



voices breaking boundaries

LIVINGROOMART production

HOMES AND HISTORIES

DECEMBER 1, 2012 & MAY 19, 2013

CONTENTS

Homes and Histories
December 1, 2012 & May 19, 2013
Artistic Director: Sehba Sarwar

Cover design: Angela Martinez; photo of
Video-Dome by Burnell McCray

Design:
Angela Martinez & Joshua Turner

Production Photography:
Eric Hester & Burnell McCray

Editors: Sehba Sarwar & Joshua Turner

Audio Transcription: Alyssa Barrineau

ISBN: 978-0-9899097-0-9

Copyright © 2013, Voices Breaking
Boundaries All Rights Reserved. No
part of this book may be reproduced
or transmitted in any form or by any
means, electronic or mechanical,
including photocopying or recording,
or by any storage and retrieval system,
without permission in writing from
the publisher.

Printed by Masterpiece Litho, Inc.
Houston, Texas

03 *The Story Behind the Stories*
Sehba Sarwar

10 *Dec. 1, 2012*
Michael Woodson

14 *Encircling Histories*
Gordon Anderson

18 *My Name is Lyari*
Haris Gazdar

24 *Africa-Asia: Connected Continents*
Dr. Kairn Klieman

30 *Fourth Ward*
Stephen Fox

40 *Forgotten Journeys*
Aslam Khwaja

48 *Interview: Robert Pruitt*
Autumn Knight

52 *Interview: Lenwood Johnson*
Gordon Anderson

62 *Crossing Borders*
Babette Niemel

68 *Interview: Excerpts from Pakistan*
Sehba Sarwar with Aslam Khwaja

76 *睦鄰mulin (Be Good to Your Neighbor)*
Anne S. Chao

86 *Interview: Jackie Beckham & Edward Brazier*
Sehba Sarwar



Forgotten Journeys

by Aslam Khwaja

The Sheedis are a community of African origin, living in the hundreds of thousands in Pakistan's Sindh province. First the Arabs and then the Europeans enslaved their ancestors, bringing most of them via the Muscat and Arabian Peninsula and then during the Talpur rule (late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries), around 600 Sheedi slaves called Zanjbarians or Mumbasains were brought to Sindh, priced between 40 to 150 rupees. Young girls carried the highest price. According to the slaves of those times, the areas of Lamo, Barah, Maji and Cancaure were their major settlements in Africa and most of them were from tribes that can still be found in the Central African Republic, Ethiopia, Sudan, Tanzania, Kenya, Congo, Angola, Ghana, Mali, Uganda and Mozambique.¹

¹The Makwa, Marima, Marima Phani, Tavair, Yaas, Mia Sanda, Mazgra, Matobini, Makami, Sagar, Madoi, Makodongo, Nazlaz Meeza, Niamizi, Temaloi, Zalma and Zang Serge tribes

Like other ancient people, Sheedis use dance as a sociocultural expression. The Sheedis of Sindh carry on their traditions through the Mugarman, a huge barrel-like African drum, placed on the floor like a Congo. With camel hide stretched over its upper part, its sides are wrapped with red cloth. To pay respect to this sacred instrument, incense is lit—agarbatis and louban—the fragrance considered holy. Before the dancing rituals start, a Mugarman is placed in the center of a large circle and the hide of the drum is warmed with a wood fire. Then the lead performer slowly beats the drum, a call to join the dancing floor. Although Sheedi songs are now primarily in Sindhi and Urdu, they still include many Swahili words that the younger generation cannot understand. The songs invoke the sadness associated with a lost motherland, existential agony and an isolated life. The song Mawai goes: "Koto is mine, Koto is mine". Koto is a river in the Central African Republic. Many Sheedis were enslaved from there and brought to Sindh.

Mohammed Siddique Musafir, a leading Sindhi intellectual in literature, education, journalism, sociology and musicology, wrote extensively on the subject of Sheedis. Musafir was born in 1879 to a former slave couple of Tando Bago, a coastal town of southern Sindh. His father had been sold at the age of seven in a slave market of Zanjibar, and brought to Muscat by an Arab, Sheikh Hassan. Hassan re-named him Bilawal and sold him to Ghulam Ali, a stone carver of Thatta town in Sindh. A landlord of Tando Bago village later hired Ghulam Ali to work on the building of his castle. When a local Tando Bago notable, Makhdoom Hur Ali, saw Ghulam Ali beating Bilawal, he purchased him and brought him home to work as a domestic help. When the British abolished slavery in India, Bilawal married a Sheedi woman who had also been sold as a child slave.

Their son Musafir received education from an institute built by a local lord. After completing his education, he began teaching in a primary school, and also wrote syllabus books. He was a staunch supporter of female education, and in 1919 founded a girls' primary school in Tando Bago, which was later upgraded to a high school. Musafir also worked as a journalist, editing these periodicals and magazines *Akhbar-i-Taleem* in 1901 and *Brihmu Samaj* in 1919. In 1935, he initiated his own newspaper *Lar Gazette* from Tando Bago and later started the first Sheedi journal, *Al Habsh Akhbar* from Kotri town. Musafir was a fine poet in Sindhi and had a poetry collection to his credit. He wrote two novels as well; however, his most significant literary work was *Ghulamian aeen Azadi-a ja Ibratnak Nazara* [The Horrendous Scenes of Slavery and Freedom], in which he discusses the plight of Sheedis in Sindh, referencing the black movement in the United States. Today, the Sheedis belong to a largely impoverished community. They have over the past century become permanent citizens in rural Sindh.



Image by Paul Hester glued to Freedmen's Town street
Homes and Histories, Part 1 | photo by Burnell McCray

The Baloch are a different race/nationality from the Sheedis, even though they share some of the same ancestry and appearance. In Pakistan, they largely reside in Karachi and along the Makran Coast of Balochistan, as well as in Seestan (Iran) and Afghanistan. Unlike Sheedis, who adopted faith and languages of their masters/owners, speaking Sindhi and following the Shia sect of Islam, members of the Afro-Baloch community speak Balochi and follow the Sunni sect of Islam.

During the 1930s, the emerging Baloch nationalism required that all Balochi-speaking people (who were considered "wretched" in traditional social structure) should be recognized as Baloch, and that politically and intellectually all those who were Baloch by race should rid themselves of their tribal identity. However, although most black people in these regions identify themselves as Baloch, there are parts of Balochistan where black people are still forced to the margins of society.

The Baloch black community resides largely in Lyari, one of Karachi's oldest neighborhoods. Many Baloch community members continue to serve as the workforce for this port city. This impoverished settlement continues to struggle for basic amenities, but Lyari provides a base for

activities proscribed by Balochistan's dominant tribal culture. Lyari's intellectual and political circles routinely engage in anti-imperialist activities, and discussions on nationalism and Marxism. They have ignited Balochi literary movements and formed institutes to promote the Balochi language through the formation of a Balochi script, yet to be standardized. By writing and staging plays and forming music groups, many young energetic political workers have surfaced. The women in Lyari are the most liberated among their community in Pakistan. They don't hide their elation or gloom, nor do they shy away from dancing in public along with men at celebrations.

Over the years, Baloch liberal thoughts travelled from Lyari to Balochistan, which was struggling for identity in the post-colonial era. In the process, skin color became less important for leaders and cadres alike.

In current times, even though the Sheedi and Baloch communities remain marginalized, some members of the community have become popular locally and globally. For example, the Sheedi banjo musician Mohammed Bilawal, also known as Bilawal Belgium was born in 1929 to a working class family. Bilawal started his artistic career with Radio Pakistan, eventually performing in many countries. His mother Mahgi was a fine singer and his father Jhak was an excellent kozank player. Baloch poet Noon Meem Danish, who currently lives in New York (USA), is well-known in Pakistani literary circles and his work has been published in Pakistan and India. Also, the African Baloch have been strong football players, integral to all the leading clubs initially formed in British India. Mohammed Omar, a great player of the 1950s and 1960s, captained Pakistan team for many years.

(Pgs 44 - 47) KoumanKele African Dance & Drum Ensemble perform in Freedmen's Town
Homes and Histories, Part 1 | photos by Burnell McCray