CHAPTER 2

# The African Khōjā: From the Colonial Period to the Present

## The Colonial Period

It has been asserted that South Asian trade with East Africa has existed for the better part of two millennia (Gregory 1971, 1–14). In part, this is due to the seasonal trade winds of the western Indian Ocean. In the nineteenth century, travel by dhow from Gujarat to Zanzibar with the trade winds took four to six weeks (Sheriff 2010, 15–26). The western Indian Ocean region was essentially a free-trade zone until the arrival of the Portuguese in the sixteenth century and their implementation of the *cartaz* system of permits and taxation (Pearson 1976, 30–56). Subsequent colonial regimes, including the Omani, German, and British regimes, routinized successive trading and security regimes throughout East Africa. The nineteenth century saw a fundamental shift in the historic South Asian trading pattern from short-term residence to long-term settlement. What push and pull factors can account for this significant shift of Asian merchantry toward a permanent African migration in the nineteenth century, after nearly two millennia of intercourse?

The principal push factor was the cycles of drought, combined with political and economic failures, which lead to severe famines, such as the famine of 1813.

> In the 1812–1813 famine in Gujarat and the adjacent North West, the Governor of Bombay would not prohibit the export of grain, declaring unconditionally for unrestricted private trade as the soundest means of relief. Rajputana suffered the most. Three-fourths of the cattle died, and skeletons of man and beast lay in every direction. Many people died of fever when the rains came. . . . Drought, followed by famine and scarcity, occurred in Madras in 1823, in Bombay in 1824. (Wallace 1900, 7)

Subsequent famines ensued from 1833 to 1835 (Sheriff 1987, 82–83). The severity of these famines forced migration from rural Kacch toward urban Kathiawar and onward toward the rising port of Bombay.[1] For the Khōjā, as a community

1 Among the Khōjā of eastern, central, and southern Africa, two distinct linguistic communities were historically present: the Kacchī and Kāṭhiyāvāḍī. In the Ithnā ʻAsharī community,

of traders, the opening of the Indian Ocean through colonial expansion represented an unprecedented economic opportunity. By the early twentieth century, Khōjā communities could be found the entire length of the Indian Ocean, from Antananarivo to Rangoon (Khoja Shia Imami Ismaili Council 1914).

The principal pull factor was the tremendous, if not precarious, opportunities provided by the economic development of eastern, central, and southern Africa. Unlike other classes of Asian labor in Africa, the Khōjā came as free traders. They followed traditional migration patterns in which caste members who were established in the diaspora pooled resources in order to bring over relatives and friends for settlement and help them get established; they then continued the process until Asian communities and networks were established throughout the region. As Gregory summarily comments, their "industry, ingenuity, thrift, and education were bound eventually to bring wealth" (Gregory 1971, 21). The liberal economic policies enacted by Sultan Syed Said in 1840 benefiting traders, including Asians, facilitated the rapid increase of the Asian merchant population on the Zanzibar archipelago and Swahili coast (Gregory 1971, 10). As with the migration of any people, individual push-pull factors were in play, including certain financial inducements by the British government for skilled Indian bureaucrats, brides from India coming to join their husbands-to-be in East Africa, adventurism, and the desire to escape debt and/or familial entanglements. In interacting with the British, chiefly in Zanzibar, some Asian merchants developed the ability to speak English quite fluently and became skilled professionals, such as accountants, advocates, and bureaucrats.

The overall success of the Asian traders within the larger East African economy depended on subsequent colonial policies of free trade (Gregory 1993a, 360–362). On arrival, most Asian immigrants were working-class entrepreneurs who decided to brave the voyage to Africa in search of economic opportunity. The caste trading network throughout the Indian Ocean allowed for transnational trade on credit, supplying the African and European customer with finished goods, such as china, while facilitating the exportation of raw materials—such as ivory—from the continent. Asians catered to remote and niche markets, organized novel transportation networks, and even competed with Europeans in cost, as Asians would conduct business at lower margins of profit unacceptable to many European settlers, who preferred the plantation economy and climate in the highland regions, such as Arusha-Moshi in colonial Tanganyika. This economic success allowed for the creation of caste

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Gujarati language and culture dominated in the *imāmvāḍō*, whereas in the Āgākhānī community, Kacchī language and culture dominated in the *jamātkhānā*. For the Khōjā of Dar es Salaam, these distinctions have lessened over the intervening century, giving way to distinctions derived from the African experience, such as 'mainlander' and *jaṅgbārī* ('Zanzibari').

infrastructure, institutions, and viable permanent settlements throughout eastern, central, and southern Africa, among which Dar es Salaam has become preeminent.

Widely held postcolonial African nationalist narratives of historical and contemporary Asian exploitation of Africa and Africans doggedly persist until the present day.[2] The simplistic notion of wealthy Asians exploiting naïve Africans and the virgin continent of Africa belies the reality of boom-and-bust cycles, which greatly affected the merchantry of all races in the region in this period (Sheriff 1987, 78–118). Embedded within this perceived racial indignation is the idea of a monolithic Asian community. There were, of course, wealthy Khōjā traders such as Nasser Nurmohmed (Gandelot 2007, 209–215), but the majority of Khōjā traders vacillated between economic security and insolvency, typified by the 1911 case of Abdool Hoosein Brothers, and Company ("In H.M. High Court of E. Africa at Mombasa, Insolvency Jurisdiction, Cause No. 13 of 1911" 1911).

Among the colonial Zanzibari Khōjā there existed great discrepancies in wealth; the economic depression of the early twentieth century exacerbated this divide. A compelling narrative of the complexity of class tension and examples of poverty among the Khōjā from 1930 to 1960 can be found in *Dastaan*; the following excerpt presents one such narrative account:

> And one more example. This old person who was jovial with a likeable personality. He yearned for company to talk to because he was partially blind in both eyes. He sat in the premises which used to be his family's shop in the same house in which he and his family still lived. And yet he proudly did a labour job for gain—for a living—of removing betel nuts (*sopari*) from husk. He developed stooping shoulders by squatting too long on the floor and keeping stretching his hands around him to have a feel of the things he was working on. It is possible that it was the untreated cataract (*motya*) that brought about his blindness and that the elusive (hard to find) surgery cost of a couple of hundred East African shillings seemed more precious to others to part with than his eyesight. (Khalfan 2010, 7–8)

Despite the economic uncertainty of the colonial period, many Tanzanian Khōjā view it in retrospect as a period of growth and security for their communities, including those in Zanzibar and Dar es Salaam. It was the postcolonial

2 Interview with twenty-seven African Tanzanian students aged thirteen to thirty, Mabibo Dar es Salaam, 21 September 2008.

period that saw the unraveling of Indic Khōjā culture thus profoundly influencing the retrenchment of African Khōjā religious, ethnic, and national identities until the present day.

## The Postcolonial Period: African Independence

As a community, the Khōjā of East Africa lived under at least three separate governments—Omani, German, and British rule—in the span of half a century. The apolitical stance the Khōjā leadership adopted out of necessity served them well throughout these successive periods, allowing them continuous access to free markets. Independence fundamentally changed the equation. For the first time, the Khōjā of Africa would experience black African political power, which made many uneasy as the date for independence approached.

For the Khōjā of Dar es Salaam, six pivotal policy decisions took place in the postcolonial period that reoriented the religious identity of the Khōjā toward insularity as a reaction to perceived insecurity and hostility by the majority Africans. These six decisions—enacted in the course of seven years, from 1964 until 1971, and based on principles of African socialism as articulated by Julius Nyerere, the first president of Tanzania—were perceived as direct threats to the economic and personal security of the Tanzanian Khōjā, particularly women.

The first policy decision, from 1961 to 1966, was a concerted effort toward Africanization of the civil service and state apparatus, which meant that many qualified Asians serving in government and the financial sector were relieved of their posts and replaced with black Africans (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics 1967, 58). This had a direct impact on the smaller professional cadre within the Khōjā community.

The second policy decision was the Arusha Declaration on 5 February 1967. It set forth the principals of Nyerere's socialist vision for Tanzania, which included nationalization of all property and assets in service of the state and required all noncitizen residents of Tanzania to obtain a residence permit. Almost overnight, the landed assets of the Khōjā, including religious trusts—indeed, all private property—were appropriated by the state (United Republic of Tanzania 1967, 621–624). The necessity to choose citizenship to retain rights of residency as well as to access state goods, such as free education and health care, meant that the Khōjā had to declare their political identity and loyalty to the state. Thus the majority of Khōjā in Dar es Salaam gave up the perceived 'safety valve' of British protectorate status and the possibility of emigration to Britain in the event of political instability. From this point

until today, because no private property exits, older nationalized buildings are under the administration of the Shirika La Nyumba La Taifa (National Housing Corporation [NHC]), and these buildings can be demolished with only a few months' notice and without effective recourse by its residents. The loss of all property and subsequent collapse of the Tanzanian economy in the 1980s had a profound psychological effect on this dispossessed merchant community, as its members were unable to engage in their defining function: merchantry.

The third policy decision, in 1966, was the implementation of two years of compulsory national service for all Tanzanians who complete higher secondary education (Mazrui 1978, 223). There was a different sort of outcry at the University of Dar es Salaam on the implementation of this policy (Ivaska 2005); however, for the Khōjā, the worst-case scenario was the idea that a Khōjā girl would be forced into the "interior where God knows what might happen to her."[3]

The fourth policy decision, in 1964, was the threat to personal security for Khōjā women that came as a direct result of the policy of 'forced marriages' in postrevolutionary Zanzibar. The passage of the Equality, Reconciliation of Zanzibar Peoples Decree (no. 6 of 1964) brought about an involuntary form of racial integration that resulted in forced marriage between revolutionary guard members and non-African women, namely Asian and white girls; this policy ran in opposition to Islamic law, which necessitates female consent in marriage. It was "the RG's [Revolutionary Guard's] major racial strategy acted out on the bodies of women" (Maoulidi 2011, 46).

Of particular concern to the Khōjā was an episode in 1970 in which four Iranian coreligionists were forced to marry "black cabinet ministers of the regime then in power" (Reuters 1973). The four young girls were Wajiha Yusuf (age fourteen), Badria Mussa (age twenty), Fawzia Mussa (age seventeen), and Naaren Hussein (age sixteen). The episode was recorded in vivid detail by the Tanzanian newspaper *DRUM*:

> The four reluctant girls were escorted to a place where there was a crowd of anxious people including government officials, and most important, a Muslim priest, locally known as Kadi. The Kadi was already in ceremonial robes. He sat majestically and then turned to the girls: "The ceremony

3 Interview with a Khōjā female professional in her early sixties, Edinburgh, 26 October 2011.

> we are celebrating today is of great moment. It is under order from the government, and by the will of the Almighty that our performance today should open a new era in the history of our country."
>
> When the girls realised that they were about to be married, pandemonium broke out. They became hysterical and bathed in streams of tears, and together with their parents and relatives screamed in chorus: "No, no, no, how can it happen?" But the matrimonial blessing was made and the Koran reading completed. The girls became the official wives of four tough and forceful men about 30 years their senior. (Smyth and Seftel 1993, §V)

The Khōjā became advocates of the girls' plight, corresponding with the Iranian Embassy in Dar es Salaam and making unanswered appeals to Nyerere (Khoja Shia Ithna-Asheri Jamaat of Dar es Salaam 1970–1973) and Abeid Karume (Meghji 1971). Three years later, three of the four women were smuggled from the island, with considerable Khōjā assistance, to the mainland, from which they eventually made their way to Tehran, arriving on 13 March 1973. The episode of the 'forced marriages' of the four Iranian girls was the catalyst for the rapid exodus of the Khōjā from Zanzibar, despite restrictions on migration to the mainland. Among the Zanzibari Khōjā women from this period resident in Dar es Salaam, stories abound of Asian girls being smuggled in dhows to the mainland under the cover of darkness.

Beyond the loss of livelihood and private property, for the Khōjā, postcolonial Tanzanian policies on family law, such as the authorization of forced marriages, meant a loss of the right to personal security and liberty (Bakari 2000, 73–79). This perceived threat to women initiated a concerted effort on the part of Asians generally either to send women out of the country—for instance, to study in India or England—or to limit their public exposure for fear of drawing unwanted attention from the police and military of the newly founded republic.

The fifth event, which precedes and triggered some of the aforementioned policies, is the Zanzibar Revolution. The Asian community escaped with only a loss of patrimony, far less than the carnage visited on the Arab inhabitants of the archipelago—despite the Khōjā support for the nationalist party, Hizb-ul-Watan, in elections following independence. Nationalization in Zanzibar, as on the mainland, meant an immediate loss of wealth, which for the Asian merchant class was the source from which their power and security was derived (Lofchie 1965). More fundamentally, at the level of identity, it was an overturning of the social order, as peasants became kings. It has been reported that

Abeid Karume, the first president of postrevolutionary Zanzibar, had previously been employed as a servant in the Khōjā kitchens.[4]

The sixth and most traumatic event in East Africa took place in Uganda in 1971, when Idi Amin expelled Asians, en masse, from the country. Although this event did not occur within Tanzania, it is impossible to understate the psychological impact of the Ugandan expulsion (Mahmoud 1973) on the Tanzanian Asian community at its northern border. It strengthened the notion of ethnic identity and solidarity among the Asian communities within Dar es Salaam as well a perception among many, which has continued until the present day, that the future of the African Khōjā is limited.

For the majority of Khōjā, the postcolonial period in Tanzania can be characterized as a privileging of the black African over the Asian and as the implementation of arbitrary policies with little or no legal recourse for Asian citizens. The six aforementioned policies and events have had a direct bearing on the Khōjā community's self-perceptions of their security, which has translated into conservatism, and insular retrenchment reinforcing communalism in postcolonial Tanzania.

## The Development of the Khōjā Community in Dar es Salaam

Khōjā religious and ethnic identity is intimately tied to membership within the *jamāt*. In the mid- to late nineteenth-century settlement of Africa, Khōjā merchants[5] began establishing communities and institutions in port cities, such as Zanzibar and Bagamoyo, before moving inward to the heart of the continent. The story of Zanzibar and Dar es Salaam intersect at various points, but Dar es Salaam, being on the continent and outside of direct Muslim rule, had a different historical trajectory in terms of the evolution of Khōjā identity, because of the stronger Christian presence in the city specifically and mainland Tanganyika more generally.

Khōjā history in the region should be understood in the context of its geographical development. Each Khōjā *jamāt* developed independent institutions and hierarchies of power. Although the twentieth century saw the development of an African Federation of Khōjā communities throughout the continent, power remained devolved to the local polis. A microhistory

4 Interview with a Khōjā male pensioner in his early eighties, Mwanza, 8 March 2008.

5 In the early to mid-nineteenth century, Khōjā merchants were exclusively men who came without their families. Later developments allowed for families to join patriarchs, once caste strategy changed from seasonal trading to permanent settlement.

of the development of the Khōjā community and its institutions in Dar es Salaam is helpful in understanding their contemporary religious identity.

Permanent Khōjā settlement in Dar es Salaam is recorded to have begun between 1875 and 1884. A few of the first Khōjā pioneers[6] in this fishing village were Sachedina Pira Mawji, Versi Adwani, and Nasser Mawji (King and Rizvi 1973, 19). The beginning of German rule in 1885, Deutsch-Ostafrika, saw a rapid development of the city and its infrastructure. In 1900, the first *imāmvāḍō* was constructed on the property of Pirbhai Jiva Bharwani. Thereafter, a temporary structure of corrugated metal was erected, which ultimately proved to be impractical. A permanent solution had to be found. Khōjā philanthropists Sacchu Pira and Suleiman bin Nasser donated the funds for construction of a permanent masjid and *imāmvāḍō* on land granted to them by the German governor of Dar es Salaam in 1894.

According to a 1950s interview with Khōjā Alibhai Ibrahim, who arrived in Dar es Salaam in 1902, at the turn of the twentieth century Bagamoyo eclipsed Dar es Salaam as the main trading port in Tanganyika, even though Das es Salaam was the capital of Deutsch-Ostafrika. The main mode of transportation into the city was by foot or cart. With the construction of the railroad in 1905, the economic fortunes of the city began to rise. At the point of the construction of the *imāmvāḍō* and mosque, the Khōjā population of Dar es Salaam totaled "two-hundred souls" (Dhī suprīm kāunsīl ōph dhī phēdarēśan ōph khōjā śīā isnāaśarī jamāts ōph āfrikā 1960, 117).

Construction of the buildings began in 1904, and occupation in 1906. They remained unfinished until Sacchu Pira's children, Nurmohamed Sacchu and Abdulrasul Sacchu, oversaw construction efforts for their completion. In 1908, the completed mosque and *imāmvāḍō* were inaugurated by Shah Kuchak, a cousin of the Aga Khan and an ardent Ithnā ʿAsharī, in the presence of the original Khōjā families of Dar es Salaam (Dārēsalām khōjā śī'ā ithanā'aśarī jamāt 1969b, 17–19). These nine original Khōjā families, who settled in Dar es Salaam in the mid- to late nineteenth century, are listed below, by patriarch:

1. Haji Sacchu Pira
2. Haji Nasser Mawji
3. Haji Nasser Rattansey
4. Haji Molu Kanji

6 Khōjā records from Dar es Salaam, until the late twentieth century, almost exclusively record the names of the male patriarchs of the family, because membership in caste institutions is established through males; female membership is assumed in connection with a male family member.

5. Bhai Nasser Molu
6. Bhai Merali Muraj
7. Bhai Pirbhai Rattansey
8. Bhai Dhalabhai Nanji
9. Bhai Alibhai Walli

A later renovation of the *imāmvāḍō* and creation of a monumental gate, financed by Ibrahim and Ghulamhusein Virjee, took place from 1941 to 1942 in honor of the 1,300th anniversary of the martyrdom of Ḥusayn.

Prior to the construction of the *imāmvāḍō* and mosque, a cemetery was a crucial first investment of the community. Shortly after construction of the mosque complex, in 1914, with support from the Nasser Virjee Trust, the Khōjā *musāpharkhānũ* ('travelers lodge') was constructed to facilitate travel for Khōjā merchants transiting through the growing port city. On 12 August 1966, the first housing scheme of the community was inaugurated to serve as a social welfare project; since this pilot project, at least five more buildings have been erected to meet the housing needs of the poorer members of the community. The community's school (Al-Muntazir Academy), seminary (Husayni Madrassa), hospital (Ebrahim Haji Charitable Dispensary), recreation facility (Union Sports Club), and missionary organization (Bilal Muslim Mission) round out the official institutions of the Khōjā polis in Dar es Salaam. Khōjā institutions independent of the *jamāt* include *mēhphīl*, missionary charities such as the World Islamic Propagation and Humanitarian Services (WIPAHS), and media outreach initiatives such the television station al-Itrah Broadcasting Network Television (IBN). These institutions are independent of the Khōjā political hierarchy, allowing for both cooperation and conflict with the agendas of the elected political leadership. The existence of these institutions, official or independent, has been internalized over time as an immutable part of Khōjā identity.

## Khōjā Confederation from the Postwar Period to the Present

The internationalization of modern multinational corporate organizational theory in Zanzibar, through close prominent placements in the British administration (Zanzibar Protectorate 1960), in time allowed the various Khōjā communities in the region to adopt increasingly complex forms of communal organization, including international bodies for common policy coordination. In the aftermath of World War II, Khōjā communities in the region—Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika, Zanzibar, Somaliland, Congo, and Madagascar—adopted

the prevalent internationalist outlook, and on 26 May 1946, in a Dar es Salaam inaugural constitutional conference, they established the Khoja Shia Ithnasheri Federated Jamaats of Africa. The objective of this organization was coordination of common social, economic, and political policies in the region as well as retention and promotion of Khōjā religious identity (Khoja Shia Ithnasheri Federated Jamaats of Africa 1946; Karim 1998). Today the membership of the Federation consists of more than forty communities throughout eastern, central, and southern Africa.[7]

Because of differing colonial and postcolonial economic national policies among states, Khōjā pan-African economic initiatives have been limited to trade and business associations. Religious and social policies—such as the Bilal Muslim Mission—have been far more successful in promoting Islamic education and missionary work in the region (Dārēsalām khōjā śī'ā ithanā'aśarī jamāt 1969a). They have helped to shape the regional transition of Khōjā identity from primarily ethnic to a religious identity with ethnic undertones through standardizing the religious curricula of the community's schools in the region and facilitating international exchange programs for Shia religious scholars from South Asia and the Near East. At the political level, the most visible achievements of the sixty-six-year history of the Africa Federation—the African division of the Khoja Shia Ithnasheri Federated Jamaats of Africa—have been its assistance in the evacuation of the Khōjā from Zanzibar in 1964 and from Uganda in 1972 and the complete evacuation of the Khōjā community from Mogadishu in 1991 (H.A.M. Jaffer 1991) and Yemen in 2015. The postcolonial political unrest in regions outside of Tanzania has transformed the Dar es Salaam Khōjā community into a regional nexus for the preservation of the diversity of African Khōjā identity and religious practice, a testament to the city's name: 'Haven of Peace.'

7 Member communities are located in the following states: Tanzania, Uganda, Burundi, Kenya, Congo, Mozambique, and Madagascar (Africa Federation of Khoja Shia Ithna Asheri Jamaats of Africa 2012). In addition to the Africa Federation, the organization also includes the World Federation of Khoja Shia Ithna-Asheri Muslim Communities. This group was formed in London in 1976 by Mulla Asgharali M.M. Jaffer to coordinate all Khōjā communities worldwide and to preserve the ethnoreligious identity of the Khōjā. The Africa Federation is a member of its constituent assembly. The World Federation essentially serves as a global Khōjā *agora* through its conferences and functions in development as a nongovernmental organization (World Federation of Khoja Shia Ithna-Asheri Muslim Communities 2012).

### Khōjā Demographics in Modern-Day Africa

From the original 200 Khōjā residents in Dar es Salaam at the turn of the twentieth century, by 1961 the population had multiplied by almost a factor of 8.5, to approximately 1,696 Khōjā resident in Dar es Salaam. Of the total Tanganyikan Asian population of 102,395 on the eve of independence, the total number of Khōjā resident in colonial mainland Tanganyika was 6,043. In the same period, of the approximately 18,000 Asians living on the Zanzibar archipelago, 2,200 families were Khōjā (Dhī suprīm kāunsīl ōph dhī phēdarēśan ōph khōjā śīā isnāaśarī jamāts ōph āfrikā 1960, 96, 179). See Figure 1.

According to the 2008 census data of the Dar es Salaam *jamāt*, the total population of the Khōjā in Dar es Salaam was 6,908. The gender ratio of male to female was 1:1.05. Mapping the Khōjā population by age group, a distinct population bulge can be seen among youth, especially those aged twenty-one to thirty. Urban Khōjā demographics in the capital are slightly more evenly divided across age groups than the national population (United States Department of Commerce 2012) due to both historically higher-quality nutrition and better access to health care by Asians compared to Africans.

The rise in the population of Dar es Salaam in the last half century is not necessarily the result of higher fertility; rather, it resulted from two demographic shifts. First, the economic and social policies of Nyerere meant uncertainty and lack of access to the resources Asians had in the colonial period (Aminzade 2003). This resulted in an exodus from the hinterland to the capital for greater access to communal social and economic goods that was under way by the 1980s and concluded in the early 1990s. Second, the Zanzibar Revolution of 1964 meant a mass exodus from the archipelago to the mainland, as Dar es Salaam was the closest port and part of the newly federated Tanzania; thus most refugees remained within national boundaries in the capital. For more than a century, Zanzibar had been home to the largest Khōjā community on mainland eastern, central, and southern Africa (Dhī suprīm kāunsīl ōph dhī phēdarēśan ōph khōjā śīā isnāaśarī jamāts ōph āfrikā 1960, 177–198). Its collapse, as a direct result of the revolution, had tremendous sociocultural and religious reverberations for the African Khōjā and irrevocably changed the locus of Khōjā power, religious identity, and cultural production from Zanzibar to Dar es Salaam, where it remains until the present day.

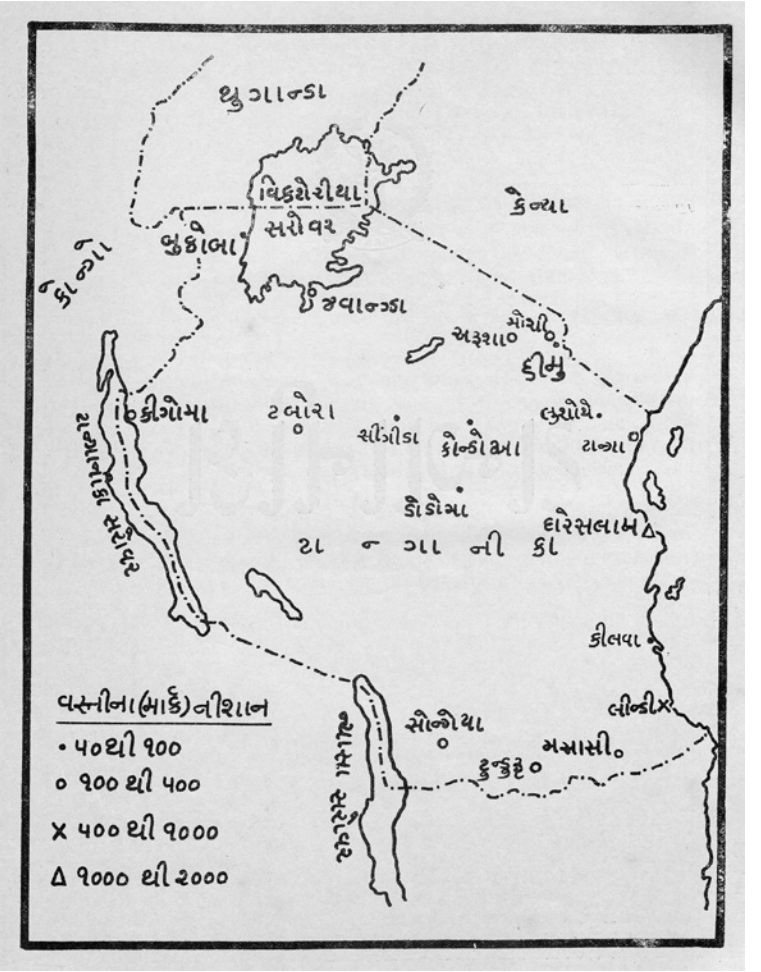


FIGURE 1 *A demographic map of Khōjā communities located in colonial Tanganyika, c. 1960.*
COURTESY OF THE FEDERATION OF KHŌJĀ SHIA ITHNA ASHERI JAMAATS OF AFRICA.