Unfinished Conversations: Narratives of Ugandan Asians who Remained

This paper is the beginning of a possible dissertation chapter; tailored to the interests of this conference. Many of these ideas need to be developed further, and I am grateful for comments and feedback. The paper reveals biographies and narratives of three Ugandan Asian and Ugandan Asian-African families who remained in Uganda throughout Idi Amin’s regime (1971-1979) and well into the 1980s. I did not include the voices and interviews of many black Ugandans who were in Kampala and Mbarara during this period, as I hope to do in a later version. First, I show that in contrast to representations of Asians in Uganda as traders and dukanwallas (Hindi, shopkeepers) — Asians, particularly East African Sikhs, practiced different forms of labor and capitalist enterprise: mining, construction and other government work in Amin’s government that gave them opportunities to remain in the country in contrast to those who were expelled in 1972. Second, I show that though few Asians remained in the country, they did so by forming relationships with Amin’s government and with political sovereigns like Idi Amin himself. They needed Amin in order to stay in a Uganda they did not want to leave—as much as Amin depended upon them to develop the infrastructure of urban areas that were in rapid and gradual decline post 1972. Third, families used strategies of transnational mobility among kin, social and political withdrawal, invisibility, and relationships with other Ugandans to survive and claim a sense of belonging during particularly violent times. Mixed race families who identified as Sikh Ugandans stressed their African ancestry and refused to leave on the grounds that they were as Ugandan as their neighbors were. Fourth, families who remained in Uganda were often subject to similar forms of routine violence that their black Ugandan counterparts were—lootings, harassment, and death. Sikh men often articulated acts of bravery during this time, contrasting masculinist ideologies about courage and practices of “remaining” with the fear and cowardice of other ethnic groups of Asian men who had “decided” to leave in
1972. Finally, I expand the analytical framework of formal citizenship and explore the sites—*gurudwaras* and domestic realms such as Asian homes in both Kampala and Mbarara town in Ankole that became ongoing sites of struggles over belonging and community formation over successive regimes. There is still much to be learned in Uganda—from the viewpoints of various social actors and subject positions—about the process by which people make claims for citizenship and belonging in post-colonial Uganda. In this paper, I utilize oral history, narrative, and (a few) documents to begin such an analysis.
In Kampala, a joke that circulates tells the story of an old non-English speaking sardar\(^1\) who arrives in London and needs to reach his family relations in Birmingham. He buys the ticket for a train and then realizes that the trip has been canceled. Frustrated, he sees another South Asian in the train station and asks him “*Aap ingrezi boltay hain? Mujhe aap ki maddat chatey hain...*” (*Hindi*, “Do you speak English? I need your help.”) The helpful stranger tells him not to worry, that of course he speaks English, and that he will talk to the ticket agent for him. When the ticket agent asks, “Can I help you Sir?” he responds, “Train no go. Ticket back, money back!”

I first heard this, amidst bursts of laughter, at a family dinner with Ugandan Asians who had remained in Uganda throughout the Exodus: a family that had managed, through its kinship resources and particular role in the South Asian labor economy at the time, to stay in Uganda before, during, and after the East African citizenship crises that afflicted Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya throughout the 1960s and 1970s.\(^2\) The evening dinner was not only about poking fun at accents and the (lack of) linguistic abilities of Indian travelers from the ex-colonies in Europe. It was a discussion of many resources and strategies Asian families used to make sense of their lives during the 1970s. Here, the family focused on geographies of travel and mobility—the possibility of leaving Uganda.

My dissertation thesis is an attempt to understand the relationship between mobility and citizenship in post-colonial Uganda via the events of the Asian Exodus, Ugandan Asian “returnees,” recent Asian migrant-traders, and global investors.\(^3\) In this essay I begin an analysis claims to citizenship among Ugandan Asians in Uganda during and after the 1972 Asian Exodus, foregrounding the subjectivities and identities of field contacts. The crisis of nation-state formation, new nationalisms, and the development of new public collectivities and modes of governance in East Africa produced intense debates surrounding the meaning of citizenship, as well as the production of “authentic”

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\(^1\) *Punjabi.* “Mr.” but with a more respectful connotation like “Chief.” A sardar typically has the outward appearance of a Sikh and wears a turban.

\(^2\) For a comparative analysis of out-migrations of Asians from East and Central Africa (Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Malawi and Zambia) from the late 1960s-mid 80s, see Yash Tandon and Arnold Raphael’s “The New Position of East African Asians.”

\(^3\) Fieldwork carried out in Kampala and Mbarara, Uganda from 2008-2010. I thank Pedro Monaville for encouraging me to investigate the historicity of Asian religious sites in Uganda beyond the participant-observation I was carrying out at the time. Unless they are public figures, I have deleted names or used pseudonyms for my field contacts in this paper.
citizens, non-citizens, strangers, and aliens in the new nation. Scholars such as May Joseph (1999) have emphasized the ways in which independence-era notions of East African citizenship were founded on authenticity and autochthony across multiple lines of divisiveness—often producing Asians as a form of “failed” or “inauthentic citizenship.” Influenced by Birmingham School scholars such as Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall, Joseph’s work is concerned with the “expressive” elements of citizenship, the acts of “staging” and performance of East African Asian citizenship in the “disaffected space” of the Western diaspora. She describes crossing paths with “embittered men” from East Africa in the 1990s, men who had spent years rebuilding their lives with nostalgic memories of the past. For May, “nomadic citizenship” is related to “histories of migrancy and [the] tenuous status of immigrants. This notion of citizenship extends beyond the coherence of national boundaries and is transnationally linked to informal networks of kinship, migrancy, and displacement, opening up circuits of dependency between communities in Canada, Britain, or the United States and communities in East Africa” (1999: 2).

During my fieldwork period in Uganda, I often thought about scholars’ attempts to understand this “nomadic citizenship” of displaced, traveling men, and the ways in which narratives and geographies of London, India, the US, and Canada impinged on the stories of Ugandan Asian families I spent time with in Kampala and outside Buganda. Understanding how citizenship is performed under conditions of migrancy is important—yet my project wanted to re-examine the politics of citizenship and belonging in contemporary Uganda beyond, or in spite of, the conditions of forced expulsion and displacement. Thus I shifted my lens back to the “affected space” of Uganda—back to the state, and the spaces, sites, and towns that some Asians (generally men) had chosen to reside in despite intense forms of political, social, bodily and spiritual/psychological violence in Uganda between the 1960s and 1980s. What were the structural openings that allowed Asians to remain in Uganda in the context of the retraction of citizenship rights under Idi Amin’s regime—and the weak and insecure states that followed his rule? What strategies did Asians use that enabled them to live in Uganda despite their unwantedness? Where did these struggles emerge and how were they connected to claims for citizenship?
I find that the “Asian Question,” or the struggle over understanding and delimiting the rights of former British subjects and “colonial middlemen” in the African postcolony is still unresolved and ambiguous. While scholars continue to revisit and understand the 1972 Asian Exodus, in contemporary Uganda, processes of Asian “return” are being redefined and reinvented by both the Ugandan state and global capitalist logics in new ways. Thus there is an urgency in taking up questions of Asian belonging in Uganda once again. I highlight the historical and contemporary significance of formal/legal citizenship to Asians in its manifestation as passports, permits, and other forms of documentation. I also emphasize revising “citizenship” beyond its Western and legal connotations to think about it as a historical and contingent process of inclusions and exclusions, and suggest paying attention to the sites and spaces where claims to belonging emerge.4

**Genealogies of Formal Citizenship**

In their narratives to me, many ex-Ugandan Asians (returnees), black Ugandan entrepreneurs and government officials drew on their memories of the industrial heyday of Uganda, linking the Asian-dominated capitalist production of the past with President Museveni’s National Resistant Movement (NRM) development vision for the country. The NRM had rooted out “Aminism,” and the country was free and open to foreign nationals and entrepreneurs.5 In the years since the Exodus, and in the absence of Asians, black Ugandans were doing “serious business,” as were returnee Ugandan Asians.6

At the time of Ugandan independence, Asians had generated an enormous amount of wealth that circulated amidst their own relatively small population and abroad (see Alibhai-Brown 1995).7 Some suggest that economic inequality in urban Uganda was so

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4 Bryan Turner’s (1993) “Contemporary Problems in the Theory of Citizenship” is a good introduction to this set of issues.
5 I interpret “Aminism” as Africanization, thus “ending Aminism” indicates the deracialization of capitalist enterprise in urban Uganda.
6 *Luganda.* “Kati buli muntu bakoze business.” (Now everybody is doing business.) Many Ugandans elders I spoke with in Mbarara discussed how they had “all become Asians now.” They were reflecting upon the new economic growth and business entrepreneurship they were observing since the onset of relative national peace in 1986.
7 At the time of Ugandan independence, massive Asian-owned sugar and tea estates, cotton ginneries, and a vibrant manufacturing economy existed in Kampala, Lugazi, Jinja, Fort Portal, and regions of the
entrenched that Asians formed 1 percent of the population yet controlled over 50 percent of the GDP of the entire country at independence. In 1969, among 13 million Ugandans, the Asian population is estimated to have been around 75,000. In terms of legal citizenship, the majority were British subjects (Asians who had chosen to retain their British passports rather than trading in their passports for Ugandan ones), the middle group were Indian nationals, and the minority were individuals who were either born in the country or had converted to Ugandan citizenship. As many scholars document, the lack of a “base” for Asians in Uganda, their general citizenship status as British subjects (see Tandon and Raphael 1984), cultural and sentimental attachments to India, and ineffectiveness in championing political rights for themselves or aligning themselves with African subjects—all these factors limited them to an economic role in the country where political power among various segments of the Ugandan masses could be mobilized against them.9

surrounding countryside. Colonial towns and rural trading centers linked up to Kampala and the now-defunct passenger East African Railway, forming a network of trade and movement among Asian traders and entrepreneurs, Swahili traders from the coast, and rural peasants in the hinterlands. Asians, generally conflated across various occupations as the archetype “dukanwallas” (Hindi; shopkeepers), are analyzed among Marxist scholars as the petty bourgeoisie class of Uganda who controlled the means of production—both wholesale and retail trade of consumer goods from India to Africa (Mamdani 1975; 1976). As some accumulated more wealth, they maneuvered and strategized for rights to own land and cultivate cash crops on plantations, to own cotton gins, and became independent financiers and “middlemen” for peasants selling cotton on the European global market (Jamal 1976; Mehta 1966). Yet it is important to note that Asians also worked as officers in the British civil service, as skilled professionals, government contractors, construction workers, lorry transporters and drivers, workshop craftsmen and carpenters, and in the service sectors as teachers, tailors, proprietors of bars, canteens, restaurants and guesthouses in Kampala and in the many small towns of Uganda. Ramgarhia and Jat Sikhs, in particular, were skilled builders and artisans and managed the construction of colonial towns. In general, capitalist enterprise and labor was stratified across caste, ethnic and religious lines among Asians in the colonial period. I would argue that part of their politics of survival for Asians in the post-colonial period depended on them trying out different business enterprises and expanding their interests in different types of work across caste and ethnic lines (buying land in remote areas to grow crops, etc). I felt this was reflected in the different types of labor and business enterprise that Ugandan Sikhs were involved in during the 1960s and 1970s: at times working for the government, at other moments engaged in their own businesses, often simultaneously. The Exodus of Asians in 1972 also, of course, created new opportunities for wealth accumulation among those Asians who remained and for those Asians who came back to Uganda during Milton Obote’s second regime and Museveni’s NRM government.

8 Personal communication with Dr. Vali Jamal, Ugandan Asian and former economist for the International Labor Organization. “Controlled” is still a vexed notion among Asians today. Some Ugandan Asians refute that they “controlled” the country—stating that the majority of the GDP of the country came from the Ugandan rural peasantry that produced the main cash crops for the European market (Interview with Mahendra Mehta, Lugazi, Uganda November 2009).

Similar citizenship crises for Asians occurred elsewhere in East and Central Africa in the aftermath of the decolonization period—but the particularity of state-directed violence against Asians in Uganda was exceptional. The dismantling of the colonial state and increasingly ethnic-based politics during Milton Obote’s presidency, Africanization and nationalist policies, and continued accumulation of surplus capital by Asians paved the way for Idi Amin’s coup in 1971.\(^{10}\) Although Asians supported Amin’s presidency, and particularly the reversal of Obote’s economic nationalization policies that restricted the mobility and capacity of Asian traders in establishing trading posts and working in rural areas. By June 28\(^{th}\) 1971, Amin had assured the emerging class of Ugandan African traders that he would do everything to ensure that the economy would be placed in their hands. On October 7\(^{th}\) 1972, Amin ordered a census of the population and required every Asian to carry a green card. In an address to the Asian Conference, Amin “criticized the Asians for failing to serve the country in spite of receiving professional education at the expense of the state, for engaging in economic malpractice, for sabotaging government policies and for their social isolation and refusal to integrate with the African population” (Ahluwalia 1995:192). Amin also canceled 12,000 applications by Asians for Ugandan citizenship. On August 5, 1972, Amin set a three-month deadline for the expulsion of Asians, explaining that the removal of Asians constituted Phase 1 of the Economic War. Ugandan Asians with British, Indian, and cancelled passports left Uganda for other parts of East Africa, many becoming refugees in England, India, Canada or the US.\(^{11}\)

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10 Ahluwalia notes, “with respect to the commercial and industrial sectors, Milton Obote’s government policies were designed to ensure Africanization…the government effectively only dealt with one section of the Asian community—the traders and civil servants. The other section of the Asian population, the industrialists and plantation owners, were left unchallenged. Africanization was an important means to attaining legitimization and was popular electorally. However, it was selective in terms of its application to Asians in Uganda as the government was dependent upon one section of the Asian community.” (183)

11 There are a number of points to make here—first, while Amin’s expulsion policies were initially directed towards British and Indian nationals, eventually he canceled the Ugandan passports of Ugandan Asians, and the expulsion became less about formal citizenship and more about the race and identity of Asians as a totality. There are also questions about whether Amin also exempted Muslims from leaving the country. The process was confusing for all Asians, many of whom waited until the last moment possible to leave. It is also not clear how many Asians were directly affected. Figures from scholarship are generally within the range of 60-100,000 Asians expelled from the country.
The specificity of the Ugandan case led to particular citizenship trajectories for different categories of Ugandan Asians. While some Asian British passport holders were able to gain entry to the UK before the expulsion decree, the British government was simultaneously instituting harsh quota systems that discriminated against the immigration of East African Asians to Europe. During the expulsion crisis, United Nations officials in Kampala sent Ugandan Asians with Indian passports back to India via rail. Once Amin established that all Asians had to leave Uganda, Asians who were Ugandan citizens became “stateless”—noncitizen aliens. They then became eligible to apply for refugee status and were re-located to refugee camps in the UK, or gained asylum in the USA and Canada. Whole families were separated at times, particularly when Asian wives with Indian passports were sent back to India.

Passports, Certificates and Letters

The 1972 Asian Exodus generated a large amount of scholarship that attempted to understand the rights of Ugandan Asians and other East African Asians in the context of both Ugandan national sovereignty and global human rights—especially as it became clear that East African Asians were unwanted refugees in such places as London, Leicester, and Kensington (Nanjira 1976). Less scholarship examined the role of British imperialism and the ensuing failure of democracy in Uganda—although many Asian and Black intellectuals directly affected by citizenship crises in East Africa did take up this work (Ghai and Ghai 1971; Jamal 1976; Mamdani 1973, 1975, 1976; Mazrui 1975; Shivji 1976). While intellectuals recognized the postcolonial failures of democracy and citizenship in East Africa, the material dimensions of formal citizenship were still significant to Asians, both in the past and present. The harried process by which Asians had to sort out their finances, assets, private property, land and documentation in 1972, in addition to the violent bureaucratic “processing” of Asians at the British Embassy in Kampala, immigration check points and roadblocks, at railway stations and the airports and refugees camps in England inflect the memories of many Ugandan Asians. Lest this violence be interpreted as directed towards Asians only, I stress the increasingly authoritarian practices of Idi Amin, his soldiers, mercenaries and state/security
institutions at this time. Asians of course were not the only ones subject to harassment over documentation. Identification, permits and passes were central to the legitimization and wielding of power in Idi Amin’s regime. A.B.K. Kasozi’s *The Social Origins of Violence in Uganda* (1994) further describes the violent “operations” against Lwo and Acholi ethnic groups from Northern Uganda, Baganda; and later, anyone who was considered an enemy or sympathizer of rebel movements (particularly from the West in the Southwestern Ankole, Rakai and Masaka regions of Uganda.)

In Kampala in 2008, Ugandan Asian returnees often stressed their East African Asian identity and rights to residence and business in Uganda by casually mentioning their residency certificates or intentions to apply for dual citizenship\(^\text{12}\) (most had British passports as a result of the Exodus). Many, for instance, hung framed photos of President Museveni next to a portrait of the *Aga Khan* or *Guru Nanak Dev Ji* in their offices in workplaces. These were often next to a carefully positioned and framed “Certificate of Residency,” building, or business permit. On the other hand, Ugandan Asians who had always remained in the country immediately stressed that they were born in Uganda, were Ugandan and had Ugandan passports rather than British ones (just like many of the younger generations of East African Asian men and women that I spent time with in Kampala). Moreover, the increasing ease with which new Asian migrants from India and Pakistan attain entry visas, passports, work permits and other forms of documentation through the financial resources and influence of Asian industrialists and managers in transnational companies, or through petty bribes to immigration police, made these practices of highlighting formal citizenship status especially interesting to me.\(^\text{13}\) I also felt that it revealed the fraught historical relationships that many Asians had had with documents and passports. When Kiran Kaur (my young research assistant among the Kampala Sikh community) and I gained permission from the *pardhan* (Punjabi, Chairperson) of the Kampala Ramgarhia Gurudwara\(^\text{14}\) committee to explore the

\(^{12}\) A Dual Citizenship law is being debated in Ugandan Parliament as of 2009.

\(^{13}\) I discuss this manipulation of documentation among new migrant Asians “in transit” to Europe and other Western destinations in a chapter of my dissertation. Some Ugandan Asians did not mention their British passports, unless I specifically asked them about it.

\(^{14}\) *Ramgarhias* are Sikhs largely of the *tarkhan*, or carpenter caste (*jati*). They take their name from Jassa Singh, a tarkhan, who commanded one of the Sikh *misl* in the 18\(^{th}\) century and was renowned for his defense of the Ramgarth fort in Amritsar, Punjab. The British, interested in their artisan skills, encouraged their movement to East Africa in the last decade of the 19\(^{th}\) century to open up the country by building its
gurudwara library, we unexpectedly found many historical documents from 1972, including an old trunk of abandoned Ugandan passports that had became “worthless” to Ugandan Asians in the last weeks preceding the deadline for the Exodus on November 9, 1972. The *gurudwara* was a central site for the processing of refugees by the United Nations Committee for Refugees, the institutional body that arrived in Uganda to process “stateless” Asians (those who had failed to attain entry permits and visas to the UK via the British Embassy in Kampala) under the “Coordinating Committee for the Welfare of Asians Leaving Uganda.” Stateless Asians were directed to communal religious sites or Asian schools in their respective communities, where they filled out intake forms, received entry permits to the UK and airplane ticket vouchers. Thus, the *Sunnī Muslim Association* went to the Muslim Girls School, the *Hindu Lohanas* went to the *Lohana* community building, the Goans went to the Kampala Institute, and *Khojas, Shias* and *Ithnashiri* Muslims went to the *Jamatkhana* in Old Kampala. Other communities were directed to the *Patidar Samaj* or the *Ramgarhia Gurudwara*. Aside from a few Coordinating Committee forms, we found numerous hand-written notes and letters from individuals requesting funds for travel to England and India from the coffers of the gurudwara *sangat*, or perhaps from a generous *sardar*.16

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15 This was a total failure. See Mamdani’s (1973) discussion of the British Embassy in Kampala and other critiques of the British government in both Uganda and London, extending to the treatment of Asian refugees in camps in Kensington and Leicester. Praful Patel, organizer of the Uganda Evacuee’s Board in London, was particularly active in confronting British policies concerning immigration and compensation of lost property and assets for Asians from 1972 onwards.

16 *Gurudwara* congregation or Sikh community.
One letter reads: “Dear Sir, Pardhan Secretary Sahib Ji Gurudwara Ramgarhia Kampala. Sat sri akal. It is my humble request that I need a ticket to England. It is my humble request before the sangat to kindly help me in this matter. I will be very grateful. In your service, Dalip Singh, Gulu.” The letter is dated what appears to be April 10, 1972 (it could also be September 9th, 1972 given that this date falls within Idi Amin’s three-month expulsion period for Asians. This corroborates with the next letter.) In English, most likely written by a community leader or the gurudwara chairperson at the

17 Traditional Sikh greeting. “God is the ultimate truth.”
time, is written “Dalip Singh Soor, Appv 2 Tickets, Paid v/70, Shs 4,000.” The letter has a hash mark crossed through it, indicating the matter was taken care of. Two tickets were funded through the community. The writing in the next letter (below) indicates a less educated and, I suspect, a perhaps even more desperate community member. The handwriting seems hesitant, and unhabituated to the practice of writing and wielding a pen. The Gurmukhi spellings here are often written incorrectly and haphazardly. Near the bottom of the letter, the written language shifts into spoken Hindi.19

The author of the letter writes: “Ik Omkar Sat Gur Prasad. The writer is Gur Nam Singh. Pardhan Sahib Ji, sat sri akal. It is my humble request before the whole sangat

19 I enlisted the help of my uncle, Makhan Singh Gill, to read this. He notes that the beginning address of the letter “Ik Omkar Sat Gur Parsad” was a “pranya jamana” (old days) traditional form of address and way to begin letters among Sikhs. Ik Omkar Sat Gur Parsad, are the first two lines from the Mool Mantr, Guru Nanak’s first and central poetic statement about God: “This Being is One; the Truth.”
that I am short on money to go to India. There is no money for a ticket. If the sangat can help, I will be so thankful. I have four children. One child is four years old. The second child is six years old. The third child is eight years old. The fourth child is eight years old. The children have their mother also. I am a poor man. With the sangat’s help I can reach India. Sangat please let me know. Waheguru ji ka khalsa, waheguru ji ki fateh.20

When I flipped the letter over, I saw the address of a Mr. Gurnam Singh: Pakwatch, P.O. Box 1. Someone who initialed the letter “RS” had paid for two tickets from Mombasa to India by steamship. It’s not clear what happened to this family—how resources and finances were allocated for them to leave, and if the family stayed together. More likely, Gurnam Singh was processed as a refugee in England and the rest of the family went to India. We found other letters as well—written in cursive English or print on professional memo pads from Asian companies. A letter dated October 1st, 1972 from the West Nile Hindu Union in Arua states, “To whom it concerns. The bearer of the letter Mr. K.H. Mehta is a teacher at the secondary school Arua. He has a big family with seven members and he has to go to the U.K. under the present circumstances. The West Nile Hindu Union Temple tried to help him with small amount of shillings two thousand for one ticket towards the transport expenses and it wishes thus to help him and his family members whatever can be done. He deserves this kind of help and the temple will be highly obliged for the same. Thanking you, J.S. Jhala Chairman.”

This sample of documents in the gurdwara indicate the relative isolation of Asian families in Northern Uganda: Gulu, Pakwatch, and Arua (West Nile), the lack of financial resources among poorer segments of the urban bourgeois Ugandan Asian community at the time, and the ways in which individuals and heads of families relied on the support of Asian religious communities to provide the means for transport out of Uganda during the crisis of the Exodus. Clearly, these were individuals who could not apply to the UNCR on their own, and at least one head of the family had an Indian passport and needed

monetary support to reach India. The documents illustrate the complex subjectivities of Asian individuals with large families during the crisis. Finally, they indicate the types of strategies they used to mobilize resources and sort out the next steps of their journeys to multiple locations outside Africa once they had been stripped of formal citizenship rights in Uganda.

For Asians in Amin’s Uganda, the politics of the passport were thus central to citizenship formation, transnational mobility, and one’s future prospects and dreams. British passports, in particular, enabled another “option,” even before the Asian Exodus in 1972: an alternative life in Europe. Yet in post-1972 Uganda, some Asians found other ways of strategizing and negotiating the boundaries and mobility embedded within formal citizenship. When I returned to Ann Arbor in 2010, my uncle, Makhan Singh Gill told me a story he heard in Toronto in the 1970s about a wealthy Sikh who was “chased out of Uganda.” When he realized his riches were worthless in Uganda, he gave it all away to other Asians and Ugandans who needed money to pay their way out of the country. Indeed, this Singh was a well-known figure among Ugandan Asians in the field, and was often referred to as the “Second Madhvani” before 1972. He had worked as a stationmaster and conductor on the Mombasa-Kampala line in the old days. He was one of a few very wealthy Sikh industrialists who had become rich through the timber business, and owned both sawmills and plywood factories in Uganda and Kenya. As 1972 approached, he traded in his British passport for a Ugandan passport. Amin was not his friend. After his citizenship was canceled in Uganda, he left for Nairobi and continued his business. In 1978, Ugandan Asians describe him organizing a meeting with President Daniel Arap Moi, and offering him a large monetary “gift”—letting Moi know that his businesses could be shut down in Kenya, but he did not want any Kenyan partners and the wealth and profits from his industry should not be redistributed. Despite the bribe, his

21 It is widely known that Indian nationals in Uganda experienced the worst violence during the Exodus. They traveled from Uganda to Mombasa via rail, and experienced looting and gender-based harassment from soldiers and Ugandan civilians. Many elite representatives from the Ugandan Asian community reflected on the ways that Indian citizens could have been more protected during the crisis by the UNRC during my fieldwork.

22 Manubhai Madhvani, one of the wealthiest Asian “tycoons” in Uganda, famously arrested and detained by Idi Amin. See his autobiography, Tide of Fortune: A Family Tale (2008).
industrial operations were shut down. Resolutely and angrily, he left for England with a Ugandan passport, attained British citizenship, and arrived back in Entebbe in the final years of Amin’s regime. Immigration officials were incensed. How could he come back to Uganda when all other Asians had been chased away? Nonetheless, perhaps through monetary bribes or other promises, he remained in Uganda until he could reclaim his property and assets in the early 1990s. His son now lives in Uganda. Despite the option to leave, this story illustrates the maneuverings of at least one Asian who refused to quit East Africa.

Africanist scholars from diverse epistemological and theoretical perspectives stress the relationship between colonial violence and the emergence of “citizens” (usually the urban bourgeois elite) and non-citizens in post-colonial Africa. Kasozi stresses the structural origins of post-colonial violence in Uganda, de-emphasizing the roles of demagogues and dictators such as Idi Amin, and rather, pointing to cyclical ethnic-based governance regimes and ethnic-based violence—and the concomitant emergence of “citizens” who became beneficiaries of rights and rewards as opposed to “non-citizens”—who were expelled, tortured, murdered (Kasozi 1994). Aware of the contingencies of “belonging” in Uganda, many black Ugandans and Ugandan Asian returnees noted that the Exodus was a blessing for Asians—while many Ugandans had perished in the violence of successive post-colonial regimes and weak states, Asians had survived and prospered abroad. A vivid image I am always left with is the description by one Ugandan Asian returnee of an Asian family in London who “hung a portrait of ‘Dada Idi Amin’ in their living room, thanking him for having brought them to England, a place they wanted to end up in anyway.” Formal citizenship for Asians in Uganda before the Exodus was an ambiguous process vulnerable to changes in leadership, governance and policy. But the politics of the Exodus also suggest that some elite Asians, to some extent, were able to use their financial capital—and through personal relationships, bribes, or other strategies continue their lives in Uganda. It is provocative, but a few Ugandan Asians who remained, felt that if Asians had “really” wanted to stay in Uganda, they could have. It just meant they would have to accept their status as ambiguous

23 For important perspectives, see de Boeck (1996); Diouf (2003); Geschiere (2009); Mamdani (1996); Mbembe (2001).
“noncitizens” among Amin and his soldiers. According to some Asians who remained, those who had “stayed” were the ones who were truly committed to Uganda and Ugandans. They were authentic Ugandans.

Politics of Survival in Violent Times

In the rest of the paper, I stress the presence of Ugandan Asians in Uganda during their purported “absence” from 1972-1979. I focus my inquiry on Kampala and Mbarara town in Ankole to discuss the interstices of formal/legal and the lived experience of citizenship in the context of a violent regime. Thus citizenship “is not organic but must be acquired through public and psychic participation. The citizen and its vehicle, citizenship, are unstable sites that mutually interact to forge local, often changing (even transitory) notions of who the citizen is, and the kinds of citizenship possible at a given historical-political moment” (1999:3). Did Asian “non-citizens” claim a sense of belonging at this time, and if so, what were the strategies that they used? In this analysis, I center the relationships of individuals and family units to Asian homes and other private property, and communally owned temples. Struggles over ownership of these sites are the realms in which claims over belonging emerge.

One of my main contacts during my fieldwork was the family of a young fourth generation Ugandan Asian friend of mine, Amar. Like many other Asian youth in Uganda, he had both enormous responsibility and opportunity, spending days and nights working at his father’s garage in their construction business, dealing with dramas at the workplace and among community members, and being a teenager. At one dinner, we talked about his family’s role in playing the part of the “Indians” in the Hollywood film set of The Last King of Scotland, shot in downtown Kampala in 2005. A neighbor who rented an adjoining home from the family in their compound and worked in the city as a trader, tailor, and internet web café proprietor, had gone to the film set. An American film crewmember approached him and told him they needed some extras—both men and women—to play the role of the expelled Indians in the film. He told me that he happily drove back to the family compound in the American film crew member’s van—telling him he knew where he could “find a whole bunch of Indians.” (Amar later complained to
me that the “Ingrez” made him wear “weird white cotton Gandhi type lungis”—“Did we really dress like that back then?” he asked me.) Amar’s family had experienced the events of the Expulsion—they also negotiated the Exodus, retained residency in Kampala, and several decades later, the next generation played the role of their expelled ancestors in a global blockbuster.

Amar and his father, Sukh Singh, often lamented the fact that Sukh Singh’s father had just passed away before my arrival to Uganda. He had all the stories, Amar would say. “You just put him in a good mood, and then he’s off.” Amreek Singh was a carpenter, like his father, who had migrated from India to Mombasa at the fin de siècle. He had a furniture shop in Kenya, but had moved to Uganda in the 1920s. Later on in his life he began to work on the Own Falls Dam, a controversial development project that was contracted to an Italian company at the time. By the early 1960s he had saved enough money to leave the dam in Jinja and opened up his own workshop with a partner in Kampala. It was called Singh Builders, and the family’s home was built on the same property. Over time, like many enterprising urban Asians, he was able to invest in and own several properties in the suburbs of Kampala.

Singh Builders was one of many Sikh companies contracted by Milton Obote’s, and then Idi Amin’s government in the Ministry of Works. In our interview in 2008, Amreek Singh’s Ugandan-born son, Sukh Singh, noted that because of the labor arrangements between Sikh builders and the government, his father was “exempt” from the Asian Exodus, and he had received an “exemption pass.” Unlike the story of the Singh who had redistributed his wealth among other Asians so they could leave Uganda and then paid his way back into Uganda—Amin’s government had cultivated relationships with some Asians, needing “many Kampala Sikhs to build roads, schools, and other infrastructure in Uganda.” Other contacts at the Ramgarhia Sikh Gurudwara in Kampala confirmed that between fifteen and twenty Sikh families had remained behind. Two points are critical here: first, other than a few exceptions, most Asian women and children were sent outside Uganda at this time: to relatives in Rwanda, Tanzania, and

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24 I never heard anything about Amreek Singh’s wife. Indeed, men and masculinity were central to ideologies among Asians who had remained, especially Sikhs. I plan to analyze gender and racial ideologies further in my dissertation thesis.

25 Some discussed 200-250 Asians who remained in Uganda.
Kenya, and India. Thus the narratives of “Asians who remained” are generally those of
Asian men. Second, it was not clear to me whether exempt families had actual material
documentation attesting to their “exempt status.” Many of the uncles I interviewed
insinuated that they had some sort of special permit—most likely these were government-
issued identifications. (In Mbarara, one uncle discussed that Asians who remained were
processed through Idi Amin’s verification committee for Asians.) Generally, Asian
contacts could not help me further on locating documents during this period—as in many
other instances during my fieldwork, they bemoaned the loss of important legal
documents: certificates of land and property ownership, business licenses, and birth
certificates that had been misplaced or unrecovered in the chaos of the Exodus.
Nonetheless, many families who remained are still in and around Kampala, while a few
relocated to England recently for retirement—making annual visits to Uganda to check
on businesses, properties, friends and extended family.

Amreek Singh lived in Kampala throughout the 1970s and 80s in the same home
that Sukh Singh and his son live in now—the only difference being that at that time the
family compound was a joint Asian home and workshop. In 2008, the family business
was located in another rental property on the other side of Kampala, and the operations of
the business had transformed greatly. Amar and several Ugandan employees at the
workshop had developed a business in steel welding—constructing large steel frames and
poles, often for the large billboards and other advertisements that lined Entebbe Road and
major roundabouts in the city center. In general, they felt that the competition from
wealthy multinational Indian construction companies from Gujarat and the Chinese
government (in addition to increasing corruption between Asian companies and
Museveni’s government) would prevent them from ever winning any major contracts in
building and construction from the Ministry of Works or Education. This sense of slowly
diminishing wealth and loss of opportunity in contemporary Uganda often inflected the
narratives of Ugandan Asians who remained, who would describe earlier forms of forced
loss during Amin’s regime. Below, Sukh Singh discusses the forced confiscation of
family assets by Amin’s soldiers in Kampala between 1972-1979.26

26 Interview, September 2009.
“Some of our property was in Port Bell, Tank Hill...so those days my father sold so many properties because of bad days...but they paid them money. Even those houses in Port bell...you know Port bell? On the lake there. Some Amin’s people came and said if you are not selling, you have to sign here. By force. If you agree, you tell us where you want your money “in the world.” Because you know they were the ones, the rich people here...the Muslims...because Amin was a Muslim you know that...so they paid him money, but not actual [how much it was worth]. They paid in somewhere like X. He was very brave man, you know. Even sometime, people used to come some army people. “You are still here? Why everybody is gone, why you are still here?” [He said] “Ok this is my property, I worked hard, I made it, even if you want to shoot me, shoot me I don’t care.”

Here, Sukh Singh stresses the loss of value of his father’s assets, the expropriation of his properties through forced sale by sovereign soldiers, and the individual negotiations he had with them at the time. It was not clear to me whether other expelled Asians and family friends had left some of their properties to be watched over by Amreek Singh, and at the time, I did not think to ask. It is also often unclear in narratives how money and financial resources were allocated—how often were soldiers and other civilians exacting monetary bribes from Asian families in order for them to remain in Kampala, and to what extent did this become a normalized practice? In the above excerpt, Sukh Singh emphasized that Amin’s soldiers paid the family much less for the properties than they were worth. Other families who remained in Uganda discussed the ways that their properties were simply taken over by force without any monetary compensation. Families I spent time with did not generally discuss their own monetary bribes to government officials and soldiers, although I imagine the circulation of wealth and other material possessions were central to their strategies of remaining in Uganda at the time.

As in the excerpt above, many Ugandan Asians who remained described their decisions to stay in the country as involving sacrifice and loss—both human and material. The allusion to Amreek Singh’s “bravery” and willingness to sacrifice his life is not surprising given Sikh masculine ideologies of courage, honor, sacrifice and strength (Fox 1985). Moreover, Sukh Singh’s discussion of his father “working hard and making it” is salient. During my fieldwork in Kampala, many Ugandan Asians, both returnees and long-term residents, discussed how they “worked the hardest,” and had helped explore, “open up,” develop and build the infrastructure of the country, both in Kampala and Uganda’s hinterlands. Asians thus had major stakes in the future “development” of the country, and these stakes contributed to their claims for citizenship and belonging in
Museveni’s Uganda. Claims for belonging in Uganda generally had to do with individual and familial achievement across generations irrespective of governance regime. As other scholars have pointed out, beliefs about “ethnic succession,” or the notion that “having made important contributions across generations, and thus being owed a moral debt by society, minorities and ethnic immigrants believe they have a right to become full citizens” (Ong 2003), was central to many of the narratives of Ugandan Asians who remained.

Homes and Asian Visibility

Amreek Singh’s son, Sukh Singh, had left Uganda before the Exodus to study in Britain in 1968. After 1972, he traveled back to Uganda every year to visit his father, check on him, and the rest of their remaining and scattered family in Uganda and Kenya until 1978. From 1978 onwards, he lived with his father in their home until his marriage in the Punjab in India in 1984. Sukh Singh often discussed the special attributes of their home. On Sundays in Kampala, his young son Amar would pick me up in Kibuli. Upon approaching the home, we entered large blue painted gates that were marked with the Sikh religious symbol, or the *khanda*. There was a large courtyard area where old Amreek Singh’s workshop had once been active. Once Sukh Singh returned to Uganda with his wife from India, the family relocated the old workshop, and began to add additions and extra rooms to the home, rebuilding the compound from the bottom up in order to make room for the expanding family and future generations. Old workshop rooms were converted into small separate cottages, now rented by migrant Indian families that supplement the family’s income. Sukh Singh mentions that these conversions and renovations began to happen just as President Museveni toppled Milton Obote and Kampala fell to the National Resistance Army in 1985. Suddenly, there was no more looting—Museveni’s troops were behaved, professional, and committed to a rebirth of Uganda.

During one visit, Sukh Singh sat up abruptly from the living room couch and asked me to follow him into an adjoining section of the house. He began to describe Kampala during Obote’s second regime from 1980-1985, a time when United National
Liberation Army (UNLA) soldiers overtook the city. Many Ugandan Asians who remained described this period in Uganda as even more violent and dangerous than Idi Amin’s regime. Kasozi notes, “violence under Amin was like a tide, peaking and subsiding at certain periods. Whenever there was a political crisis in the ranks of the regime itself, or when an attempt was made to dislodge the dictator, violence intensified. But in the second Obote period, violence was always at high tide” (1995:145). Sukh Singh noted that, “Soldiers looted, and looted very badly.” He laughed, and said he remembered that a soldier could walk right up to you and “take the eyeglasses off of your face,” demonstrating this to me by whipping the spectacles off his face. He also remembered that all people kept their wristwatches in their pockets, never wearing them on their wrists. He shows me a bedroom where a soldier had shot and killed one of his friends and coworkers from the old workshop. The soldier had forcibly entered the house through the window. One of the window frames was still bent from this intrusion, and, as he pointed out to me, at that time there was no outside wall surrounding the house as there is now. The soldier had also threatened his life but God had spared him. He runs his finger over an impression from a gunshot in the doorframe of the bedroom.

Ugandan Asians who remained and had had some security as contractors in Amin’s government, or who were associated with Amin’s government directly, suddenly had to re-invent new strategies and tactics for living in Kampala given the rapidly shifting political situation after 1979. Asian homes were key sites for the continuity and reproduction of life, protection, and survival. Mobility for Asian men who remained in the 1980s was restricted, and if they did walk outside in public they risked harassment from soldiers and possible death. Sukh Singh mentioned that his father and brothers only used candlelight at night so Obote’s soldiers would not find their home or attack them. The complete and total retreat from public life—social invisibility—was the way to survive in Kampala, at least until Obote’s second regime fell and his soldiers scattered. This, I felt, was a moment when Asians who remained felt the most vulnerable, and when their rights to belong were even more circumvented than under Amin.
In 1972, departing Asians left behind a vibrant associational and religious life in Uganda, in addition to private property (Asian homes and businesses such as the small shops that were central to social and commercial life in Kampala and small towns throughout Uganda), large agricultural and industrial estates, and communal properties such as community schools, recreational areas, and religious sites of worship. Little intellectual scholarship on Asian private property exists for many reasons. While, I do not take up a historical analysis of Asian property here, I note the significance of property—both private and communal in the formation of practices and claims to belonging in Uganda. Moreover, because of my interest in community formation among Asians in contemporary Uganda, I spent much time at religious sites in Kampala, both Hindu mandhirs and Sikh gurudwaras. A mix of new migrant Punjabi Sikhs, Punjabi and Gujarati Hindus attend the two major Sikh gurudwaras in Kampala: the Ramgarhia and Singh Sabha gurudwaras on Sunday. Because of its larger number of congregants, the Ramgarhia Sikh community is the most active group of Asians in Uganda in regards to the amount of time and effort they invest in traveling throughout the countryside of Uganda to visit and pray at Sikh religious sites.

Prior to the Exodus, Ramgarhia Sikhs constructed gurudwaras in Kampala, Jinja, Entebbe, Mbale, Soroti, Lira, Masaka, Kabale, and Fort Portal. Jat Sikhs had constructed gurudwaras in a similar fashion in Kampala, Mbarara and Gulu. They were kept functional and maintained by the small weekly donations of congregants and the larger philanthropic donations of male committee members, or entrepreneurial community members. The first Sikh gurudwara was built in Kampala in 1935—a small structure in a different site than the existing temple, which now faces a major roundabout that divides Old Kampala from the city center. The gurudwara at the present location was

27 Punjabi. “Uganda’s gurudwaras” as they were described by field contacts.
29 “Old Kampala” is the historically Asian area of Kampala. It tended to be more working class, and contains such residential flats and homes like “Bombay Gardens” that are now rented by more recent Indian migrants.
established in 1971. The Chairperson of the Ramgarhia Sikh gurudwara committee discussed how; unfortunately, by the time the new gurudwara had been built, many Asians were beginning to leave Uganda. By 1972, “bahut jada log Uganda nu shad gayee si” (many people had left Uganda then) and the sangat had diminished considerably.
Hanging on the wall honoring the donations of Sikh, Muslim, and Hindu patrons of Entebbe Gurudwara. Photo May 2008.
Amreek Singh, along with Gurcharan Singh, Chand Panesar, and Bakshish Singh Bhamra were the critical men who remained in Uganda during and after the Exodus and negotiated with Amin’s government for all Sikh gurudwaras and Hindu mandhirs to remain in possession of the remaining Asian community rather than become expropriated by Amin’s Ministry of Finance, and notably, the Departed Asians Property Custodial Board (DAPCB) that emerged in 1973. Another community member, Ram Singh, was the Chief Engineer in Internal Affairs and Defense in Amin’s government, and the person who maintained the sovereignty of the gurudwaras at a time when all Asian property was turned over to Amin’s inner circle. In addition, while I had assumed that the majority of Sikhs did not begin to return to Uganda until after Idi Amin’s fall in 1979, the pardhan insists that Sikhs had come back to Uganda in 1976, and that Amin’s government had invited them back. He mentioned twenty to thirty Punjabi Sikh families returning to Uganda at this time.30

In our conversations, I found that the men I spoke with were extremely interested in reviewing the history and order of successive pardhans of the gurudwara committee from 1972-1986. In 1972, the remaining Sikh community in Kampala voted Amreek Singh to become the Chairman of the Ramgarhia Sikh Committee—indeed, when I spoke to Sukh Singh and Amar, they expressed that this was a great honor for their family. It meant that all the departed Sikhs entrusted the gurudwaras to Sukh Singh, and that they trusted him and thought him worthy of the responsibility. Throughout the 70s, Kampala Sikhs banded together with other Asians in the city—a few Punjabi Hindus and Ismaili Khojas, and also helped protect the Swaminarayan and Shikhar Bandhi mandhirs in Old Kampala from Amin’s men:

SS: Many of the Sikhs who were here, and some people from the Hindu temple they were helping each other…because you know, if government said you are not running these places, they are going to take over. So whole communities they decided to do one Sunday over here, one Sunday in mandhir, one Sunday in Singh Sabha, one Sunday in Entebbe,

30 This is undoubtedly after the first coup attempt against Amin in 1976, and the period when Amin’s Uganda has entered serious economic crisis. It could be that Amin summoned Punjabi Sikhs back to Uganda at this time in order to help revive the economy. Further research needs to be conducted on why and how Punjabi Sikhs were first invited to return to Uganda—well before Milton Obote’s second term when major landed industrialists Mahendra Mehta and Manubhai Madhvani returned to Uganda, and well before Yoweri Museveni’s post-1986 invitation for Asians to return and “invest” in Uganda.
one Sunday in Jinja, [sab no vakhan liye ki apnay propertiya tey janday si] just to show those people that we are continuous with our properties.
A: Did some people also come inside?
SS: Yeah they used to come inside…once some Ugandan people came, they said they want to open a disco here in the hall…Even Amin came once, they had to see how many people are here on Sunday. We were always 20 to 50 people in the gurudwara.

Idi Amin usually appeared in many of these narratives. Most Sikhs, because of their work and the close connections they had to build with Amin’s bureaucrats and soldiers, had individual relationships with Amin himself. Many Kampala Sikhs described, how, one Sunday, Amin himself had entered the Ramgarhia gurudwara in Old Kampala, climbed up the steps, and presented himself before the sangat and pakarmah. They “were nervous” they said, but continued kirtan and prayers, and answered his questions. He was there in order “to check that Asians were really praying in the gurudwaras and mandhirs.” They discussed how after this visit, they were happy to take the risk of traveling to other gurudwaras in the country, drawing comparisons with the destruction of the Ismailia jamatkhana once it had been expropriated by Amin’s soldiers and allocated to the Uganda Supreme Muslim Council. I had no more details of this story, and no more knowledge if Amin had “checked up” on any other Asian sites of worship.

During the period 1972-1979, among all Ramgarhia gurudwaras, only two had fallen out of the possession of Kampala Sikhs. The first was a small gurudwara in Fort Portal, whose Sikh proprietors and congregants disappeared after the Expulsion. According to townspeople in Fort Portal, it had briefly been converted into a canteen. In 2008, the DAPCB contacted the head of Kampala’s Indian Association and informed him of its existence—it had long been regarded as “lost” among Ramgarhia Sikhs. Now officially repossessed and somewhat rehabilitated, it is under the auspices of the Committee once again. During the Nishaan Sahib ceremonies in May 2009, a newly composed Sikh community, mostly recently-arrived young Sikh men from the Punjab, had traveled from Kampala to Fort Portal by bus, worshipped, prayed, ate langar, and spent the night in the gurudwara for the first time since 1972.32

31 Walking area before the Guru Granth Sahib, the central Sikh spiritual text.
32 The Nishaan Sahib is the traditional Sikh flag, which hangs on a timber or metal pole outside of gurudwaras. Kampala Sikhs travel to each gurudwara in Uganda every year and change the flag. Langar is a central institution among Sikhs in gurudwaras, it refers to preparing and eating a meal together.
The second gurudwara, located in Masaka, has still not been repossessed by the Sikhs because there is no documentation attesting to anything about its previous history among Sikhs: no property or land titles, receipts or files. The gurudwara is now a church. Town legends surround the old gurudwara. At one time, the pardhan tells me, Muslim Ugandans had tried to convert it into a hostel. A hajji had slipped on a concrete slab outside the temple, fallen, and died. Another accident occurred during the conversion of the temple, and yet another hajji met a similar fate. It then became associated with witchcraft and Masaka townspeople considered it cursed for several years before its recent conversion. When I asked the pardhan if anyone had visited the religious site recently, he stressed that it would be impossible for him to go near there—that he would not be wanted there, gesturing vaguely to his turban. It was much better for the DAPCB and the Indian Association in Kampala to handle the lost properties than for individuals to search for information on their own, especially if there was no trace of information left behind.

Again the pardhan and other committee members mentioned the frustrations of trying to locate original or even duplicates of land and property titles of many types of Asian properties. Only one property title exists—in the 1950s, the British governor in Entebbe had framed and presented it to the Committee, and it hangs on the wall of the gurudwara there. These documents had disappeared in the hands of previous committee chairman and others who left Uganda with the intention of coming back. Old property titles are rumored to be carefully hidden in the unknown hiding places of decaying Asian structures that mark Uganda’s landscape—in the many nooks and crannies of foundation walls, buried under trees and other landmarks on Asian land. As of 2008, the committee had been unable to recover any other property titles for the Sikh gurudwaras, a problematic situation as land rental fees in the city escalate, and the committee finds that its increasingly poorer Indian migrant congregants cannot fund property fees via pithy

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33 Hajji, from Arabic. A Hajji is usually a respected Muslim elder who has made the pilgrimage, or hajj, to Mecca. For further reading on Islam in Uganda see Lodhi (1994). Tens of thousands of Ugandans converted to Islam during Amin’s regime. There was also a small exodus of Muslims from Uganda to Kenya and Tanzania after Amin’s fall.

34 Stories circulate among Asians and Ugandans about returning Asians who were involved in property disputes with Ugandan beneficiaries of Asian property in 1972-1973. Many discuss the circulation of returning Asian men in 1994 and 1995. They recovered lost documents hidden under foundation stones or other hiding places, thus proving their ownership of property and repossessing it from the DAPCB.
donations alone. Debates and questions surrounding the status of communal property among Asians in contemporary Kampala are related to the events of 1972 and the sense of loss and devaluation of Asian property. Moreover, communal property, particularly *gurudwaras* and *mandhirs*, became sites of contestation and spaces for practicing community and claims for belonging among the few Asians who remained in Uganda. In order to practice these claims, they created their own communities of Hindus and Sikhs in the absence of the larger Asian population, working together to protect religious sites from much of the violence and destruction occurring elsewhere.

**Mbarara Asians: Sovereign Relationships and Beyond**

In Mbarara town, I discovered other types of openings and citizenship claims created by Asian families who had remained in Ankole during Amin’s regime.\(^\text{35}\) First, the racial/ethnic character of Asian families in small towns in Uganda is often much different. In Mbarara, Bibi’s father was a *Jat* Sikh, who worked in the British civil service and originally migrated in the early 1930s from a small village in what is today Pakistan. A famed lion hunter, he married a *Munyarwanda* woman from the region, and settled down in the town, urging other Sikhs from his village to come to Mbarara.\(^\text{36}\) Bibi, his only daughter, never got married. Her brother, Sahib, vividly remembers the day in 1971 when Amin’s entourage moved through Mbarara town after taking Uganda. Mbarara town had “a couple thousand” Asians then, and all Asians stood on High Street (Mbarara’s “main street”) with other townspeople to cheer for Amin. After most Mbarara Asians had left towards the end of 1972, Sahib and Bibi simply refused to leave. “I am a Ugandan,” Bibi would stress to me, “why would I have left?” In 2008, when new migrant

\(^{35}\) There is much data to be incorporated on Mbarara town as a site for considering the relationship between mobility, race/ethnicity, and citizenship. For the purposes of this discussion, I limit my analysis to brief sketches of two families who reflect on the period between 1972-1985 and religious sites in particular. Readers should note the particular role that Mbarara played in the 1979 Tanzanian Invasion and the launching of Museveni’s Bush War in 1985. In both instances, Mbarara town was bombed and destroyed. Moreover, *Banyankole* and others who were viewed as supporters of Amin’s many enemy groups at the time were murdered in the 1970s. Thus the town has experienced cycles of profound violence, loss of life, destruction and reconstruction. During my fieldwork new migrant Asians from India had begun to trade in town, provoking interesting sentiments and reactions from Ugandan Asians and other long-term town residents.

\(^{36}\) There is a street in Mbarara town called Makhan Singh in his honor.
Indians in Mbarara town tended to exclude Gudo by emphasizing that she was a “half-caste,” Bibi ignored these comments and noted she was a Sikh. She wore salwar kameez and dupatta, and spoke Punjabi, Hindi and Gujarati in addition to Swahili, Runyankole, and Luganda. She knew everyone in the town, and arranged and negotiated all marriages for her brothers with “good Indian women.” Family members were the protectors and pardhans of the Sikh gurudwara in Mbarara town. Other townspeople in Mbarara confirmed that after Amin’s soldiers had looted all Asian dukas (Swahili, shops) in town, they came to Sahib and Bibi’s home. Sahib and Bibi told them that they were Ugandan, and to “get out.” Nonetheless, soldiers took over the house until 1973 and the families temporarily relocated until they were able to get it back. Bibi and Sahib’s claims to belonging in Mbarara first and foremost depended upon their African ancestry, despite the fact that they were often regarded as Asians among townspeople in Mbarara because of their businesses, outward comportment, and religious practice.

Bibi had three older brothers: Babu Singh, who eventually left Uganda in the late 1970s and became a long-distance truck driver in Canada and the US, Ram Singh, who handled work and business in Mbarara, and Sahib—who had worked for years in the transport business in Uganda and Zaire. One of the strategies the family used over the long periods of violence and insecurity was the maintenance of multiple and diverse businesses—involvement in mining, farming, transport; and, in the 1990s—contracts with the UNHCR and World Food Program. By 1973, Sahib became affiliated with Amin’s Ministry of Defense by providing lorries to his government. He described Amin as “a friend,” that he would often come through and visit him when he was in Mbarara. Sahib was a sportsman like his father, and described hunting expeditions with Amin. Amin admired Sahib because he was a “strong” man: a hunter, rally car driving champion, and he always brought back great stories from Kisangani and Lubumbashi. Sahib tended to stress that Sikhs were not afraid to leave Uganda, but other Asians “ran off” out of fear. At that time, among Ugandan Asians who remained, he said, there was a
lot of “money to be made.” He also pointed out that “as long as you did not talk about any politics, everything was ok.”

Relocating some family members outside of the volatile political situation in Uganda was important, and Babu Singh was able to use the citizenship crisis to earn and save money abroad, raising his children in North America. Back in Mbarara, like other Ugandans in town who converted to Islam, or formed other alliances with Amin’s troops in order to survive, Sahib’s relationship with Amin proved useful in protecting the family and other remaining Asians in town. Yet when Idi Amin’s regime fell in 1979, and Mbarara was destroyed, Bibi and the other women in the household were temporarily sent to Mombasa and to live with relatives in Rwanda. The family had to sort out a plan for their continued residence in Mbarara all over again. After some time, all family members came back to the home. According to Babu Singh, the 1980s were the worst. Soldiers invaded the home, looted, and moved in, and Ram Singh was shot and killed by Obote’s soldiers.

As in Kampala, the home and gurudwara were key sites of contestation and belonging. As regimes and governments changed rapidly, the family had to strategize over whether and how they could retain proprietorship of the gurudwara. Various townspeople in Mbarara remembered that the “temple for the Singha-Singhas” was the space in which the Departed Asian Property Custodial Board reallocation committee had set up a “temporary office” and many Muslim Ugandans in town were asked to fill out forms. They were then allocated Asian shops and homes, especially if these sites had not already been taken over by force. Later on in Amin’s regime, the Kampala Sikhs were traveling to Mbarara, helping Bibi and Sahib take care of the gurudwara. By the 1980s, it was once again up for grabs. In 1985, while other parts of the town were bombed and destroyed, the gurudwara remained standing. During Museveni’s early regime, it had been converted into a temporary hostel, especially for young boys. Many townspeople also described National Resistance Movement decentralization trainings taking place within the gurudwara. In the 1990s, when Museveni had re-instated the Expropriated Asian Properties Act, Bibi had finally paid off some last hangers-on that were living

38 I felt he was alluding to magendo (cross-border smuggling practices), and that some Asians who remained engaged in this more than others.
inside the space. She then used family funds to rehabilitate the *gurudwara*. In 2009, a new *gyani*, (*Punjabi*, Sikh priest) had arrived with his family from Tanzania to live in and preside over the *gurudwara*. Bibi was deeply protective and connected to the *gurudwara*. She was often nervous about the *gyani*, and during my field visits asked me to stop by the *gurudwara* and check if he was actually there or hanging about in town.

Lalbhai, another head of an Asian family in Mbarara, is a second-generation Ugandan Asian of Gujarati descent. He also remained in Mbarara throughout the Exodus because he owned a mine, and was friends with Sahib. He describes the particular openings for his family during this period below:

“Because I never left… Yes we stayed here, because, during the Exodus, they…we were the citizen. We were working here. That time we were doing mining business and farming. When we verified our citizen was proper…and when we stayed, they never harmed us or anything. And we stayed here. But few people stayed here, about ten families. After ‘73, after six month they [Ugandans] had taken their business. For us, they never harassed us in mining business. And we stayed. There was no problem. We stayed, all four brothers here.

Not exemption pass, we were citizen. You know, that time, they used to make verification. There was a deadline it was 9 November I think, so, we went to the RDC office, that time it was the DC office. Then they verify us, you know? So how many Asian mining here? We were about…twenty. Then for the others, there businesses were slowly, slowly taken, then they went off. For us, they never took our mine. If it was taken, then also we have gone, see? But we stayed here. And we lived in our home, right there in High Street.”

Lalbhai stressed the fact that he was a citizen, and this was why he stayed. But he also qualifies his discussion by noting that the mine itself was the opening that allowed him to be “verified” by the committee at the District Commissioner’s office (he emphasizes that there were no “exemption passes” like there were in Kampala.) While other business operations had been expropriated over time, and other Asians slowly came to terms with this and left Uganda, Lalbhai and his brothers remained, living off the farm and mine. When I asked him if it was difficult for him to live in his home on the main street of Mbarara when all other Asian had been forced to leave and their shops and homes had been re-allocated, he stressed his social relationships with Mbarara townspeople—the ways that they formed a community, helped him and took care of him:

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39 Interview February 2010.
40 RDC, or Resident District Commissioner. DC, or District Commissioner.
“Because we born here three generations, and everyone knows us. But once you are not in politics, no one will harass you. And when you are staying with the people, like your own people... Once you stay with people nicely, nobody will harass you, for what? You know Uganda people, like Kenya people, Tanzania people. If I don’t know anybody, if I got a problem, they will help me. They don’t go for the color, you know? Even you go in the village anywhere, even you are stuck-up, They welcome you, they look after you, they give you place for sleeping. They look after you! Until you finish your car, your repairs and go. But you will not find a thing like this. No one will give you free food. I been to India in ’71. Some people came [from there] and stayed home and stayed in my home for one month! When I went there, even they never offered me a cup of tea, even! See? But you will not find people in Ankole, especially in Uganda, they cannot offer you, see? We stayed with the people nicely, there was no harassment, they used to help us, if you got any problem, [they said] we are there.”

Lalbhai, Sahib, Bibi and other “Asians who remained” were part of a tight-knit social network with other Ugandans in town. Lalbhai emphasized that “if you stay with people nicely, nobody will harass you”—it is possible that here, he was contrasting the practices of Asians who remained with the more arrogant or “stuck-up” practices of Asians who had been forced to leave—these sentiments are often expressed in the memoirs and autobiographies of expelled Ugandan Asians (Alibhai-Brown 1995). Clearly, Lalbhai emphasizes his family’s relationships and friendships with generous and protective townspeople during the worst period of violence: the Exodus itself, the re-allocation of Asian shops and homes, the launching of Museveni’s 1976 Bush War against Amin and ensuing destruction of Mbarara town, and throughout the 1980s. This reinvention of “community” and kinship between Ugandan Asians who remained and their Ugandan neighbors in the context of the “failed” Asian community at large, was a central strategy that enabled some Ugandan Asians to claim a sense of belonging in Uganda.
The narratives of Ugandan Asians “who remained” involved moments of pause and reflection; quiet moments of stillness and silence. There was also rumor, secrecy, mystery, abrupt and sudden memories, confused time lines, humor, intrigue, guilt, regret, sadness and a deep sense of loss. Many stories were of a political nature, and at times Ugandan Asians reflected on the ambiguous nature of their relationships with political sovereigns. Many resisted attention on Amin and wanted to focus on the future and President Museveni. If any Asian men I talked to felt complicit about their roles in Idi Amin’s regime, it was not clear to me. Most stressed the importance of “staying out of politics” and to maintain friendly and social relationships with him in order to survive. At times, I felt that Asian men felt slightly sympathetic for Amin, who they often
characterized as a personable and friendly man. Often, I am sure, they did not see his more volatile side. I also intuitively felt that they appreciated that Amin cultivated personal relationships with them and knew their names, faces and families—all this despite the fact that he had ordered the expulsion of the rest of the Asian population.

During my fieldwork, many uncles confided that although he had not gone about it the right way, Amin had given Ugandans opportunities that they would otherwise have never received with Asians still going about their businesses. There were other confessions—about the “other African families” that Asian men had left behind in the aftermath of the Expulsion. In Kampala in 2008, one Ugandan Asian returnee described his haunting visit to Uganda in the 1980s, when “half-caste” children in Old Kampala approached him with photos of their departed Asian fathers, asking him for information on their whereabouts and if they could send money for school fees. Confessions over lost children, “African families,” the break-ups of Asian families in the diaspora over Asian property, and unequal wealth accumulation in the 1970s and beyond continue to inflect the lives and stories of Joseph’s “embittered men.” This loss of a complex and unequal social fabric between Africans and Asians in Uganda is the backdrop of my ongoing analysis on Asian citizenship in Uganda.

A story that Sukh Singh told me remains with me still. In 1972, an elderly poor Singh lived in the jungle in a remote area outside of Fort Portal, bordering Zaire. He worked for a wealthy industrialist Sikh who owned a sawmill there. Everyone had left the sawmill, but mzee refused to leave. He had no family, no home, and drank way too much sharaab (Punjabi, alcohol) to get through the long lonely nights. When Sukh Singh passed through the old saw mill on his way to Kasese on a government contract to build teacher-training colleges, mzee had been living there for thirty-five years. He found out from him that his elder brother lived in Southhall, and Sukh Singh pleaded with him that he could arrange for his retirement there. Because his British passport and documents had all expired, it took over a year to sort everything out. The UK finally granted him citizenship. In Kampala, an elderly Ugandan woman in immigration asked, “Now you are an old man and suddenly going to the UK? For what?” He responded, and Sukh Singh translated in English, “now I lived my life in Africa, I want to go to UK and rest.” In England, he reunited with his brother, lived with him, received weekly retirement
benefits, writing to Sukh Singh’s family regularly. A few years back, Amreek Singh asked him to return to Uganda to help them learn more about timber as he was an expert in the industry. Mzee said he was satisfied in England, and was happy to have “cashed in on his citizenship.” Sukh Singh has not heard from him for several years, and is not sure if he died peacefully in his bed in Southhall or if he is still alive.

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