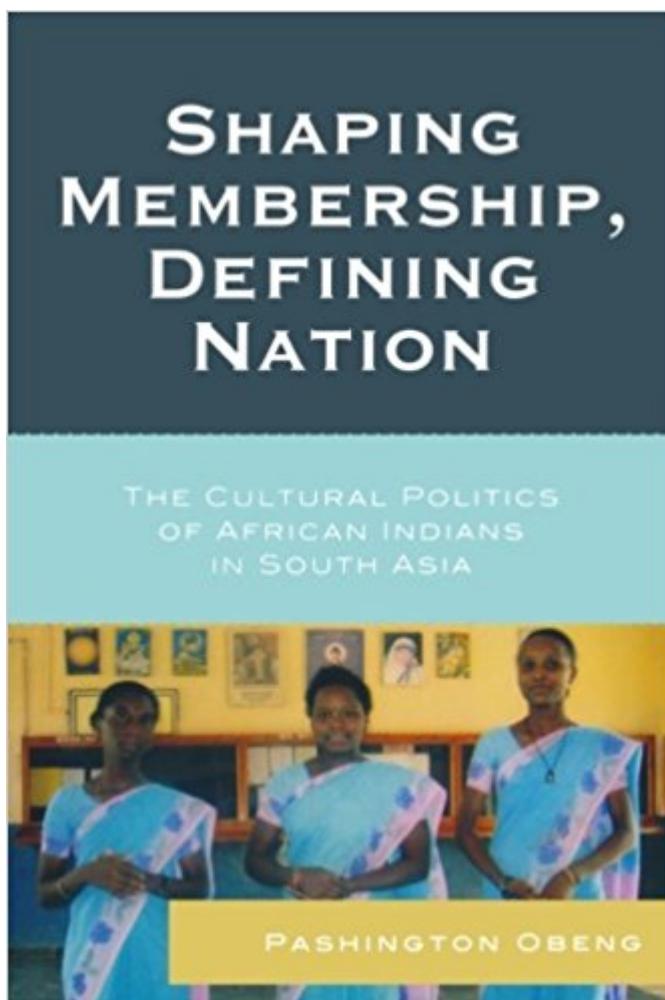


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# Shaping Membership, Defining Nation: The Cultural Politics Of African Indians In South Asia



## **Synopsis**

Shaping Membership, Defining Nation explores and interprets the social politics, religion, and history of Africans (Habshis/Siddis) in Karnataka of South India. Focusing on the continuous dialog between African Indian historical formations and contemporary power structures, Pashington Obeng clearly explains the process of constructing socio-political and religious mores to respond to India's religious, socio-economic, and caste systems. The study begins by contextualizing the history of Africans in India before moving onto a sociological study. Pashington Obeng examines the formal and non-formal religious customs that stress African Indian agency in appropriating and shaping new forms of Indianness as well as African Diasporic realities. The book concludes with an important analysis of African Indian folksongs and dances. Shaping Membership, Defining Nation is a ground-breaking study of interest to scholars of African History and contemporary Indian society.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

In this timely and seminal contribution to the ever-expanding field of African diaspora studies, Pashington Obeng offers a detailed discussion of the history, culture, and religion of Afro-Indians, especially the ways and means of their struggle to assert their complex identities as Indians of African descent. In a political and cultural environment that does not naturally include them in the national imaginary, this far-flung diasporic group has struggled to maintain a distinct identity. By bringing the discussion into the present and highlighting the ongoing efforts to gain official recognition, Obeng presents a complex picture of a community which in spite of history and regional isolation continues to manifest both Indianness and a certain interconnectedness to African

diasporic realities. A must-read for all with a serious interest in Africana and diasporic studies.. (Anani Dzidzienyo, Brown University) This new study of a centuries-old Afro-Asiatic group, the Siddis of Karnataka, offers poignant witness to the persistence of ethnic and religious identity among forcibly relocated peoples. Written by a leading scholar of the African diaspora and grounded in years of field research in India, *Shaping Membership, Defining Nation: The Cultural Politics of African Indians in South Asia* is a fascinating window into a world that remains little-known in the West. The book introduces us to the Siddis, the descendants of African slaves brought to South India by Europeans, and shows us what has become of them there through historical research, social analysis, primary documents, first-person narratives, transcribed stories and descriptions of ritual life in all three of their adopted religious traditions (Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam) -wherein continental African practices and beliefs, although at times occulted, remain to this day. The author also interrogates the historical phenomena of cultural assimilation, showing in rich detail how social and racial hierarchies play out in their particular Indian contexts, and what collective survival has really meant for the Siddis in lived experience. Obeng confronts the question of how the Siddis are viewed by others (Kimberley C. Patton, professor of the comparative and historical study of religion, Harvard Divinity School) African scholar and pastor Pashington J. Obeng has written a new chapter in the 1,300-year-old history of Africans in South Asia. Today's African Indians, or 'Siddis,' are the descendants of African merchants and slaves, some of whom effectively ruled South Indian principalities. Obeng charts the colonial and postcolonial circumstances of the Siddis' marginalization and impoverishment, but not only that. Instead of reducing Siddi experience to a set of historical types or sociological generalizations, the author documents with pathos and detail the public performances, healing practices, financial decisions, legal claims, ethnic organizations, political strategies and, above all, multiple and hybrid religious expressions through which Obeng's living acquaintances have fought for wellbeing and respect. To wit, Obeng observes an emerging Siddi consciousness of and pride in belonging to a global African diaspora. This vivid portrait of black oppression and hope in South India will be an eye-opener for all students of the African diaspora. (J. Lorand Matory, professor of anthropology and of African and African American studies, Harvard University; author of *Sex and the Empire That Is*) Very few people within India-much less abroad-have heard of Indian people of African descent, and South Asian academics are no exception. It is thus refreshing to see a book on this subject from a native Africanist with appropriate academic training. Academics and non-academics alike are familiar with European slave trade that forced thousands of African people into cheap labour in the Americas, Caribbean islands, and elsewhere. Less familiar are the elite soldiers that Muslim rulers brought into medieval and early

modern India as praetorian guards. Obeng compliments the works of historians by writing on the subject from the perspective of a student of religion. . . . The book is recommended for advanced students of Indian religious history and anthropology and African diaspora studies. (The Muslim World Book Review)"A ground breaking contribution to the unwritten social politics, religion, and cultural history of Africans in India. Here, Obeng explores the history and ritual practices of Africans in India and shows how their socio-political life is shaped by intriguing forms of ritualization, various cultural adaptations and innovative practices that make possible new enclaves of African Indians in Karnatika. A must read for anyone wanting to understand the post-slavery adaptations of Africans in South Asia. Its richness is in its explorations of ritualization in everyday practice." (Kamari Maxine Clarke, Yale University, author of *Mapping Yoruba Networks: Power and Agency in the Making of Transnational Communities and Globalization*)In this timely and seminal contribution to the ever-expanding field of African diaspora studies, Pashington Obeng offers a detailed discussion of the history, culture, and religion of Afro-Indians, especially the ways and means of their struggle to assert their complex identities as Indians of African descent. In a political and cultural environment that does not naturally include them in the national imaginary, this far-flung diasporic group has struggled to maintain a distinct identity. By bringing the discussion into the present and highlighting the ongoing efforts to gain official recognition, Obeng presents a complex picture of a community which in spite of history and regional isolation continues to manifest both Indianness and a certain interconnectedness to African diasporic realities.A must-read for all with a serious interest in Africana and diasporic studies. (Anani Dzidzienyo, Brown University)This new study of a centuries-old Afro-Asiatic group, the Siddis of Karnataka, offers poignant witness to the persistence of ethnic and religious identity among forcibly relocated peoples. Written by a leading scholar of the African diaspora and grounded in years of field research in India, *Shaping Membership, Defining Nation: The Cultural Politics of African Indians in South Asia* is a fascinating window into a world that remains little-known in the West. The book introduces us to the Siddis, the descendants of African slaves brought to South India by Europeans, and shows us what has become of them there through historical research, social analysis, primary documents, first-person narratives, transcribed stories and descriptions of ritual life in all three of their adopted religious traditions (Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam) -wherein continental African practices and beliefs, although at times occulted, remain to this day. The author also interrogates the historical phenomena of cultural assimilation, showing in rich detail how social and racial hierarchies play out in their particular Indian contexts, and what collective survival has really meant for the Siddis in lived experience. Obeng confronts the question of how the Siddis are viewed by other Indians, and even more importantly,

the far more complex question of how they view themselves. A valuable and eye-opening book. (Kimberley C. Patton, professor of the comparative and historical study of religion, Harvard Divinity School)

Pashington Obeng is assistant professor of Africana studies at Wellesley College and Harvard University, and the author of *Asante Catholicism: Religious and Cultural Reproduction among the Akan of Ghana* (E.J. Brill).

The author notes that while much has been written about Africans in the Americas, studies of African Indians have only recently been given some attention. The book provides a brief history of African Indians and their identity, marriage, family system, economics, education, religious beliefs, Christian, Muslim, and Hinduism, and sociopolitical issues. In India, African Indians are known as Siddi or Habshi/Habashi. According to the author, Africans have inhabited India for over 500 years. Yet it's also cited they have been on the Indian subcontinent since the seventh century. Omani Arab Muslim traders delivered Africans to India, Turkey, Arabia and Persia. As early as the sixth century, some Africans arrived in India as free individual merchants and traders, while others as voluntary emigrants as blacksmiths, carpenters, and masons. Dutch, Indian and the Portuguese transported Africans to India between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. Some escaped from their European handlers, and lived in the forest. Habshi, Malik Ambar, born in 1548 in Ethiopia, was enslaved by the Arabs, sold in Bagdad, and rose to power as a wazir (regent minister) in the Deccan region of India. In India, he served under Chengiz Khan, the Regent Minister of the Sultan of Nizam Shai in Ahmadnagar. Ambar defeated the great Mughal forces in 1601 at Berar. He trained Habshis and Maranthes (Hindus) fighting techniques. Other illustrious Habshis rose to gain military and political power between the sixteenth and nineteenth century. However, by 1947, when India gained their independence, they lost their influence. Today, mostly known as Siddis, African Indians, have white collar and blue collar jobs, but many have menial work and low wages. At the time of the book's publishing, children's education lagged behind. Children have been used as child laborers to help their families. Children are sometimes abused by employers; oftentimes, losing their lives. Schools cannot get full-time teachers because of low pay. At the copyright of this book, 2007, there were about forty thousand African Indians on the Indian subcontinent. African Indians have had a lasting presence in India. They have married other African Indians, as well as non-African Indians. Most are recognizably different, however, share a common history with the Dalits (untouchables) and Gowlis (cow traders). The author writes that as of 2003, because they

belong to an ethnic, racial, and social group that has suffered social and political disadvantages for centuries, the African Indians of Karnataka have attained the title of Scheduled Tribe (ST), a legally and socially legitimate identity provides them with access to Indian educational, health, and other social facilities. This textbook was unexpectedly enlightening, especially concerning the African Indians' presence in India past and present. I would have enjoyed this book more in a university African studies group with animated discussion between the instructor and students. I gave this book four stars.

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