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African Tongue, Indian Blood: The Case of Swahili Authors of Indian Descent

Chotara is a Swahili word which signifies someone or something “of mixed origin.” The etymology of the word is unknown. It might have derived from Arabic *shatara*, which means “half”, but according to Iqbal Akhtar, the word has its root in Sindhi *chuto*, or “impure.” The probable Sindhi origin of the word signifies the influences of Indic languages on Swahili which began with the settlement of Gujarati and Sindhi traders or *vaniyas* (as they were usually called in Zanzibar) in the East African Coast during 18th and 19th Century. Though in modern Swahili *chotara* refers to any racial mixing, in the 19th century East African coast this word was used as a pejorative to denominate people having parents from Africa as well as India. During this time, most of the traders from the Indian Subcontinent, who settled in the Swahili coast, were followers of Shia Islam and belonged to the Khoja Community. This community soon gave birth to a new racial order, namely *chotara*, and a hybrid culture, taking elements from Swahili and Gujarati. The religious and literary expressions of the Khojas which owed heavily to the Gujarati local tradition of *vratkatha* got merged with the indigenous Swahili literary tradition. Interestingly, after more than two or three generations, in the 20th century, the authors, who came from this mixed background often chose Swahili as their literary language. Farouk Topan translated Gujarati plays into Swahili, Ahmad Nassir created *taarab* music having Swahili words and Indian tune and thus created a cross – cultural literary space where both the cultures interact. This paper attempts a close reading of the literary works of the Swahili authors of Indian descent from Kenya and Tanzania and wants to explore how they negotiated with their racial and cultural position in form and content.