Résumé

Abstract
The Indian presence in Ethiopia has attracted little attention in Ethiopian historiography. Yet Indian businessmen were as instrumental to Ethiopia’s early 20th century economy as they were in British East Africa at the same period. As part of a broader research project aimed at addressing this gap, this article explores the life and achievements of Mohamedally Shaikh Sharafaly, the best known of these Indian businessmen, who set up one of the largest commercial and industrial businesses in Ethiopia. The account follows the narrative of an un-published letter the merchant wrote in 1940 about his business trajectory. From his arrival in Harar in the late 19th century to the eventual expulsion of his company in 1937, his story is highly revealing of the political context in which large foreign businesses would emerge, involving both friendship with the Ethiopian emperors and diplomatic protection, in the case of Indians as British subjects. Mohamedally Shaikh Sharafaly created an extensive network of Indian outlets throughout the country and organized a powerful multi-partnership with Indian fellows, with branches in Djibouti, Aden, and Berbera. The G. M. Mohamedally & Co was much more than a mere business. On several occasions, the company provided intelligence to foreign countries and it actively supported Ethiopians against the Italian occupation. On the social scene, it remained a long-term leader of the Indian community and was famous for its various philanthropic engagements. The 1937 expulsion, as brutal as it was, also showed the political power exercised in India by the company and its founder.
In the second half of the 19th century traders from Gujurat, India were among the first foreigners to settle in the city of Harar, strengthening Ethiopia’s linkages with the Indian Ocean trade. Indians came to Ethiopia in increasing numbers as British subjects after the opening of Anglo-Ethiopian relations in 1897. Their presence drove Addis Ababa’s early development following Emperor Menelik II’s resolve to make his new capital the commercial hub of the Empire. Thanks to their commercial skills, their ability to please Ethiopian tastes, and their historical access to Aden and Indian ports, they soon formed a large business community alongside Greeks, Yemenis, and Armenians. “Indian bazaars,” as Europeans travelers called them, were the places to find all indispensable items for daily life.

This is well illustrated with the fascinating story of G. M. Mohamedally & Co, one of the most influential business concerns in early 20th century Ethiopia until its expulsion by the Italian authorities in 1937. This article is part of my more in-depth work on the Mohamedally Company and Indian communities in Ethiopia, topics on which very little has been written. The story I have reconstituted so far shows how a young Indian migrant navigated the Ethiopian political and economic contexts to start a business that eventually contributed greatly to Ethiopia’s emergence in the 20th century. The research
approach combines oral history, new primary-source documents,\footnote{I am very grateful to Mr. Mohammed Husein H. Sardharwala, head of the Dawoodi Bohra community in Ethiopia, for his interest in my research work and his invaluable help to document some of the legacy of the Indian community in Ethiopia. He shared with me his deep knowledge and life-long personal experiences. He provided the following primary-source documents to use for this article: a letter M. Shaikh Sharafaly wrote in 1940 to his business partners (footnote 5), M. Shaikh Sharafaly’s will and death certificate, and the three photographs reproduced here in figures 1, 2, and 3. He also provided a newspaper article of an undated interview given by Abbas, son of M. Shaikh Sharafaly’s (footnote 6).} contemporary newspapers, and travel accounts. The study of diplomatic archives helped put some of the puzzle together and facilitated discussions with community elders.

1. The Founder and the Company: Which “Mohamedally”?  
The founder of the company was Mohamed Ali (Mohamedally) Shaikh Sharafaly, an Indian from Sidhpur, Gujarat born around 1860-65. Shaikh Sharafaly being the name of his father. His full name is unknown in Ethiopia, as “Mohamedally” is used for both the company and the man behind it. It is crucial, however, to distinguish between the two. This point was made by Smidt (2008), who drew attention to a man also called “Mohamedally” shown in various photographs with and without M. Shaikh Sharafaly. Smidt identified him as Abdullabhai Mohamedally Kera, one of the long-term partners of the firm.

Historical confusion between the two men seems very likely since additional evidence shows that M. Shaikh Sharafaly probably left Ethiopia around 1905. His triumphant return to Ethiopia after a reported 22 years of absence is narrated in an article of Le Courrier d’Éthiopie dated December 23, 1927. He was accompanied by several of his partners and branch managers, including Abdullabhai M. Kera. During this trip M. Shaikh Sharafaly was awarded the title of Member of British Empire, by Charles Bentinck at the British Legation, and received the Star of Ethiopia, second order by Emperor Haile Selassie I. On July 31, 1928, after a final reception organized by the Indian community in Dire Dawa, M. Shaikh Sharafaly and Abdullabhai M. Kera took the 4 p.m. train for Djibouti en route for Aden and India (Le Courrier d’Éthiopie, 10/08/1928: 1). So far there is no indication that the great man ever went back again to Ethiopia, except perhaps to attend Haile Selassie’s coronation in 1930 (Dubois, 1997: 167). There is also indisputable evidence that he was a resident of Bombay in the early 1930s (Zervos, 1936: 143) and in 1937, as we shall see later, when the new Italian Government closed Mohamedally & Co in Ethiopia.

So who was Abdullabhai M. Kera, the second “Mohamedally”? A photo (fig. 1) shows him as an aged man with a gentle look. At the time of the
Company closure he was sixty years old and had received full powers from the Bombay headquarters to engage in negotiations with the Italian authorities in Ethiopia. When questioned by Italian officers in July 1937 he declared that he was born in Sidhpur, that he had resided in Ethiopia for forty years at different periods, and that over the previous year he had resided in Aden making trips to Djibouti and Ethiopia. This suggests to me that Kera was in charge of the company’s dealings in Ethiopia, Djibouti and Aden, supervising the import-export trade that formed the bulk of the firm’s business. These important functions made him a good match for the role of the other “Mohamedally,” a distant director but still a familiar figure. Kera likely arrived in Harar at M. Shaikh Sharafaly’s call as a 20-year-old migrant, and entered the firm as a partner, while perhaps also having his own company. This hypothesis will be discussed further below.

The apparent confusion between the two men is more than a mere effect of fading memories. The British officials referred to the firm as Messrs. Mohamedally and sometimes Mohamedally & Co as did Le Courrier d’Éthiopie from 1926 to 1936. Oral tradition in the Indian community maintains this association of the name of the firm with the name of the founder. Elders showed surprise when I asked them about M. Shaikh Sharafaly’s reported

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2 NAI, Gov. of India, External 206-N/37, Restis, Bombay to Foreign, New Delhi, 07/04/1937. 3 PR UK - FO 371/251, G.M. Mohamedally & Co to Consul General in Addis Ababa, 18/07/1937.

Figure 1. Abdullabhai M. Kera, no date. Private collection of Mohammed Husein H. Sardharwala, Addis Ababa
return to Ethiopia in 1927. They had no doubt that their parents or grandparents were interacting with the founder himself and they assumed that he was continuously residing in Addis Ababa managing the firm.

This raises questions about the company’s business model and organization. Unlike most Indian companies in Ethiopia, it is never referred to as a family business but as the entity Mohamedally. On the other hand it did have a tight organization formed around its founder. So a look at the first years of M. Shaikh Sharafaly after he left his native Gujarat will help understand how a successful trading company could develop in Ethiopia at the turn of the 20th century. His road to success contrasts sharply with the experience of most young Gujaratis who would first work for a family member or a Gujarati community member before opening their own business.

2. The Journey of a Young Gujarati Dawoodi Bohra

What little is known of M. Shaikh Sharafaly shows that his journey from a young migrant to the chief partner of a large consortium was the result of ten formative years in Aden, his belonging to the community of the Dawoodi Bohra, and his understanding of Ethiopia politics.

In a letter dated 17th May 1940, Bombay to his partners M. Shaikh Sharafaly wrote:

In about 1885 when I was about 25 years old I left India for North Africa in search of fortune. Fortunately, I was able to secure an employment with the well-known firm of Menahem Messa then carrying on business at Aden, Abyssinia and Somaliland and I remained in their employ for about 10 years. During that period... I acquired considerable business knowledge and experience. I also learned the local languages dialects and came in close contacts with the local residents.

In a few sentences, he tells us a good deal about his modest start: He followed the many Gujarati who at the end of the 19th century left the region of Sidhpur affected by serious economic strain, then migrated in search of business activities to Bombay, Calcutta, Madras, and as far as Aden, Ethiopia, Burma, Madagascar, or Siam (Zoyab, 2010: 15). So around 1885, “in search

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4 Mohammed Husein H. Sardharwala (Interview 04/04/2014) received this 1940 letter – as well as M. Shaikh Sharafaly’s will, death certificate and photograph (see Footnote 2) – from two grandchildren of M. Shaikh Sharafaly who came to Ethiopia in December 2007. During their visit, Ali Asgar Hararwala and Abdul Kader Hararwala, talked also with the historian Richard Pankhurst, who used some of the material they brought with them for his notice on G. M. Mohamedally & Co in the *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica* (Pankhurst et al., 2007). Extracts of the 1940 letter were also used by Smidt (2008), but written in the third person as the testimony of the grandchildren.
of fortune,” and reputedly illiterate, the young M. Shaikh Sharafaly arrived in Aden, which was then “an Anglo-Indian colony where it was largely the British and Indian hands that made the wheels go round” (Ahroni, 1994: 42). Although he doesn’t specify his duties at the famous Jewish company, he was probably a sales clerk helping with import-export goods including coffee, sugar, textiles, silk, rice, metal, ivory, rubber and kerosene. The decade spent in their service was doubtless a formative stage, for the business was of gigantic proportions and had entered Indian merchant networks trading with India (ibid.) It is tempting to imagine that during his years in Aden the young Sharafaly took inspiration from the company’s founder to set up his own business: Menahem Messa had humble origins, maintained ties with the British Government in Aden as government supplier, opened multiple branches of business, and was a strong community leader (Ahroni, 1994: 47).

From Aden, the second step of M. Shaikh Sharafaly’s journey took him to Harar, at that time the commercial center of the Abyssinian empire. This was sometime in 1893 or early 1894, and the circumstances are told in his son Abbas’s interview (footnote 6). His father reached the old city via Berbera after an unpleasant eight-day ride on a mule. After almost nine years of service in Aden he had been sent by his “master” Banin Messa to replace the retiring company manager of the Harar branch, who was a Jew. This sign of trust shows the level of commercial ability he had reached. Large trading companies with headquarters in Aden had branches in Harar. The manager’s duty was to collect and ship the items exported, ivory, coffee, and civet, and develop a local market for imports such as textiles, tools, and household items. It was not an easy task. The caravans were often attacked and merchandise lost or damaged during transport. Competition was fierce among firms, so political support was crucial, and all foreigners tried to entertain good relations with Ras Makonnen, the governor Menelik II had appointed to Harar after conquering the city in 1887.

M. Shaikh Sharafaly remained Banin Messa’s manager only for a short period. As he says in his 1940 letter (footnote 5):

Naturally, I was ambitious to commence a business of my own and I am glad to state that... my Masters... assured me of their fullest support and co-operation in the new venture I was to embark upon. Ras Makonnen the then Governor of Harar

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5 This is mentioned in an interview that Abbas, M. Shaikh Sharafaly’s son, gave about his father in the magazine Zabkar Kiren, Gujarat, India, undated. This interview, despite possible embellishments and inaccuracies, and several problems of dates, adds important information. It is quoted in this article as “Abbas’s interview.” I am using here a translation in English provided to me by Mohammed Husein H. Sardharwala. 6 It was founded around 1850 by Menahem Messa. On his death in 1864, his son Banin took over and developed the business eastward to India and China, and Ethiopia. It is during this time that the Messa family would “amass a vast, almost legendary fortune” (Ahroni, 1994: 47–50).
was good enough to offer me to join and did in fact join me in the new venture as a partner with considerable finance at his command and continued as such for several years.

However, Abbas (footnote 6) relates other reasons behind this partnership. When Italy invaded the country in 1895, Ras Makonnen asked M. Shaikh Sharafaly for urgent financial help. The manager agreed to lend him the considerable sum of 100,000 silver dollars (Maria Theresa Thalers) from Messa’s cashbox. It was certainly difficult to refuse, for he was under the Governor’s protection and his business had prospered well enough to make 150,000 dollars within a year of his arrival. As Abbas told the story, this money allowed Ethiopia to win against the Italians, but M. Shaikh Sharafaly was fired by his employer. He was then ready to go back to Sidhpur when Ras Makonnen came to his rescue saying: “Once you stood beside Abyssinia, all our Abyssinia is now beside you. Take whatever you like from the Government’s treasury and start business on your own.” Abbas mentions that his father got a monopoly in dealing in coffee, plus permission to export ivory, sheep, and skins of cheetahs.

From the beginning M. Shaikh Sharafaly chose to have multiple partners, an essential aspect of the firm’s organization. So he continues, in his 1940 letter (footnote 5):

Being desirous that my near relations who were not well placed in life should enjoy the benefit of my venture, I suggested that … Mulla Buxabhoy, the late Mulla Ebrahimji and … Khan Bahadur Mulla Abdullabhoy, the late Abdulhussein Ebrahimji and Mulla Mohamedali Master should avail [yourselves] of the opportunity and to join me as partners. … I do not wish to stress this fact but I think I should here add that none of these persons contributed to anything towards the capital for my venture.

This sentence is worth comment. First M. Shaikh Sharafaly had in mind to set up a large company; he had the capital through Ras Makonnen but he needed trustworthy men. Second, who these near relations were is unknown, except that Ebrahimji was his own brother. What is essential here is that his partners were all Dawoodi Bohra, a Shia Muslim sect settled in western India in the 16th century but historically widely spread geographically. The diaspora form closed local-communities, and in the late 19th century, such partnerships among Dawoodi Bohra friends were common (Zoyab, 2010: 83). Finally, M. Shaikh Sharafaly probably added his partners immediately, in any case before Ras Makonnen left the venture.

7 Bohra is a corruption of the Gujarati word vohorvu or “to trade.” From around 2,000 people in the early 20th century, the community in Ethiopia has decreased to 50 families today (Interview with Mohammed Husein H. Sardharwala, Addis Ababa, 04/04/2014).
Now well acquainted with business and life in Abyssinia, speaking native languages, with Ras Makonnen as partner, M. Shaikh Sharafaly embarked on very rewarding business dealings, as he wrote in his 1940 letter (footnote 5):

By unrelenting zeal and exertions on my part and with hard work and business integrity and with co-operation of my partners I was successful to develop the business beyond imagination. A stage was reached when it was desirable that Ras Makonnen should retire from the business. The business was then in such a sound and prosperous condition that it was not found difficult to bring this about.

In Harar, success proved indeed to be fast. As early as 1902, Le Roux (1902: 143) observed that: “All the commerce is taken by two Indian firms, Mohamed-Ali and Taib Ali-Ak-Barally, from Bombay, and a Greek one.” In 1904, M. Shaikh Sharafaly moved to Addis Ababa, at a time when the new capital was replacing Harar as the commercial center of the empire. He opened one of the first general-merchandise shops near what used to be the central
open market, an exquisite two-story building in the style of the merchant houses seen in Djibouti or Aden\(^8\) (fig. 2).

Following this opening M. Shaikh Sharafaly’s movements are uncertain.\(^9\) Based on evidence described above, I believe he left Ethiopia no later than 1906. Of course, his departure might have been caused by the sudden death of his protector Ras Makonnen, on March 22, 1906. Family reasons are not to be excluded too; he had married before setting off for Aden, so he had a family in India.\(^10\) However, the desire to expand his business and make new associations seems more likely. He apparently moved to Bombay to run the company, while keeping an office and a residence in his hometown of Sidhpur.\(^11\) This is where he died on January 1st, 1948, according to his death certificate (footnote 5).

At his death, M. Shaikh Sharafaly held an impressive record of honors, as he said in his 1940 letter (footnote 5):

> The British, Italian, Abyssinian and Geikwar governments have … been pleased to confer honors upon me and other members of the firm for invaluable services

\(^8\) See Harre, 2015, for a description and discussion of the Indian Ocean trading ports influences on early 20th-century architecture in Addis Ababa. \(^9\) This period needs more investigation in India; a trip I planned for next year to Gujarat will hopefully shed light on the Indian side of the firm. \(^10\) According to Abbas’s interview (footnote 6). A wife and six children are mentioned in M. Shaikh Sharafaly’s will (footnote 5). \(^11\) He had there one of the beautiful houses that the Dowoodi Bohra built, an elegant mixture of Indian and European styles that revealed the wealth and cosmopolitan tastes of the successful families overseas (Zoyab, 2010: 37).
rendered to them from time to time … the honors and the subsequent affluence conferred on me are not only with different governments but also with Congress Circles [Indian Congress].

The photograph in fig. 3 shows a very solemn aging man in Bohra attire, wearing a row of seven medals, among them British Justice of Peace, Member of British Empire, Cavalier Officer Italian Cornet, Star of Ethiopia, and two titles from the Maharaja of the State of Baroda: Rajratna (gem of the Raj) and Rajmitra (friend of the State).

Today there is no Mohamedally family in Ethiopia, nor any trace of family members. The successful businessman departed for India leaving behind him trusted partners, probably Kera, to manage the Aden-Djibouti-Ethiopia segment. When he left he had also established solid connections with the Imperial family, carefully balanced with good relations with the British government.

3. The Kings’ Friendship
As in the case of the East African coastal cities, Ethiopia’s early economic development owed much to connections between merchants and local elites. Special relationships and access to the Emperor or imperial Governors was
crucial to conduct business and procure monopolies or trade authorizations. As a few other successful foreigners did\textsuperscript{12}, M. Shaikh Sharafaly enjoyed lasting relationships with the royal family: photographs taken over three decades show him and members of the firm with the young Ras Tafari, future Haile Selassie I, Menelik II, Prince Lij Eysu, Empress Zawditu, and then Haile Selassie I (fig. 4).\textsuperscript{13} Although genuine, this friendship remains largely undocumented with no evidence other than M. Shaikh Sharafaly’s lapidary remark in his 1940 letter (footnote 5): “I was also welcomed even in the household of the Royal Family in Ethiopia.”

Relationships with the Ethiopian rulers did involve money—at least on several occasions and in considerable amounts. At a time when he was one of the country’s main moneylenders, prior to 1901, Menelik II might have loaned M. Shaikh Sharafaly’s firm a sum of 2 millions pounds sterling (Schaeffer, 1990: 288). Later, Täklä Hawaryat, on becoming Minister of Finance in September 1931, found that “there were gross arrears in the repayment of government loans, Mohamedally, the famous Indian import-export firm, owing for example over 2 millions beers.” (Bahru Zewde, 2002: 63) This is, however, not enough to support the widely held assumption in Ethiopia that both Emperors were sleeping partners of the firm. As Schaeffer (1990: 290) states: “Limited partnership in foreign business was prevalent, but how prevalent is open to question,” and “the financial dealings of Emperor Haile Selassie I remain an enigma.”\textsuperscript{14}

Two areas of possible partnership come to mind.\textsuperscript{15} The first was well explained by De Felcourt (1911: 159, author translation), who said: “Menelik understood that it was in his interest to do business with foreigners to dispose of the riches he received as taxes, royalties and gifts. He often would pay in-kind for merchandise he had bought. That is how I saw a convoy of ivory worth one million \textit{thalers} in payment for a debt to an important European company in Harar.” These in-kind transactions may well have been at the heart of M. Shaikh Sharafaly’s venture with Ras Makonnen, who as Governor of Harar had products to sell from his large agricultural estates and received local taxes in-kind. The second area of partnership was the arms and ammunition trade. Menelik II and Ras Makonnen imported tremendous quantities of arms and ammunition from the 1880s onwards, until a treaty signed by the United Kingdom, France, and Italy on September 13, 1906 limited arms imports to the Emperor’s own personal use (Pankhurst, 1962: 171). Some trade nonetheless

\textsuperscript{12} See Pankhurst, 1967 and Adjemian, 2013. \textsuperscript{13} Among them are photographs from private family collections, which will be published in a forthcoming album-photo I am doing in collaboration with the Indian community in Ethiopia. \textsuperscript{14} I am not aware of research more recent than Bahru Zewde (1984). But see also Wolff (2009). \textsuperscript{15} The slave trade would be a potential third area, but I found no evidence of the firm’s involvement from oral history or archival research.
continued, so Mohamedally & Co might have sold arms on the emperor’s behalf. Archival records show that in 1906 the firm asked permission to import sword blades from India, probably for Menelik II’s army, and that in 1926 the Addis Ababa branch director tried to dispose of an impressive stock of old arms.\footnote{NAI, Gov. of India, Foreign External B, May 1906, No. 274-277 and Home Department, Police Branch, Proceedings 21/55 of 1925. The firm had a monopoly to provide uniforms to Menelik’s army. These fine swords with the script “Mohamedally & Co” engraved on the blade are now sold as antiques (See online, URL: http://www.swordsantiqueweapons.com/s/nine/one/three_full.html).}

What diplomatic archives recorded too is a partnership that raises many questions about Ethiopia’s early business expansion. For a period of twenty years the firm acted as an agent for the \textit{bitwoded} Haile Giorgis,\footnote{NAI, Gov. of India, Foreign 740X, 1922-23, H.M. Minister at Addis Ababa to Foreign Office, 06/03/1923.} a jointure that ended in 1923 in a long legal dispute. The magnitude of the dealing is suggested by the sum of 45,000 sterling pounds the \textit{bitwoded} claimed in court. According to the British representative, the dispute was a case “of greatest complexity, the comprehension of which presumed an expert knowledge of trade and accountancy, and entitled the examination of many ledgers.”\footnote{NAI, Gov. of India, Foreign External X, 1906, No. 23-24 and Home Department, Police Branch, Proceedings 21/55 of 1925. H.M. Minister at Addis Ababa to Foreign Office, 17/01/1923, Microfilm 411/1.} The case went to Ras Tafari for appeal, but it was only under pressure from the British Legation that G. M. Mohamedally & Co recovered their funds.

Many thought—and still think—that the relationship between M. Shaikh Sharafaly and the imperial family went beyond regular business. There is not much to support such presumption, apart from this surprising declaration of the American Consul in 1923: “Prince Lij Yasu is held in great esteem in Abyssinia … and … he may regain his throne. \textit{Negadras} Hailu Giorgis is so sure that Prince Lij Yasu is going to succeed that he has openly declared that all property belonging to Prince Lij Yasu, including money, gold, etc., which disappeared just before his deposition, was in possession of the firm G. M. Mohamedally & Co. […] he has now asked the firm to get the accounts into shape in order to save time…”\footnote{NARA Dept. of State, Internal Affairs (884-00/125), Consul in Aden to Secretary of State, 17/01/1923, Microfilm 411/1.} Given M. Shaikh Sharafaly’s alleged friendship with Haile Selassie, this should be considered in the context of the legal dispute between the firm and Haile Giorgis.

In any case, a decade later M. Shaikh Sharafaly was concerned with the fate of Ethiopia under Italian military threat. In August 1935, the Ethiopian
government asked the British authorities if they would object to a loan raised from private firms in association with India, an offer presumably made through G. M. Mohamedally & Co. The purpose of the loan—although not officially—was arms and war material, which might explain the diplomatic precautions taken by the Ethiopian government that was still under the arms embargo and their initial request for a British legal advisor. In November 1935 the British Secretary of State in London related a visit from the Aga Khan, saying that: “Mahomet Ali [sic], the richest man in Abyssinia, is a member of a community that is in close relation with the Aga’s following and had on his account pressed the Aga to take an interest in the project.” The British authorities having no objections to a public loan from private businessmen, the Ethiopian government eventually sent an envoy to Bombay to meet potential financiers. The outcome of this visit is unknown, although elders of the Indian community in Ethiopia have made reference to such financial help without knowing the details.

The Italian authorities held the view that G. M. Mohamedally & Co assisted in the assassination attempt against the Viceroy Graziani on February 19, 1937, maybe because the firm had openly supported the Ethiopians during the war. On the night following the attempt eight hand grenades were thrown at the firm’s premises in Piazza, four of them around 10:30 p.m. and four at 1:00 a.m. According to the British Consul General, who made the initial investigation with the head of the Carabiniers, one of the grenades lying on the ground did not explode, which allowed them to see that it was a type used by the Italian military. Then the British official pointed out that the “propaganda that has been allowed to circulate against the firm […] suggested that it played its part in provoking the attack.” A few months later the Italian authorities tried to justify the order of expulsion given to the firm with the allegation that: “one of the most important members of the firm of Messrs. Mohamed Ali & Company had said before witnesses that though they have failed to get the Viceroy … at the first attempt they would succeed at the next.” This accusation was strongly denied by the firm.

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22 For example, Interview with Mohammed Husein H. Sardharwala, Addis Ababa, 06/20/2014.  
23 NAI, Gov. of India, External 206-N/37, Telegram from Sir Drummond, 30/03/1937. See Campbell (2010) for a fascinating account of the attempt. Italian intelligence believed that the firm’s Berbera branch took part in importing the hand grenades thrown at the Viceroy (Pankhurst et al., 2007: 986-87).  
24 NAI, Gov. of India, External 206-N/37, Consulat Général britannique to Chef de Cabinet.  
25 NAI, Gov. of India, External 206-N/37, Consulate General to Aden, 01/03/1937.  
26 NAI, Gov. of India, External 206-N/37, W.R. Hay to Turner, 03/08/1937.  
27 PR UK, FO 371/251, G.M. Mohamedally & Co to Consul General, 18/07/1937.
Finally, the rumor about Haile Sellassie being the illegitimate son of M. Shaikh Sharafaly must be brought up in light of the very insistent references made in Harar about this supposed filiation, based upon a physical resemblance between the two men. I have nothing to add to Smidt’s discussion of the rumor (2008: 122-24), except what Abbas told in his interview (footnote 6) about his father’s first visit to Ras Makonnen in Harar around 1893-94: “As he entered the house, he meets a three to four-year-old playful child. The Governor said: ‘This is my son Teferi.’” The reason for the persistence of this belief in Harar, which seems to have no historical foundation, would be more interesting to discuss than “searching for the truth.”

4. A British Company

If M. Shaikh Sharafaly arrived in the country as a young migrant making his way under the protection of Ras Makonnen, very soon the company expanded under the British umbrella. In 1908, the businessman and traveler Rozis (1908: 470, author translation) observed: “One of the most important Indian companies is Mohamed Aly [sic] … This company has branches in the provinces of Gojam and Kaffa, supplied by the roads of Khartoum—Gambella. The firm seems to have an agreement with the British to use the roads of the Egyptian Sudan, and then divert a large part of the commercial traffic to the detriment of Djibouti.”

Thirty years later, the British General Consul stated: “Messrs. Mohamedally are our main, and may be our only close and intimate contact with practical commerce.” Besides, the Indian firm offered a unique network of branch offices that could help support the consular services. On several occasions, such as in Harar and Dire Dawa in 1924 and Jimma in 1936, the branch managers were appointed acting consuls for short periods of time. In 1933 the Consul arranged with the branch manager in Dire Dawa to set aside a room in the firm’s premises for the tribunal of the local consular court. The good relations between the firm and the Legation were also witnessed on May 2-4 1936, when mobs discontented with the Emperor’s departure into exile looted the commercial centre of Addis Ababa, leading to a fire that destroyed most of Piazza, just as the Italian troops were marching on the capital. A few officials from the Legation went downtown to get considerable quantities of stores

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28 Interview with Abdul Semet Idriss, Harar, 29/07/2015. 29 Up to 1947 Indians in Ethiopia were British subjects or Protected persons. The Order in Council of 1913 offered them an extra-territoriality status with special courts to set legal disputes. 30 NAI, Gov. of India, External 266-N/37, British Consul General to FO, 01/03/1937. 31 PR IK - FO 371/80, Addis Ababa Intelligence Report for April 1924 and FO 371/250, Consul General to FO, 18/03/1937. 32 PR UK, FO 371/140, Observations, British Legation to FO, 2 June 1933.
from G. M Mohamedally & Co and transported them to the Legation, where 900 British subjects and protected persons had taken refuge. The firm was able to defend its premises from the looters, thanks to their staff, including the Ethiopian staff, and arms the Legation had delivered to several British firms for that purpose.

Does this mean that G. M. Mohamedally & Co collected intelligence for the British government? Perhaps mystified by its size and reputation, the Italians would claim in 1937 that: “This organization, with its network of mysterious branches was directly connected with the policy of British expansion on Ethiopia and intelligence service and the Emperor’s personal speculations. […] British officers and agents use the branches of Mohamed Ali organization for exploration of Abyssinia territory and […] the branches had played an active part in espionage and in provocation.” According to Pankhurst et al. (2007: 986-87), “Mohamedally may have acted as an agent for several Anglophone governments.” It is true that in 1916, the US Consul in London reported having received “a fairly complete report in regard to political events in Abyssinia … sent … by Messrs. Mohamedally and Company of Harar, a very reliable firm, with whose members I have been acquainted since 1903.” Whatever agreement was worked out with the British and Americans—if there was any—, it appears that the firm made use of their status as British subjects as much as they benefited from the protection of the Ethiopian emperors.

5. “This Great Firm of Abyssinia”

The expression “this great firm of Abyssinia” was often used in the 1930s to talk about G. M. Mohamedally & Co, then at its apogee. At that time, it might have been the largest trading firm in Ethiopia with its multiple commercial activities, several industries, and considerable property. The firm had 60 employees, mainly from India, ran multiple branches within Ethiopia, had offices in Aden, Djibouti, Berbera, and its headquarters in Bombay.

Just as there was more than one Mohamedally, there were also several “Mohamedally” legal entities. When M. Shaikh Sharafaly left Ethiopia around 1905, he was the main partner of a company that involved five other Dawoodi Bohra Indians. What firm was that? According to Pankhurst et al. (2007: 986-87), the company was called A. M. Mohamedally & Co with Abdulabhai M. Kera until Ras Makonnen retired, and thereafter G. M. Mohamedally & Co when Goolamally Abdulhusein Paghdiwala joined. On the other hand,

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33 PR UK, FO 371/239, White Papers Ethiopia No. 5, 1936. 34 NAI, Gov. of India, External 206-N/37, Telegram from Sir Drumond, 31/03/1937.
35 NARA, Dept. of State, Internal Affairs, Revolution in Abyssinia (884.00.80), Consul in London to Secretary of State, Microfilm 411/1.
36 NARA RG59, State Consular Trade Reports, 08/18/1928, Box 286.
Smidt (2008: 119) believes, based on seals collected by the traveller Raichevitch in 1913, that there were two distinct companies of the same consortium both active in Harar: Hebtoolabhai M. Mohamedally & Co, Kera’s company, and Goolamally M. Mohamedally & Co. In support of Smidt’s argument, a “Goollamally, Mohamedally & Co” existed in 1906 and two years later a “G. M. Mohamedally company” in Harar was importing among other things sardine and tomato conserves. According to M. Shaikh Sharafaly’s grandchildren, in 1927 the G. referred to the partner Goolamally (Gulamali) Abdulhusain and the M. to the title Mulla (Smidt, 2008: 119). However, things appear more complex. First, the name A. M. Mohamedally & Co is clearly visible on a photo taken in front of the firm compound probably in the late 1920s. Second, a letter of 1923 signed A. M. Mohamedally but whose letterhead reads G. M. Mohamedally says: “We Mohamedally and Company of Addis Ababa.” Further investigations will try to clarify the number and legal status of the several companies that worked within the consortium over time.

The entire company was run from Bombay, I would argue, starting from the moment Ras Makonnen left the joint venture: Both Le Roux (1902: 143) and Rozis (1908: 470) affirmed that the main company (headquarters) was in Bombay. At the time of the closure in 1937 M. Shaikh Sharafaly, as Senior Partner, and Mulla Mohamedally Jivanji Master were in charge of the Bombay headquarters, and the firm had six partners. New partners, all Dawoodi Bohra, had been admitted over time to replace the five who had passed away.

However, if partnership was the backbone of the company’s organization, the element of continuity and cohesion was certainly M. Shaikh Sharafaly himself, as he stated himself in his 1940 letter (footnote 5):

I do not wish to be accused of exaggeration, nor do I want it said that I am speaking to get the credit for something I have not done, but I do say, and I know some of you, who are aware of the facts will also agree, that it was only due to my business experience and knowledge and influence and the co-operation of my partners that the firm enjoyed almost international reputation as a sound and prosperous business concern in Abyssinia, French and British Somaliland, Arabia, and India. … Throughout the existence of this firm extending over 45 years I have with paternal regard and with kind co-operation of my partners borne the burden of attending to all the responsible spheres of its activities and guiding my co-partners an all the spheres of business with which they dealt.

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37 NAI, Gov. of India Foreign, May 1906, No. 274-277 and TNA FO742/1, Correspondence, 05/05/1908. 38 The building can tentatively be dated 1926 or 1927 (Le Courrier d’Éthiopie, 23/12/1927: 8) and the Empress Zewditu (1916-1930) appears on this photo. 39 NAI, Gov. of India, Foreign 740 X 1922-1923, Mohamedally and Company to FO, 08/04/1923; both A. M. and G. M. continued to appear on letters sent by the company to British officials until the 1930s. 40 Zervos’s list of G. M. Mohamedally & Co partners in 1936 included five of them deceased.
6. A Pioneer Firm
In Ethiopia, M. Shaikh Sharafaly was a precursor in various ways. Zervos (1936: 150) credits him with the organization of the Ethiopian markets and the establishment of the first general-trading concern offering a wide range of products. M. Shaikh Sharafaly had started with traditional exports and imports. He collected and exported coffee, wax, gold, hides and skins, ivory, and ostrich feathers, and imported everything from household items, foodstuffs, cotton fabrics, hardware, kerosene, and tools. In the mid-1930s the company was listed among the top ten coffee exporters in Ethiopia, as well as a main collector of export products from the provinces of Jimma, Wellamo, and Lekempte (Zervos, 1936: 156).

Some of the imported products were sold in the company’s own shops, the rest given to a myriad of small sellers spread across the country. The strength of the firm stemmed from its ability to create a dense, powerful four-tier network of outlets that established its reputation for a deep understanding of the Ethiopian markets. The Addis Ababa office was the head, above the provincial branches (Harar, Dire Dawa, Jijiga, Jimma, Lekempté, Modjo, Wellamo) that served as relays for smaller outlets, more than 40 of them according to Abbas’s interview (footnote 6). The small rural shopkeepers, who were mainly Dawoodi Bohra, acquired the merchandise from the firm on credit, obeying a well-known model based on trust among people with a “shared identity.”

Money-lending and currency speculation was a specialty of Indian businessmen, who used their knowledge of the Indian Ocean silver market (which was linked to Bombay as much as London) to run informal credit networks (Schaeffer, 1990: Chapter 7). There is no evidence that the firm was heavily involved in money lending, but “Currency exchangers” is listed in the firm’s activities in 1935 (fig. 5). It continued also as official supplier to the imperial court, an important privilege printed on the letterheads: “Appointment by royal warrant to H.M. the Emperor of Abyssinia.”

Real estate was another important income-generating activity favored by the Ethiopian aristocracy as well as foreigners. Like other people close to the royal family, M. Shaikh Sharafaly likely received large pieces of land from Menelik II, which formed the core of the firm’s considerable property in Addis Ababa. A row of the company’s stores lined a street casually called “Mohamedally Street” and formed what the journalist Evelyn Waugh in 1935 described as Addis Ababa’s “great emporium.” Nothing more is known about other real estate except that a commercial building of rented-out shops called the “Mohamedally Building” burnt down on December 1934 (Le Courrier d’Éthiopie, 14/12/1934).

What was rather unusual for an Indian company of that period was to invest beyond these traditional sectors in various industrial concerns. Alongside a
few Armenians, Greeks, and Western Europeans, the company started major Ethiopian manufacturing activities. In the early 1930s it was running one of the two existing industrial flour mills, one of the three large edible oil plants, one of the four soap manufactures, one of the five sawmills and the unique manufacture of soda drink and pasta (Zervos, 1936: 145). The company might have introduced the making of soda drinks for it was a monopoly from Menelik II. The glass bottles, similar to the ball-valve models used in India were imported and filled in Ethiopia (fig. 6). In his recollections of the early 1910s, André Evalet (1999: 31, author translation) remembered his fondness for Mohamedally & Co soda bottles: “they were the type of thick glass that we do not see anymore. One had to push down a small glass marble to open them. I found it sad that people placed marbles in bottles, so that we could not play with them.” The sawmill was a concession on forested lands leased by Empress Menen (Zervos, 1936: 164).

Throughout the early 20th century, the development of Addis Ababa and the growth of consumer markets brought new products and business methods. The earliest big import market was corrugated-iron sheet, imported as roofing material in large quantities after the new railway linked Djibouti to Dire Dawa in 1902 (Pankhurst, 2004: 209). In the late 1920s, G. M. Mohamedally & Co was well placed to represent renowned foreign companies looking for

Figure 5. Firm advertisement page in Le Courrier d’Éthiopie dated June 7, 1935
outlets in Ethiopia. The firm represented Kodak Company, LEVER Brothers Limited (soaps and laundry soaps), Angus Watson and Co Ltd (food), Hodson & Simpson Ltd (cleaning soaps), Satyrin land treatment, Dr. Ross life pills, Lamm Brothers Ltd (cement), Anglo-Persian oil Co India Ltd, and G. M. C. trucks (*Le Courrier d’Éthiopie*, 01/03/1929).

The automotive market followed this model, as international automobile and truck dealers granted Ethiopian trading companies concessions as their exclusive agents. In 1928, G. M. Mohamedally & Co became the representative of Firestone and General Motors, Pontiac, and Oakland, an event announced in the G. M. magazine in appreciative terms: “Their success in the most important Ethiopian trade centres and their knowledge of the market are a valuable help for the sale of our products.” (quoted in *Le Courrier d’Éthiopie*, 18/01/1929) The US Consul, who shared this trust, reported that the firm was “going seriously into the matter of developing business by building the best showroom and establishing the best service station to be found in
Addis Ababa.”

It was Ras Tafari, accompanied by the Addis Ababa mayor and notables, who officially opened the new showroom in December 1928 (Le Courrier d’Éthiopie, 28/10/1928). Over the following five years, the firm would import 190 cars and trucks, more than all their competitors together (Zervos, 1936: 153). They did well too with tires, as the US Consul wrote again a few months later: “Firestone is doing well, its present 10% of total volume having been attained in less than one year of local representation by Messrs. A. M. Mohamedally & Company, whose wealth, active marketing methods and several General Motors franchises are potent advantages.” Nor did the company miss the growth of the benzene market, for in 1934 it opened the third automatic pump in the country as the agent for Texaco (Le Courrier d’Éthiopie, 19/06/1936).

7. A Strong Social Presence

G. M. Mohamedally & Co, without doubt the best-known Indian company in the country, had a strong public presence through various social and philanthropic engagements. The immediate circle was the Dawoodi Bohras in Ethiopia. M. Shaikh Sharafaly is considered today the father of this community, if not of the entire Indian community, because he brought in many Indians who worked for his firm in one way or another and helped newcomers to start businesses. After his departure the company’s directors continued their patronage of the Dawoodi Bohra institutions, a cemetery and a community center that served religious and social purposes. According to Dawoodi Bohra elders, he also helped to secure land for the Hindu crematorium in Piazza. The company branches would run Indian institutions in their provincial towns. For example, when the British Vice Consul went to Jimma in 1928 to set up a new Consular Court, it was taken for granted that the manager of Mohamedally would be appointed president of the Jimma court and head of the local Indian and Arab community.

The firm’s public activities went well beyond the Indian community. In 1934 when the Addis Ababa lottery was created to finance a water supply system, Mr. Gullamaly, the Addis Ababa director, sat on the lottery committee with the head of the Bank of Ethiopia and directors of several ministries (Le Courrier d’Éthiopie, 11/11/1934). The horse races at Jan Meda were popular social events in which the firm figured as owner of a horse riding stable and organizer of the “Mohamedally Cup” (ibid., 07/06/35 and 14/01/1936). However, charitable

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41 NARA RG 59, State Consular Trade Report Dec. 1928, Box 286.
42 NARA RG 59, State Consular Trade Report Oct. 1929, Box 286.
giving remained an important part of the company’s social presence, although this is not documented. A lot of it, and this is something emphasized by elders of the Indian community today, was personal help that M. Shaikh Sharafaly and/or his directors provided to people in need: “Mohamedally, it was said, was a very generous person. Yes, my father used to tell me. A very nice gentlemen, he used to help many people, many people.”

The social aura of the firm appears through the articles published by *Le Courrier d’Éthiopie* when M. Shaikh Sharafaly returned to Ethiopia in 1927–1928. Such was his fame that he was received with all honors. Travelling by special train from Djibouti, he was escorted by more than two hundred cars and the imperial cavalry on his way from Addis Ababa station to his firm’s offices downtown. His visit was filled with receptions and meetings with the royal family, diplomats, officials, and other businessmen. The fact that the editor and owner, Mr. Robillard, published these articles—and gave regular news of the firm—should be remarked upon given the prejudices and distrust European business circles generally expressed towards Indians, as they did for Arabs, Armenians, or Greeks. In short, Indians were considered as unfair competitors, mainly because of their supposedly frugal life style. *Le Courrier d’Éthiopie* as well as the diplomatic community made an exception for G. M. Mohamedally & Co whom they held in high esteem.

8. The Liquidation
The Italian occupation of Ethiopia caused major economic difficulties that affected the whole business community. In an effort to redirect import markets through Italy, the new authorities imposed a complicated maze of permits, red tape, and restrictions of all kinds, on prices, foreign currency, and exports. In regard to these multiple obstacles, in the fall of 1936, G. M. Mohamedally & Co contemplated a joint venture with a newly created *Societa Nationale d’Ethiopia* in which the firm would cede 60% share of its capital.

Regardless of what might have resulted from this scheme, an expulsion order was issued on March 6, 1937 giving the Mohamedally & Co only 18 days to wrap up business and evacuate its staff. All branches were immediately closed, sales stopped, and business suspended. The firm sought the help of the British Legation, whose intervention allowed extended delays: The Jijiga and Harar branches were closed on April 10 and Dire Dawa around April 15. Other large companies such as Besse were also expelled without explanation. In the case of G. M. Mohamedally & Co, it was understood that the expulsion

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was to force the firm to sell their business to *Societa Italiana per il Commercio con Africa*. Instead, the firm’s headquarters in Bombay addressed a formal request to the Italian authorities for permission to liquidate. At that time, all but ten of the Indian employees had already left the country.  

The expulsion order turned into an eventful negotiation process that kept the British Legation in Addis Ababa busy for the following six months. This high-profile matter involved as well the representative of the British government in Italy, various offices of the Foreign Office in London, and the government of India in Bombay pressured by public opinion. The order of expulsion, as well as instructions related to the terms of negotiation, came from Rome, which complicated discussions between the parties. Pressured by Indian public opinion, the British officially asked for the reasons behind the expulsion, only to receive an unsatisfactory answer accusing the firm of involvement in the attack against the Viceroy Graziani (see above). As they never thought that the order of expulsion would be withdrawn, their line of action was to secure adequate time for the liquidation and help the firm to negotiate favorable terms for the sale. They received the firm directors almost on a daily basis to discuss the many minor issues and difficulties, and provided crucial help when the Italian Viceroy in Addis Ababa challenged the terms of the sale agreement the day before the signing.

In India, the expulsion raised tremendous concern about the treatment of Indians in Ethiopia, and the context of the India Independence Movement might explain the support of the British authorities. In Gujarat, “considerable feeling has been aroused among the intelligencia [sic] and the shop-keeping class […] by the expulsion from Abyssinia of the firm of Mohamed Ali who is a native of Sidhpur…” says an official report. Vigorous demands for retaliation measures against Italians were discussed at high level, but soon officially rejected as unproductive given that the balance of trade between India and Italia was in favor of the former. Many newspaper articles as well as repeated questions at the Assembly enquired about actions taken by the British government. The government of India received letters from prominent institutions such as the All Indian Muslim Federation, the Indian Merchant Chamber, and the Muslim Chamber of Commerce in Calcutta, whose letter gives the tone of the protests: “… the expulsion […] is an insult to the people of India and a breach of international trade courtesies. […] suitable assurances

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should be forthcoming from the Government of India for the safety of life and the security of property abroad of every Indian carrying on peaceful trade and that they be protected by the might of the British Commonwealth of Nations of which India forms an integral part.”

The liquidation process started in April 1937 after the Italian authorities agreed to a time extension until November 30 and the repatriation to India of the liquidation-sale proceeds. The shops re-opened to allow sale of stocks. On July 1st, a telegram from Rome authorized the purchase of all properties and ordered that negotiations start immediately. At this point, the diplomatic archives are vague about with whom G. M. Mohamedally & Co was negotiating, and this may reflect an odd but actual uncertainty. According to M. Shaikh Sharafaly in Bombay, their negotiations with the Societa Italiana per il Commercio con Africa had fallen through because the Societa refused to buy above 100,000 pounds sterling. Then the Italian government in Rome made a much higher offer that the firm accepted.

Things accelerated when on July 15th one of the partners, Gulam Ali (as spelled in the Foreign Office archives), arrived by air from Djibouti with full powers from Bombay. After several final difficulties, on September 29, 1937, an agreement was signed with the Government General of Italian East Africa for the sale of the company’s real and movable property, goods, and real rights. The company managed to minimize losses: real property alone was bought for the considerable amount of 240,000 pounds sterling while the Company itself had first put the value of its properties at 250,000. The agreement also provided for the purchase of outstanding stocks of goods at Djibouti and in transit at invoice prices, including transport charge, plus 10% for overhead expenses. What was essential to the firm was to obtain the conversion of the sums realized into foreign currencies. Despite real shortages, the Italian government was able to offer pounds sterling at a decent rate; half of the sum was paid on the Central Bank of India in Bombay within three days of the sale agreement and the rest in two installments within ninety days.

In his 1940 letter (footnote 5) M. Shaikh Sharafaly acknowledged the fairness of the liquidation process and the critical political support he received:

I feel it will be readily conceded that the honors conferred on me not only with different governments but also with the Congress Circles have been in good stead in getting back, with minimum loss, our property which was blocked by the Italian Government as a result of the Italo-Abyssinia war.

55 PR UK, FO 371/251, Muslim Chamber of Commerce, Calcutta to Gov. of India, 05/08/1937. 56 PR UK, FO 371/251, Consul General to FO, 01/07/1937. 57 PR UK, FO 371/251, Commissioner of Police, Bombay Letter No.3944-N-4220, 19/08/1937. 58 PR UK, FO 371/251, Consul General to FO, 25/09/1937. This probably did not represent all properties owned by the company or its managers and employees.
The ability of the firm to transform a brutal expulsion order into a negotiated sale with the occupying authorities suggests indeed a lot about M. Shaikh Sharafaly’s strong political influence in India and the extent of his relations with the “different governments” he mentioned. Despite a lack of evidence, it is tempting to see this support as one aspect of the possible political associations discussed above.

On October 16, 1937, the firm’s remaining staff left for Djibouti, except four who were allowed to stay until December to take care of private affairs. However, as told in Abbas’ interview (footnote 6), the end of the firm in Ethiopia raises questions: “Finally, one day, Mohamed Ali also left his palatial house in Harar. He had his favorite American clock fixed on the wall … Mohamed Ali would not remove it, but did stop it with a shot from his revolver, as though the time was over… He and his partner … tidily packed everything before locking the doors … The year was 1938 and 3rd of March.” Was this a metaphor for the end of a formidable adventure or did the old man actually come back a last time to the city of his beginnings?

The company never went back to Ethiopia and the Indian headquarters are now closed, though there is still a Mohamedally Street in Bombay. Three years after the expulsion, M. Shaikh Sharafaly’s letter to his partners was an appeal to the younger generation to take over. The words closing his 1940 letter (footnote 5) show his worry that the company might not survive him:

What other aspirations can I now have but to see you all the younger partners actively and tenaciously working for the solidarity and prosperity of the firm. May providence inspire you to rise manly to the occasion and prove yourselves worthy of a noble and active life and thus fulfill my hopes. In conclusion I definitely and unequivocally express my desire to retire and to enjoy, I may be permitted to state, a well-earned and over-due rest and peace in my old age.

Conclusion
What happened to the firm after its closure in Ethiopia and M. Shaikh Sharafaly’s retirement? This question will be looked at in the next phase of the research project, which will explore the Indian side of the Company and try to clarify the status of its various branches. This further direction results from several important points made in this article. Born in Harar in peculiar political circumstances, the firm was very soon managed from Bombay by its founder, who apparently stayed away from Ethiopia leaving in charge one of his long-term partners, Mohamedbhai Kera. For reasons that remain to be clarified, Kera was working under his own name up to the 1920s. What appears too from this first examination of M. Shaikh Sharafaly’s movements and accomplishments is his apparent atypical business career, at

59 PR UK, FO 371/251, General Consul to FO, 11/02/1937.
least regarding trading firms of the early 20th century in Ethiopia. He set up and maintain for fifty years a multi-partner business, a complex organization of seemingly semi-independent branches headed by partners chosen among fellow Dawoodi Bohras. Ten years after the expulsion from Ethiopia, the business was worth enough for M. Shaikh Sharafaly to implore his remaining partners to let him retire.

To better understand the *modus operandi* of the Company, comparisons should be made with Gujarati firms in countries with a strong Indian presence such as Kenya, Tanzania, or South Africa. Such comparisons will also help research into how Gujarati trading firms operated in Ethiopia in the early 20th century and in the 1950-1960s, during a second phase of Ethiopia’s development. Additional research along such lines would indeed significantly contribute to Ethiopia’s historiography. G. M. Mohamedally & Co was, although on a large scale, representative of other trading firms, mostly Indian and Armenian, which were instrumental in taking the country into the international economy (exports of natural resources, development of customer markets and currency markets, monopolies, concessions...). One crucial question that remains is how relations/ventures between these firms and the Ethiopian imperial rulers durably shaped Ethiopia’s early economy.

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**Interviews**

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Mr. Shanti T. Gopani, Addis Ababa, 20/07/2015.

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**Abstract**

The Indian presence in Ethiopia has attracted little attention in Ethiopian historiography. Yet Indian businessmen were as instrumental to Ethiopia’s early 20th-century economy as they were in British East Africa at the same period. As part of a broader research project aimed at addressing this gap, this article explores the life and achievements of Mohamedally Shaikh Sharafaly, the best known of these Indian businessmen, who set up one of the largest commercial and industrial businesses in Ethiopia. The account follows the narrative of an un-published letter the merchant wrote in 1940 about his business trajectory. From his arrival in Harar in the late 19th century to the eventual expulsion of his company in 1937, his story is highly revealing of the political context in which large foreign businesses would emerge, involving both friendship with the Ethiopian emperors and diplomatic protection, in the case of Indians as British subjects. Mohamedally Shaikh Sharafaly created an extensive network of Indian outlets throughout the country and organized a powerful multi-partnership with Indian fellows, with branches in Djibouti, Aden, and Berbera. The G. M. Mohamedally & Co was much more than a mere business. On several occasions, the company provided intelligence to foreign countries and it actively supported Ethiopians against the Italian occupation. On the social scene, it remained a long-term leader of the Indian community and was famous for its various philanthropic engagements. The 1937 expulsion,
as brutal as it was, also showed the political power exercised in India by the company and its founder.

**Keywords:** Ethiopia, Addis Ababa, Indians, businessmen, Italian occupation, migrations, Bohras

**Résumé**

**Mots-clés:** Éthiopie, Addis-Abeba, Indiens, hommes d’affaires, occupation italienne, migrations, Bohras