

# Hidden histories: Indian influence on architecture and urbanism across the East African interior

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**Conference Proceeding-Event Name:** CAMEA Adelaide Congress 2021: Migrant Labour and Material Transfer: Politics of construction in the Indian Ocean Rim

Event Date: 7 - 9 November 2021

## **Abstract:**

In 1896 construction of the Uganda Railway began at the East African port town of Mombasa, in what was then British East Africa, reaching the Lake Victoria- Nyanza terminus of Port Florence (now Kisumu) in 1901. This engineering feat was achieved with the importation of workers from British India, beginning a presence of a vibrant Asian migrant community in the interior of East Africa. They established a vigorous and ingenious Indian community in the interior of East Africa that thrived throughout the twentieth century and its influence today is unassailable. Their enterprising spirit was instrumental to the development of trading centres across the region during the early decades of the twentieth century. The legacy left behind, and ever-present reality of many urban centres, is somewhat invisible in the historical narratives related to architecture and urbanism. Exploring these hidden histories is in recognition of this contribution, a growing appreciation of the multifaceted influences on the built environments across East Africa, and a necessary frame of reference for further explorations of the development and evolution of contemporary architecture across the region. The paper uses Jinja on the northern shore of Lake Victoria-Nyanza as a focus of study. Jinja was home to a large population of 'Ugandan' Asians' during the middle of the twentieth century, contributing to its role as a key transport and industrial hub. Through the tumultuous years toward the end of the century, this contribution remains as a powerful reminder of the contribution of Asian migrants to Uganda. The Asian contribution has largely been side-lined by the domination of European modernism and more recently Middle East commercialism. Through this initial foray and future explorations, we seek to build an understanding of the rich histories within the African triple heritage.

**Publisher:** Centre for Asian and Middle East Architecture, University of Adelaide

**Publication Date:** 2022 January 01

**Key Words:** Architecture; Colonisation; British India; Jinja; East Africa; Postcolonialism; Uganda railway; Uganda Asians; European modernism; Asian migrant community; African heritage