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# Introducing African Mobilities and Heritage in the Indian Ocean World

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## ABSTRACT

As the United Nations International Decade for People of African Descent was approaching its end (2015–2024), the contributing authors were invited to write articles in order to complement its pillars: Recognition, Justice and Development. Whilst the articles were in progress, the UN adopted a second decade recognizing work that needed to be completed in order to address the full human rights of people of African descent. Recognition of People of African descent in the Indian Ocean World emanating from involuntary migration is a crucial part of bringing about justice. Building our episteme of African migrations continues as we enter the Second International Decade for People of African Descent (2025–2034).

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## Background

Connections between Africans and other peoples in the Indian Ocean World are not surprising given their mobilities and diasporas. Inevitably, slavery, the slave trade and colonialism are entangled in this historiography. The concept of the Indian Ocean World (IOW) is defined by historian Gwyn Campbell (2017, 36) as “regions directly involved in the long-distance maritime trade network of the ‘first global economy,’ an economy that was regulated by the monsoon system of the Indian Ocean and the China and Indonesian seas.”

The true dimension of African history within the IOW context will remain occluded unless a major challenge is mounted to the dominant Western-driven perspectives governing historical chronology, the significance of states, the equation of hierarchical polities with economic modernization and of decentralized polities with economic backwardness, the territorial divisions implicit in regional and country analyses, narrow definitions of Islamic influences, and “Atlantic” models of slavery and the slave diaspora. (Campbell 2017, 36)

African mobilities in the Indian Ocean are not surprising given that part of Africa’s coast borders the Indian Ocean. Contributions of Africans and their settlement in the Indian

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Ocean World are not adequately recognized in the national historiographies, even though assimilation and marginalization may partly account for this scenario. Scholarship on the easterly African migrations, nevertheless, has grown over the last 50 years since the pioneering work of Joseph Harris (1971) in *The African Presence in Asia: Consequences of the East African Slave Trade* which drew attention to an overlooked part of the African diaspora. Thirty years later, a multi-author work – *The African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean* (De Silva Jayasuriya and Pankhurst 2003) – followed. Whilst *Uncovering the History of Africans in Asia* (De Silva Jayasuriya and Angenot 2008) is spread over a large geographical area, scholars have concentrated on smaller portions of the Indian Ocean: *Sidis and Scholars: Essays on African Indians* (Catlin-Jairazhabhoy and Alpers 2004), *India in Africa, Africa in India: Indian Ocean Cosmopolitanisms* (Hawley 2008) and *Afro-South Asia in the Global African Diaspora* (Ali et al. 2020). Thematic monographs on *Habshi-Sklaven, Sidi Fakire* (Basu 1995), *African Identity in Asia* (de Silva Jayasuriya 2009), and *The African Diaspora in Asian Trade Routes and Cultural Memories* (De Silva Jayasuriya 2010) complemented the edited, multi-author books. Given that histories of the slave trade are connected with mobilities of Africans, the scholarship includes slavery and the slave trade: *Slavery and South Asian History* (Chatterjee and Eaton 2006) and *Slavery and Abolition in the Ottoman Middle East* (Toledano 1998), for example. This list is not comprehensive but the above mentioned works will provide an entry to the scholarship in the area.

Despite the expanding scholarship, several aspects of the historical past of African contributions to the Indian Ocean World and the afterlives of the descendants of enslaved Africans go unnoticed. What are the reasons for oversights of existing documents and communities of African descent in the Indian Ocean World? The six articles in this special volume of the *Journal of African Diaspora Archaeology and Heritage* titled "African Mobilities and Heritage in the Indian Ocean World" contribute towards redressing the gaps in our episteme by including affective histories and lived experiences to archival documentation. Scholarship of the Indian Ocean mobilities of Africans, however, lags behind that of the Atlantic World. Whilst the intersections of race, caste, religion, class, and other factors need to be studied in order to ascertain the causes of marginalization and discrimination, we also need to be sensitive to the peculiarities and nuances of the Indian Ocean region (de Silva Jayasuriya 2025a).

Drawing on a variety of methodologies, ranging from documentation in colonial archives to field work, the articles include narratives on the Indian Ocean island of Sri Lanka, India, and the Ottoman Empire. The volume draws upon multilingual competencies of the authors in Marathi, Konkani, Gujarati, Hindi, Portuguese, French, and Turkish. Archived records elucidate and reinforce places of memory and reveal the subtleties in managing enslaved persons. They also reveal the hierarchies of power within which the enslaved were slotted. Social mobility due to acts of bravery and heroism, and flexibility due to religious customs meant that enslaved Africans were not always at the bottom of the pyramid. Within this scenario, African agency in mobilities/migrations should not be undermined, however, as evidenced by their military might, leadership qualities, strategic plans, and spiritual roles. Their social integrations into the political and economic landscape of host countries of which their descendants have become citizens are noteworthy. People of African descent are at two ends of the social spectrum, however, with a minority of elite and a majority of marginalised people.

Given the significant presence of people of African descent in contemporary India, this volume includes four contributions from scholars working on Maharashtra, Gujarat, and Karnataka. Inclusion of Africans in the nearby island of Sri Lanka and also in the Ottoman Empire broadens its geographical scope.

### Articles in the special volume

Movement of enslaved Africans from Diego Garcia to Sri Lanka after transatlantic abolition of the slave trade raises several questions. Firstly, archival documents indicate that Mozambique is considered the main source of supply of enslaved Africans to Sri Lanka. The literature also refers to Madagascar, South Africa, Mauritius, Mumbai, and Goa as places from which Africans were moved to Sri Lanka. Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya's (Institute of Commonwealth Studies, UK) article on "From Plantations to Military: Heritage of Galle Fort in Sri Lanka" identifies a place of arrival for enslaved Africans in the early nineteenth century, and throws new light on migration patterns. A manuscript in the National Archives, Kew, gives an inventory of enslaved Africans embarking in Diego Garcia and disembarking at Galle in southern Sri Lanka. The diversity of the names of enslaved African men and women, de Silva Jayasuriya (2025b, this volume) argues, represents the variety of owners and overseers of the enslaved African labourers in the coconut plantations of Diego Garcia. Marronage was not uncommon and the agency of enslaved Africans in boarding British ships to get away from ill-treatment in the French plantations was noteworthy. In Sri Lanka, the fate of the African men changed as they were enlisted to the Ceylon Regiments under instructions of the British Governor, Thomas Maitland (1805–1811). Timing of the purchase of enslaved Africans in 1810, however, despite the British Parliament's Act of abolishing the transatlantic slave trade in 1807, illustrates the continuing trade in enslaved persons in the Indian Ocean (Figure 1).

According to Pliny (23–29 C.E.), the Roman writer, enslaved Africans were included in the trade goods that were exchanged from the Aksumite port of Adulis, situated in today's Eritrea, to western India (Pankhurst 2003, 189). From the third century, Arab-Indian trade included enslaved Africans brought to the Indian ports of Maharashtra (Chauhan 1995a, 2). From the sixth century onwards, with the growth of the Arab-Indian trade, involuntary movement of Africans increased (Chauhan 1995a, 16). In the ninth century, enslaved Africans from Sofala were sent to ports in western India (Wink 1990, 31); the largest number of enslaved and freed Africans from Arabia and the Persian Gulf entered India overland through the Sind, Cutch, and Kathiawar. From the early ninth century to the late thirteenth century (810 to 1260 C.E.), Sofala became a source of supply to the port of Thana in the State of Maharashtra (Chauhan 1995b, 2). Records of African movement to India are scarce, however, until after the end of the tenth century, which follows the expansion of Islam to northern India (Alpers 2003, 48). Exonyms and ethnonyms for Africans and their descendants in the scant historical records as mainly *Habshi*, *Zanj*, *Cafre*, *Sidi*, and *Chaush* (De Silva Jayasuriya 2015; Ali 2024) with varied orthographies makes identification of Africans a challenge for the researcher.

Notwithstanding, Africans are most prominent in the narratives as bodyguards and military men and enter the Indian political scene in the Bengal Sultanate where they



**Figure 1.** Cannon on Galle Fort. Photograph by Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya.

ruled from 1487 to 1493: Ghiyath al-Din Barbak Shah (1487–1488), Saif al-Din Firuz Shah (1488–1490), Qutb al-Din Mahmud Shah (1490) and Sham al-Din Muzaffar Shah (1490–1493) (Goron 2006, 132). Their achievements are epitomised when Chapu, an Ethiopian child sold to slavery by his impoverished parents, renamed Ambar, rose to a prominent position through his military prowess and strategic skills. Warding off the enemies of Ahmednagar – Portuguese and Moghuls – Malik Ambar became the *Peshwa* (Prime Minister) of Ahmednagar from 1600 until his death in 1626. His self-designed stately tomb in Khuldabad speaks to his stature as a military leader, politician, strategist, and philanthropist. His unparalleled life in the historiography of India has attracted several scholars (Shyam 1968; Eaton 2005; Ali 2016). Whilst Ambar epitomises the military might of Africans in India, Sidis were also reputed as expert mariners and fearless, tenacious fighters which gave them naval superiority in battles on the high seas over Marathas (Chitnis 2009, 8).

Scarcity of textual sources on waves of African migrations over 2000 years makes a comprehensive mapping of historical continuity between the people of African descent in the subcontinent and their African ancestors infeasible. Sidis in the western Indian state of Gujarat trace their ancestry to two contexts, both associated with Sidi Mubarak Nobi whose ultimate African origins are signalled as Abyssinia (Ethiopia) (Alpers 2003, 29) or Nubia (Basu 2019, 192). Agate mining in Ratanpur (Gujarat) was attributed to Sidi Mubarak Nobi, and he was known as Bava Gor<sup>1</sup> acknowledging his spiritual qualities and commercial contributions. Bava Gor, a Sufi Saint revered by Indians of all faiths, provides an anchor for Sidi identity as a cult of *faqirs* (Basu 2003, 246), a word which derives from the Arabic word which literally means poor but in this instance implies religious mendicants. Sonic memories and embodied movements are evident in the identity as *faqirs*, giving them status in society.

Consulting Marathi sources and recording Sidi oral narratives, Durga Kale (University of Calgary, Canada) (Kale 2025, this volume) writes on “Situating Hābasāna: Charting the Affective Boundaries of the Sidi kingdom in Konkan.” She unveils forgotten histories of translocation from Africa to the west coast of India concentrating from the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. The area is a tourist site today due to the Sindhudurg fort which has been inscribed by UNESCO in July 2025 as a World Heritage Site (<https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1739/>). Through personal correspondence and fragments of material culture in the Konkan, Kale charts the trajectory of disenfranchised Sidis reflecting on affective histories of landscape through the lens of displaced Sidi families. Her article reveals cross currents between the Marathas, British, Portuguese, and Sidis



**Figure 2.** Apparently Hidden Front Gate of the Sindhudurg Fort (2016). Photograph courtesy of Debatoti 1985, available under Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license.

in Maharashtra and the dynamics of land ownership, usurpation, and clearing of Sidi lands and graves which further disperse the Sidis. Kale draws on her fieldwork in Ratan-giri and Sindhudurg districts to complement her textual work (Figure 2).

In “Janjira Fort: Living Memories and Heritage” Beheroze Shroff (University of California, Irvine, USA) and Sonal Mehta (Centre for Environmental Planning and Technology University, Ahmedabad) deal with memories of belonging to a diverse cosmopolitan community nurtured by Sidi Nawabs who ruled a princely state of India for over three centuries. A thirteenth-century trading base for African traders off the western coast of India, an active site of trade and theatre of commercial interactions, Janjira Island memorialises the often overlooked free movement of Africans to India. Janjira State, however, was not limited to the island and extended to mainland India, land on the western coast of India, to the Konkan coast and to Danda-Rajpuri, whose power gave rise to a second State ruled by Africans – Sachin in today’s Gujarat. Sachin also suffered the same fate as Janjira after India’s independence and was integrated into the Indian Union in 1948. How did the changing political scenario affect those who devoted their lives to working for the Nawabs? The value of Shroff and Mehta’s ethnographic study is in recording the living memories of Sidi Nawabs, who are an important part in inscribing the Sidi legacy of a site which memorialises African contributions to India. Nostalgia for secure livelihoods in Janjira fort is noteworthy. Shroff and Mehta’s corpus consists of Indians of non-African descent with the exception of Rizvan Karbhari, who claimed descent from Sidi administrators and soldiers appointed by the Nawab. Narratives of the Janjira island community are juxtaposed with personal reflections of Qamar Zaman, Begum<sup>2</sup> (granddaughter of Nawab, Sidi Ahmad Khan (r.1879–1922)) and Dr. Faeza Jasdawalla (granddaughter of the last Nawab, Sidi Mohammad Khan (r.1922–1947)), a trained historian who has authored publications on her family and the fort of Janjira (Jasdawalla 2015, 72–91). Whilst reconnecting the descendants of the Janjira African rulers with their past, Shroff and Mehta also situate Indians of non-African descent and emphasise the urgent need to safeguard the heritage of Janjira fort and to exploit the residual memories of the community that once lived in Janjira island. Together with eight other forts along the Konkan coast of Maharashtra, Janjira fort (Figure 3) has been nominated to be inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List due to its outstanding universal value (<https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/6703/>). Unbroken Sidi rule of Janjira began with Sidi Ambar Sainik (r. 1621–1642) only to end with Sidi Mohammad Khan (1922–1947). A year after India’s independence, in 1948, with the integration of the princely states to the new Indian Union, Janjira faded into a chapter of India’s past. Majestic tombs of three Sidi rulers – Sidi Surul, Sidi Yaqut, and Sidi Khairiyat Khan – in Khokri, on the mainland opposite Janjira island and an unidentified tomb not yet declared as a protected monument (Sohoni 2019, 150), speak to the power and the respect they commanded.

The theme of tombs continues in “Habshi Histories, Sidi Ceremonies: Sites of African Diasporic Heritage in Ahmedabad, Gujarat” by Jazmin Graves Eyssallenne (University of North Carolina, Greensboro) (this volume) and picks up a forgotten strand of African descendants who served in the military, as evidenced on their tombstones. The hagiography of African “elites” in India are re-narrated through Eyssallenne’s article, broadening the spectrum of Sidi elite from rulers of princely states to include elite militia entwined with Sidi Sufi Saints. “Habshi elites of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Ahmedabad were



**Figure 3.** Janjira Fort Cannons and fort walls. Photograph by Beheroze Shroff. Photograph by Beheroze Shroff.

part of same historical waves of migration that brought enslaved Ethiopians as soldiers to Gujarat and the Deccan” asserts Graves Eyssallenne (2025, this volume). Why have they been marginalised? She is inspired by the anthropologist Helene Basu, a longstanding scholar of Sidis in Gujarat, who articulated Sidi identity through a cult of *faqirs* (religious mendicants) who assume ritual authority over their superiors (Basu 2003, 245). Sidis in Ahmedabad revere two strands of Africans: the fourteenth-century African Rifai Sufis in Gujarat and also the enslaved African military members who served the Sultanate of Gujarat. Whilst contributing to the hagiography of Sidi Saints, Graves Eyssallenne draws on her fieldwork and presents oral histories to support arguments that Habshis are woven into the spiritual iconography of the Sidis.

Sacred geographies and heritage, both immaterial and material, coalesce through Sidi oral histories and sites of devotional practice in Ahmedabad. African elites, both Habshis and Sidis, enjoy a privileged status in the claimed genealogy of Ahmedabad accorded due to their bravery and heroism. The most recognised Ahmedabadi Sidi through his exquisite filigree work in stone in the eponymous Sidi Said mosque (Figure 4) brings home the reality of the artistic genius of Sidis while epitomising the elite status of Africans in India. Moreover, Sidi military elites are memorialised in a complex of graves just outside Ahmedabad. Graves of Habshi military elites, such as the famed Bilal Jhujhar Khan (d. 1558–1559) who died defending the Gujarat Sultanate from incursions by the Portuguese and the Mughals (Pankhurst 2003, 204; Shroff and Mehta 2020, 415–416), enable Sidis to incorporate them in the Sidi Sufi tradition. As Basu (2003, 246) states, “Sidi were assigned and assumed different roles, such as slaves, soldiers, traders, and finally, the dominant role in the present, *faqirs*”.



**Figure 4.** Sidi Said Mosque Latticed Window with the Tree of Life. Photograph by Beheroze Shroff.

Moving away from the State of Gujarat to southern India, Andreas Hofbauer (São Paulo State University, Brazil) focuses on “The Siddis<sup>3</sup> of Karnataka: Religiosity, Africanity, and the Struggle Against Discrimination.” (this volume) Karnataka is home to Sidis of multiple faiths: Christian, Hindu, and Muslim. His article seeks to analyse the role played by religious factors in the lives of Sidis, how they have helped or hindered the struggle to obtain specific rights, and how the population has been affected in this process. Africanness can override religious differences. Hofbauer observes varied

gendered and religious differences in the marriage patterns in the monotheistic and non-monotheistic religions. Africa and Africanity have been a binding force in carving out a Sidi identity by Indians of African descent with varying genealogical and historical pasts. Hofbauer explores the relationship between religion and caste, and also between religion and “race” in analysing the role of religion on the lives of Sidis. Perhaps future scholarship might engage in an intersectional study to ascertain how these factors interact with each other in order to explore the fluidity of identity construction. The struggle against discrimination, as illustrated by Hofbauer (2025, this volume), entrenched boundaries and a sense of belonging emerged as new identifications were constructed, necessitating rebuilding a broken bridge between India and Africa. Fragmented oral histories, due to the long centuries that Africans have lived in Karnataka, complement the silence in the archives. On the other hand, people of African descent in Karnataka who benefitted from Schedule Tribe status have uplifted themselves by gaining employment in the government sector. They are giving back to their villages as exemplified by Juje Jackie Harnodkar Sidi and his wife Juliana Harnodkar Sidi (Shroff 2015) (Figure 5).

Moving westwards from India, in “The *Kızlar Ağası* in the Early Modern Period: Reconstructing Perceptions of the Chief Harem Eunuch of the Ottoman Empire through Contemporary Narratives,” Faaeza Jasanwalla-Williams (2025, this volume) reviews power structures in West Asia and issues of race and colour, which are also



**Figure 5.** Juje Harnodkar Sidi being garlanded by a young Sidi. Photograph by Juliana Harnodkar Sidi, Karnataka.

described in the southern Indian state of Karnataka by Andreas Hofbauer (2025, this volume). Enslavement was not limited to Africans in the Ottoman Empire (1300–1922). As historian Ehud Toledano (1998, 3) remarks in his book *Slavery and Abolition in the Ottoman Middle East*, women and children had been reduced to slavery by their own societies prior to Ottoman intervention. Jasdanwalla-Williams draws attention to the power structures entangled with ethnicity and race. In the complex world of the Ottoman empire the treatment of African eunuchs was ambiguous. Physical strength and personal qualities enabled African eunuchs to negotiate their positions in Harems. Jasdanwalla-Williams traces the role of the Chief Harem Eunuch from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, revealing that the power of the Black eunuch rose over time. She illustrates how the balance tips in favour of East Africans who were the holders of



**Figure 6.** The *Kızlar Ağası*, the chief black eunuch of the Ottoman harem, circa 1809. Image available for public domain via the Wikimedia Commons.

the powerful position of Chief Black Eunuchs; being Arabic-speakers, East Africans were suitably equipped to oversee the administration of the pious foundations in Mecca and Medina. Jasdawalla-Williams engages with historical sources and literature, political institutions and visual art in order to understand the racial connotations surrounding perceptions of the Chief Harem Eunuch. The *Kızlar Ağası* (Figure 6) and the Black eunuchs he supervised were privileged in that they were allowed to enter the women's apartments and carry messages; white eunuchs who originated from the Ottoman Balkans, Greeks from Anatolia, and enslaved persons purchased from the Caucasus (Hathaway 2018, 44) were not allowed this privilege. This also illustrates that enslavement was not uniquely an African phenomenon. The African diaspora in Ottoman lands in the early modern period was brought into sharp focus on account of the role of the Black eunuchs who not only played increasingly important roles in the Ottoman administration in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but also rose to one of the highest positions in the Ottoman household and government as Chief Black Eunuchs, controlling the Imperial Harem.

### Future directions

I offer a word of caution to future scholars embarking on Indian Ocean studies. As historian Sanjay Subrahmanyam (2019, 806) remarks:

the Atlantic only emerged as a two-sided zone of interaction at the very end of the fifteenth century . . . . Yet, it has become common enough for historians of various phenomena, be it colonial urbanism or the slave trade, to essay a comparison between the Atlantic and Indian Ocean spheres, and even transfer analytical models from the former to the latter as if this were the most natural of exercises.

Lost histories of the African diaspora reveal inequalities of power, silences in the archives, undocumented lived experiences of translocation, and erasure of identities. The prominent positions held by Africans who transitioned from enslavement challenge “the overwhelming, even hegemonic influence exerted on slavery studies by the Atlantic plantation model” (Eaton 2006, 2). Nevertheless, afterlives of Asians of African descent should not be overlooked. Sidis in Karnataka and Saurashtra have been accorded Scheduled Tribe status which entitles them to government benefits, reserved quotas in educational establishments and employment, and subsidies to build homes. Whilst this aims to correct inequities, the powerless state of Sidis renders them unable to access the specific bundle of goods to which they are entitled. The majority of Sidis are unable to negotiate their way around the bureaucracy to benefit from their recognised special status. A few who have crossed the bridge are contributing to fellow Sidis through their entrepreneurships and professional networks. What of African descendants in other spaces in which such corrective measures have not been put in place? This volume aims to raise awareness of the contributions of Africans in the past in order to enhance social inclusion. The volume includes archival records and vignettes of affective histories captured through oral narratives of the memories and living heritage of people of African descent in the Indian Ocean World. It is hoped that scholars will draw inspiration from this volume and contribute to an area that is under researched.

## Notes

1. *Bava* means holy person (Gujarati language) and *Gor* (Gujarati/Hindi language) means tomb/grave which can in this context be interpreted as rising out of the tomb/grave.
2. A high ranking Muslim woman in India and Pakistan.
3. Sidi and Siddi are variant Romanised spellings in the literature.

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

*Professor Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya*, PhD, FRAS, is a historian, linguist, ethnomusicologist, musician, writer and editor whose work ranges from academia to advocacy. As an Expert on People of African descent in Asia, she advises the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNOHCHR) Geneva. She served as Rapporteur for the UNESCO Slave Route Project, Paris and was also a member of the Project’s International Scientific Committee. She is the Chair, National Scientific Committee on Intangible Cultural Heritage, ICOMOS Sri Lanka. Her six monographs on the easterly movement of Africans include – *African Identity in Asia* (Markus Wiener, New Jersey) and *African diaspora in Asian Trade Routes and Cultural Memories* (Edwin Mellen Press, UK). Amongst her five edited books are *Uncovering the History of Africans in Asia* (Leiden: Brill) and *The African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean*. (Africa World Press, New Jersey). She contributed “African Diaspora in South Asia: A Theoretical Perspective” to the UNESCO General History of Africa Volume 10 (2023) and several further articles to UNESCO publications. Shihan is a Senior Research Fellow (Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London), Senior Associate (Lucy Cavendish College, University of Cambridge), Research Associate (Faculty of Modern and Medieval Languages and Linguistics, University of Cambridge), Discretionary Associate (Faculty of History, University of Oxford), Research Associate (African Studies Centre, University of Oxford), Sarath Amunugama Visiting Professor (University of the Visual & Performing Arts, Colombo), Visiting Research Fellow (National Centre for Advanced Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences, Sri Lanka), and Collaborative Researcher (Department of Sociology, University of Colombo).

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