

# African Slavery in Asia: Epistemologies across Temporalities and Space

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## Abstract

Whilst enslavement was not limited to a single ethnic group, the dispersal of Africans due to involuntary mobilities has had a major impact on the world not only through the productivities of the diasporas in commerce but also in other areas: defence, domestic services and entertainment. This article questions the rationale for forced movement of Africans to Asia and discusses the important and intimate roles they performed and continue to perform through examples from India and Japan. What do the variety of roles played by Africans in numerous sectors tell us about the space open to them for social mobility? Voices of Afrodescendants have been muted but they are carving out a new niche through enacting cultural performances persisting through cultural memories and collective identities linked to their role as *faqirs*<sup>2)</sup> in India. Alterity is voiced through cultural carryovers as illustrated by Afrodescendants in Sri Lanka. What do the lives of enslaved Africans who achieved high positions in the Indian Ocean World reveal about acculturation? Comparative studies with other experiences of slavery and its afterlife are an essential part in understanding global slavery and the Atlantic World is an obvious starting point which will enhance contemporary debates on alterity, perceived through categorisations such as ethnicity and race.

Key words: African diaspora, global slavery, equity, race, ethnicity

## An Ancient Phenomenon

If we are to tackle contemporary issues in our societies, we cannot ignore the dark side of human history associated with slavery and the global slave trade. Slavery existed globally in various guises over the centuries (Bailey 2008; Ennals 2007) and

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2) An Arabic word *fakir/faqir* is a person who devotes their life to God. For Sidis (Afrodescendants in India) the role of *fakir* as spiritual specialists is inherited from Bava Gor. Sidis created their own distinctive community as a brotherhood of *fakirs*, based on spiritual kinship ties (Shroff 2022, Basu 2003).

metamorphosised over the centuries, across time and space, and is known by numerous terms but at the core lies involuntary, forced or tied labour or service, bound by power relations. Slavery is, however, memorialised by the legacies of plantation slavery and remembered through the aftermath of imperialism. The aggressive transatlantic slave trade of the Early Modern and Modern empires of Europe fed by chattel slavery reduced human beings to commodities. Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch (2014) argues that colour-based racism is engendered in the transatlantic slave trade to which sub-Saharan Africans fell victim. Although captives were previously white or Asiatic, from the fifteenth/sixteenth centuries, to be black was synonymous with being a captive in the Atlantic World. Slavery, colonialism and racism are entwined and underpin contemporary problems inherent in societies. Although race is a social construct and not a biological reality, the notion of race has coloured society and engenders inequality through denial of accessibility to goods and services. Whilst marginality of slave descendants is not entirely due to their legacy of slavery, access to the same bundle of goods as those without a slave past is exacerbated due to their inherited status. Recent discourses on race have led to other phenomena which draw on an illusive concept creating inequalities based on physiognomical features and skin colour, and illustrate the deep scars made by the entanglement of slavery and colonialism. Differentials in societies are, nevertheless, bound by other intersecting axes such as ethnicity, religion and gender. In order to identify cumulative effects of overlapping systems of discrimination, intersectional analysis is a useful tool but the choice of parameters such as race, ethnicity, gender, religion, age, class, caste should not be biased by pre-existing models which may not be culturally feasible; the parameters need to be tailor-made for each community. Or else, intersectional analysis could exacerbate problems for the communities themselves.

The notion of race underpins racism, described as a type of discrimination that originates from the belief in racialism and racial hierarchy. Such a hierarchy is not based on a biological reality. The transatlantic slave trade which fostered commercial gains in a triangular trade conducted across the ocean is perceived as underpinning colour based racism. A racially based system of hierarchy established white superiority and was reinforced by writers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: Edward Long (1734-1813), Robert Knox (1791-1892), Arthur de Gobineau (1816-1882) and Houston Stewart Chamberlain (1855-1927) (Moran 2011:171). Long argued that “blacks” were a separate,

inferior, bestial and servile species fit for slavery and domination by the white race (Jordan 1969:491-494 quoted in Moran 2011:171). European colonialism ended in the 1970s but “colonial and racist mindsets dominated the treatment of Africa and Africans in regional, national and international governments, judiciaries, executives, and other public and private institutions” (Kooria 2020:351).

What is noteworthy is the number of Africans who achieved high status within the Indian Ocean World. Their achievements are admirable but comparative studies with slavery in other spaces are necessary. What can we say with any degree of precision about the extent to which Africans experienced real power or authority given their origin as slaves? Although the Africans described in this paper achieved status and power within the system they found themselves in, what was the nature and real extent of that power? Although enslavement was not limited to people of African descent, this article contributes to global slavery through the mobilities of enslaved Africans across the Red Sea and Indian Ocean, though Africans were also involuntarily moved via both the Atlantic and Indian Oceans to Asia. African mobilities did not end in the Indian Ocean; they continued to the Far East.

Africans became a factor of input in transoceanic trade conducted by Africa, Americas and Europe. European traders and colonisers utilised African labour to work on ‘discovered’ lands of the New World and produced raw materials (sugar, tobacco, cotton) for Europe; Africa also became a market for consumer goods (rum, textiles) produced in Europe, the former driven by external European global expansion and entrepreneurship and the latter driven by African demand for consumer goods.

Economic-centred models of development, denied African agency biased by enslavement which commodified Africans. Historian Toby Green (2019: xxvi) comments on the departure from the economic underdevelopment models of Walter Rodney and Immanuel Wallerstein since the late 1980s. “The rise of neoliberal emphases on autonomy and personal responsibility coincided with an increasing focus from historians on showing African ‘agency’, with Africans as active participants in history and not as passive victims of impersonal economic forces” (Green 2019: xxvi). African contributions to mathematics, astronomy, navigation, engineering, agriculture and irrigation have begun to enter historiography (Lovejoy 2020:382-383). Advanced naval technology of Europeans resulted in control of the giant waterways of the world through international trade of people and

goods, and as historian Paul Lovejoy points out to “reorganise the intercontinental division of labour and the factors of production” (Lovejoy 2020:381).

I was struck by the agency of captives during forced transportation when I read the “Journal of Captain Dominicus”<sup>3)</sup> who directed an East India Company ship - *Delaware* - which commenced its voyage from Downs on 26 November 1751. On 13 April 1752, she arrived in St Augustine’s Bay, Madagascar, a haven for shipwrecked sailors and pirates where “any man could have become a king, even disreputable lower-class sailors of Europe or the Americas” (Hooper 2011: 225). Stopping to replenish stocks of water and food was a necessity on a long distance voyage to Sumatra and Java. The *Delaware*, however, spent over fifteen days obtaining twenty two captives and then sailed northwards and anchored in the southwest of the island, at Morandava, where she spent over fourteen days obtaining forty three captives. She continued sailing northwards to the most active slave port on the island - Massaleige - receiving five captives and sailed on to Manengara. On Friday 26 June 1752, Captain Dominicus recorded an uprising against the crew:

“About half past six of clock this morning sent our Yaul and Long Boat to the factory with sundry goods belonging to the Honorable Company as also stores for the factory and about half past nine. ... our slaves rose on us and knocked down our Armourer and Botswains Mate on the Main Deck and then made the best of their way into the Gally and took possession of the cooks furniture spit hatchet & Co. and began to cut the cable and stabbed the sailmaker in the belley got the women off the Deck and gott our small arms outt then went forward with what people we had on board well having a great many sick we endeavoured to pacifie them with fair words telling them they should not be beat if they would surrender but they have bullets of wood at us & began to cutt our cable upon which was obliged to fixes on them & slide one man but another supployed his place & continued cutting the cables which made us fire again & killd another be wounded a few more some of them then jumpt overboard & was taken up by our boat coming off at the alarm at 1/2 10 they askd a parley & our Linguist we got at S Augustines went to go onto the galley they

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3) British Library (London) India Office Records n.d. IOR/mar/b/322b(1); India Office Records n.d. IOR/mar/b/322b(2) (13<sup>th</sup> April to 31<sup>st</sup> August 1752).

wanting to speake to him but he no sooner set his foot in but a Lance & a spit was run through his Body & died in a short time upon which it was impossible to keep our people from fireing on them & just before 11 o clock they surrenderd most part of them being wounded soon after our Capt came off in a lanse. Sent on shore for the Doctor to dress their wounds, double irond the Men, & put all the women in iron except five they confessing if this skeem did not succeed we was to have been poisond. Our Second Mate was wounded with Lance in his left hand”.<sup>4)</sup>

Whilst the attempt to overthrow the Captain and crew failed, further plots were revealed. The day after the Rebellion, on Saturday 27 June, “Captain & Doctor came of as also the two linguests to inquire amongst the women & men who were the Ring Leaders. One woman impeached three of her companions who was to have given us poisson if the mens scheem did not take.”<sup>5)</sup> These coordinated attempts at resisting captivity would have been enhanced by their linguistic homogeneity. The rate of resistance for the VOC (*Vereenigde Oestindische Compagnie*), generally known as the Dutch East India Company, slave trade between Madagascar and Cape Town was about 25%, a similar rate to the rate of revolts in the Madagascar to Sumatra expeditions (Thiebaut 2015:13). The high rate on the Madagascar to Sumatra could be explained in terms of linguistic differences of the captives. The Madagascar captives had an advantage in being linguistically homogeneous. A comparison with other voyages in the Indian Ocean would add to our knowledge on resistance, revolts and what precautions slavers took to curtail these episodes.

Rafael Thiébaut (2015:14) writes that although the number of *vrijburgers* (Dutch who were not employed by the VOC) on the west coast of Sumatra were limited, the general staff of the VOC managed to sell their personal captives, private property, to the local governor or even to the free colonists of Batavia, a city where the ships always returned to after having disembarked their Malagasy captives in Sumatra. I observed this pattern of sailing 20 years later, on the English EIC ship, *Delaware*, where Captain Dominicus delivered 32 slaves of the Company on Friday 6 April 1753, and sailed to Batavia (Jakarta)

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4 ) British Library (London) India Office Records n.d. IOR/mar/b/322b(1); India Office Records n.d. IOR/mar/b/322b(2) (13<sup>th</sup> April to 31<sup>st</sup> August 1752).

5 ) British Library (London) India Office Records n.d. IOR/mar/b/322b(1);India Office Records n.d. IOR/mar/b/322b(2) (13<sup>th</sup> April to 31<sup>st</sup> August 1752).

(de Silva Jayasuriya 2010). Rafael Thiebaut (2015:14) emphasises that in addition to the 2,036 figure processed by the VOC, another 10% needs to be included to reflect the illegal slave trade. The mortality rate on VOC slave ships sailing from Madagascar to Sumatra between 1678 and 1734 were on average 44% (Thiebaut 2015: 13-14)<sup>6)</sup>, with almost half the slaves dying during the voyages, is an indication of the high-risk nature of the slave trade and the unassured return.

Whilst Europeans gave a filip to the slave trade in Madagascar, although the institution of slavery had existed from ancient times (Regnier and Somda 2019). Despite the cooperation of King Radama I (1810-1828) to end the slave trade and also the signing of three treaties - 1817, 1820 and in 1895 - slavery was ended in Madagascar only when the French colonised the island from 27 September 1896. Whilst British Abolition of the transatlantic slave trade in 1807, curtailed the westwards mobilities of Africans, the longer and lesser known slave routes continued to flourish, one connecting Madagascar, Comoros and northeast Africa for Red Sea and Persia markets and the other for western India (Campbell 1981: 205).

Given the clandestine and persistent slave trade, is it surprising that elderly Sidis<sup>7)</sup> in western India could speak Kiswahili even twenty years ago? In the Beheroze Shroff (2004) film, "We're Indian and African: Voices of the Sidis", Babubhai, a former Bollywood stuntman and caretaker of a Sufi shrine in Mumbai, voices his opinions of home and belonging. His dual heritage - African and Indian - was not an issue for Babubhai, or other Sidis, who are given a voice in the film. Nevertheless, Sidi identity and belonging generates academic discussion and debate influenced by the experiences of other African diasporas and discrete disciplines. Although Babubhai's linguistic register was limited due to disuse and the absence of a speech community, he recalled KiSwahili learnt from his grandmother and counted in KiSwahili, re-establishing a feature of linguistic memory. Babubhai was interviewed by Shroff in Gujarati, an Indic language. In the absence of intergenerational transfer of KiSwahili, Sidis have acquired the local languages in the process of indigenisation. KiSwahili is an identifier of African-ness, but was spoken as a lingua franca

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6) Sources listed by Thiebaut (2015:14): P. Van Dam, Beschryvinge, vol. 1.2, p. 654, p. 657-662 ; «Generale missive» du 01.08.1679, du 19.03.1683, du 30.11.1684, du 13.12.1686, du 23.12.1687, du 23.11.1699 ; Rapport van den onderkoopman Jeremias Brons, NA, VOC 1260, VOC 1320, VOC 1341, VOC 1411, VOC 1503, VOC 1560.

7) Sidi (from the Arabic Sayid meaning 'Lord') CHECK/REF is a name given to Afrodescendants in India today. In the past, they were known by other names such as *Habshi*, *Cafre* and *Zanjibari*.

and a second or third language; ancestral African mother-tongues were lost over the centuries.

Dualities of remembering and forgetting - selective amnesia - are played out by slave descendants. How and what people remember and forget is beyond the scope of this paper. Given that free and forced mobilities were concurrent, remembering a military past or a past as domestic servants in royal households is favoured, for example, against other forms of service such as building roads and fortresses which required hard labour. How discrete were the boundaries between free and forced migration in the defence sector? This is an area for future research.

Whilst slavery has been silenced, we cannot ignore its impact on society; Hilary Beckles (2020:439) emphasises that twenty million Africans were dispersed from the continent due to the globalisation of African labour. The actual number will never be known due to the incompleteness of statistics. An estimated 12.5 million captives were moved across the Sahara, East Africa, Red Sea and Indian Ocean to various parts of Asia between 800 and 1900 CE (Lovejoy 2000; Collins 2007), which is over a period of 1,100 years. A similar number of captives were moved forcefully across the Atlantic over a much shorter period. Various estimates are available for the transatlantic crossing between 1500 and 1900, 11.2 million (Philip Curtin 1969) 12.7 million (Per O. Hernaes 1995), 11.8 million (Paul Lovejoy 1989), 12.6 million (Joseph Inikori 1998) and 11 million (David Eltis 2000) (Beckles 2002: 93-95). Twenty years ago, in 2001, the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance held at Durban, South Africa, recognised slavery as a Crime against Humanity. The UNESCO Slave Route Project (Paris), established in 1994, highlighted the importance of recognising slavery and the slave trade and the scale of the phenomenon whose tragedy affected all humanity (Iye, Schmidt and Lovejoy 2020: vii). In 2004, UNESCO commemorated the two hundredth anniversary of the Haitian Revolution, marking the independence of Haiti, an important historical moment in eliminating global slavery. As a member of the International Scientific Committee of the UNESCO Slave Route Project, I was invited to present a paper on the Indian Ocean (de Silva Jayasuriya 2006), a little discussed subject at the time, but a field which has since grown with the buoyancy of Indian Ocean Studies. Moreover, I was privileged to have met Sir Rex Nettleford, Chair of the UNESCO Slave Route Project, who told me that he would like to know what happened

on the other side of Africa (Nettleford 2004: personal communication). Given the long duration of easterly mobilities of Africans, this is a long story and I had made a start by publishing a collection of chapters within *The African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean*, co-edited with the Ethiopianist Richard Pankhurst OBE (de Silva Jayasuriya and Pankhurst 2003). Scholars were scarce, however, either due to lack of data or not having placed their work within the frame of slavery. Commemorations in 2007, nevertheless, to mark British Abolition of the transatlantic slave trade two hundred years ago, gave an impetus to slavery studies. William Wilberforce and Thomas Clarkson are portrayed as leading figures in this triumphant moment which undermines the economic rationale for Abolition. Slavery, however, haunts Abolition. Almost 80 years ago, Eric Williams (1944), who later became the first Prime Minister of Trinidad (1962-1981) argued in his doctoral dissertation, completed at the University of Oxford in 1938 (Neilson and Peters 2019: 475), against the thought that British Abolition was driven by humanitarianism. Capitalist development in Europe, and in Britain in particular, Williams argued was linked to the expansion of slavery and the slave trade in the Americas, particularly during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Bailey 2008: 547). This was contrary to Reginald Coupland's (1933) influential work - *The British Anti-Slavery Movement* - which dominated thinking. Eric Williams's economic argument - "the role of Negro slavery and the slave trade in providing the capital that financed the Industrial Revolution in England and of mature industrial capitalism in destroying the slave system" (Williams 1944: vii), undermined the British triumph of championing a moral argument for Abolition. Transatlantic Abolition neither ended the slave trade nor slavery. When the supply of forced labour decreased due to the illegality of engaging in the slave trade, illicit slave trading, nevertheless, continued. Moreover, slavery assumed new guises: indentured labourers contracted for a fixed period of time, French *libres engagés* (freelancers) (Alpers 2018) and apprenticeships (Christiansö 2020:151-181).

Slave Route Sites of Memory help to break the silence on slavery "lest we forget" man's inhumanity against man. The Slave Route Project's efforts in producing educational materials, written publications and audio-visual media contributes to the global dissemination of breaking the silence on slavery. Establishment of UNESCO's Indentured Labour Route Project in 2014 reinforces efforts in confronting issues of inequity and injustice.

## **Demand for Africans in Asia: Economic, Political, Sociological, Demographic**

**Figure 1: An Afro-Sri Lankan Community in Puttalam**



Photographed by Professor Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya

Africans moved freely as missionaries, sailors, soldiers, administrators and inevitably free and forced movement were simultaneous processes. Free mobilities of Africans are overshadowed by the overwhelming historiography on the transatlantic slave trade.

Does moving captives across long distances involving high costs and high risks make economic sense? What drove the demand for enslaved Africans in Asia? Historical archives and oral histories reveal that Africans were in demand as cavalymen, jockeys, soldiers, bodyguards, musicians, entertainers, midwives, herbalists, nannies, concubines, eunuchs, spirit healers, missionaries, entrepreneurs, pearl divers, fort builders, stone cutters, water carriers, milemen, postal runners and labourers in plantations.

Acculturation, disenfranchisement, marginalisation and the diversity of Asia have led to the concealment of Afrodescent communities that arose from intercontinental contact. My interest in the African diaspora began in a village in the northwestern province during doctoral research fieldwork on Sri Lanka Portuguese, a lingua franca for 350 years until English took over this role (de Silva Jayasuriya 2003, 2008a). Speaking this prestigious language reveals the socio-political climate into which the ancestors of the Afro-Sri Lankans were brought. Their patrons, European traders and colonisers filled the demand for sailors, soldiers, servants to oil the imperial machinery and gave a fillip to the already

existing Indian Ocean slave trade. As people in-between the colonisers and colonised, their fate changed with the dynamics and transition to independent rule from 1948. Generations were born locally, and Afrodescendants have adapted to the local socioculture save for a tradition of chanting *manja* accompanied by percussion instruments and dancing. The community live in 23 houses with no fences or barriers between them giving the feel of a real community, connected by a common history - a past linked to an international network of commerce which mobilised people forcefully to *terrae incognitae*. The community's shared cultural heritage and cultural identity draws them apart from other Sri Lankans. *Manja* was recognised publicly at a national cultural festival - *Deyatekirula* - initiated by a former President, Ranasinghe Premadasa (1989 to 1993), as Marie Jacinta, a member of the community told me during my semi-structured interview with her in 2013.

Due to the unexpected demand from the public and the need to practise for the 'stage', the community formed a twelve member group - "Ceylon African Manja". Being a village community without adequate IT equipment, the group have limited access to the entertainment market, however. The remoteness of their habitat, off the beaten track, has protected *manja* from cultural tourism. Nevertheless, the community is exposed to journalists, scholars and visitors. A visit to Johannesburg to represent Sri Lanka on her independence day (4 February) has meant that Africa is no longer an imagined homeland.

Although Afrodescendants lost their African languages and other cultural habits in the process of adaptation, their cultural identity is established through collective recollection of *manja* and remembered rhythms. *Manja* of Afro-Sri Lankans in Sirambiyadiya village, handed down through intergenerational transfer, brought them out of the woods, but their marketable skills in music and dance lack a marketmaker. Currently the windfall gains that the community enjoyed have halted due to the covid-19 pandemic. Since they have brought out the presence of Afrodescendants on the island, more Sri Lankans have begun to identify with their African heritage. Octaganerian M J Emiliana's husband George had worked for the royal navy in Trincomalee before he moved to Puttalam and she saw her brother-in-law Marcellinu Alphonso only on her wedding day. Her daughter Lena acted as an extra for John Derek's film *Tarzan the Ape Man* (1981) together with Afro-Sri Lankans from Trincomalee on the east coast of the Island. Being situated on opposite sides of the island, there had not been much interaction between these communities but interest by scholars has spurred them to self-identify as

Afrodesendants.

Lack of historical evidence simply leaves us with a gap in our epistemologies. Even within the records, Africans remain anonymous or are mentioned en bloc. Five hundred *habshis*<sup>8)</sup>, known to be guardians of the Indian Ocean, were included in the force of Jalasti, admiral and minister of Colombo (Gibb 1929; Dewaraja 1994: 39). Their status is unclear. Eight centuries prior to that, Ethiopians were trading in the Island's port of Mantai, an entrepôt for both eastern and western goods.

From 1631, the Portuguese army in Sri Lanka included Africans (de Silva, 1972, 188). Significantly, the Portuguese kept records of the cost of maintaining the African soldiers. African slave-soldiers were valued and well looked after - paid 18 *xerafims* per annum, given two measures of rice per day and also cloth for their use (de Silva: 1972, 189). The fixed annual income of the kingdom of Kōtte between 1619 and 1638 recorded the cost of salaries of 280 Africans at one *fanam* a day being 1,708 *xerafims* and the rice allowance for 280 *Kaffirs* at 2 measures a day as 2,800 *xerafims* (de Silva 1972: 232).

During the battles for control spread out over twenty years, when the Dutch routed the Portuguese, enslaved Africans changed colonial masters (de Silva Jayasuriya 2003: 253-254). Demand for slave labour continued during the Dutch era (1658 to 1796) and according to Remco Raben (1996 :131) the majority were from Malabar, although Coromandel, Bengal and Batavia were also sources of supply; the birthplace of slaves was recorded purely for accounting purposes, in the quarterly lists of missing and deceased slaves and taken stock of similar to the dead horses and worn-out tools and used materials. The enslaved were deployed to construct fortresses and also to load and unload ships. Alicia Schrikker and Kate J. Ekama (2017: 192) confirm the diversity of captives, ranging from Africa to Southeast Asia and draw attention to the entanglement with convicts and exiles; forced migrants were part of a connected world which formed the underclass of Sri Lanka's coastal cities. They (2017: 192) point out that captives had formed the majority of inhabitants in Sri Lanka's coastal port cities during the seventeenth century. The heterogeneity of the supply of enslaved people makes economic and geographic sense. Acute demand for slave labour shifted the source of supply closer to the point of disembarkation although other sources had been explored during the early years

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8 ) An ethnonym for Africans (from *Al Habash*, an Arabic word by which today's Ethiopia and Eritrea was known).

of Dutch colonisation. During 1692 to 1694, for example, 35 slaves were purchased from Madagascar for Sri Lanka and deployed to perform tasks that Malabar captives were considered unsuitable - cutting stones<sup>9)</sup>. Moreover, in 1690, VOC records indicate that Malagasy slaves who were in the Cape were taken to Colombo due to the desperate requirement for labourers to build the fortresses and to fill the gaps in terms of numbers due to the high death rates of the South Asian slaves and also the lack of skill in stone cutting.

*“de Sillida brengt vier paarden en zes grote ezels naar de Kaap en zal slaven van Madagascar terugbrengen, die op Colombo seer van noden waren toteen spoedige volbouwinge der fortification, die te langzaam voorging om de groote sterfte en swakheyte der Mallabaarse slaven, die onbequaam waren om de steenen utyte kappen, die men dagelijX<sup>10)</sup> tot dien eynde diende te hebben”<sup>11)</sup> (GM V 370 (1690 Maart 14)*

‘The Sillida brings four horses and six big donkeys to the Cape and shall return slaves from Madagascar who were very much needed in Colombo to quickly finish building the forts which did not progress fast enough due to the great mortality and weakness of the Malabar slaves who were incompetent in cutting the stones which were daily necessary for that purpose’. (translated from Dutch by Jennifer Van Der Greft)

Furthermore *“de Hogergeest bracht ook mee 29 afgeleefde en 40 er niet nodige Madagasacarse slaven”<sup>12)</sup>*

‘The Hogergeest also brought 29 decrepit and 40 unnecessary Malagassy slaves’ (translated from Dutch by Jennifer Van Der Greft)

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9) Sourcec listed by Remco Raben 1996 *Generale missiven van gouverneurs-general en raden aan Heren XVII der Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie*. Eds: W.Ph. Coolhaas and J. van Goor. Rijks geschiedkundige publicatiën, grote serie V, 370 (1690 March 14)

’s-Gravenhage 1960-1988; VOC 1693, p.578-579; Governor and Council Colombo to Goernor-General and Council (1704 July 13).

10) X indicates an illegible character

11) General missiven V 370 (1690 March 14)

12) General missiven V 370 (1690 March 14)

Malagasy slaves were *grof van leedenen* ('strong, robust and sturdily built') and deployed for heavy work (Barendse 1995: 142).

When the British took over the maritime areas from the Dutch, in 1796, VOC employees had the option of moving to Batavia. Pieter Sluijsken (1740-1813), the former Dutch Military Commander in Galle (1788-1792) stayed on perhaps because he could not take his 20 slaves (Schrikker 2011:144). Sluijsken's band of Africans played "sweet music" on the lawn in front of his mansion in Colombo and he entertained British Officers, promoting goodwill between the Dutch and the British (Elliott 1924:12). For the British, Africans performed several tasks but they were mostly valued for their military capabilities. Records in the National Archives, Kew, show transactions in 1804 when the British Governor, Frederick North (1798-1805) purchased 100 Africans - 2 women, 79 men and 19 boys from Bombay<sup>13)</sup> at 20,219 rix-dollars and 78 Africans (8 women and 70 men) from Goa<sup>14)</sup> at 19,954 rix-dollars. The English East India Company had dispatched slaves to Colombo for governmental and military reasons: 91 as military recruits and a large unspecified number in 1813 (Bauss 1997: 23). Furthermore, "A List of Negros received on board His Majestys ship Sir Francis Drake from the Island of Diego Garcia the 14<sup>th</sup> of May 1810"<sup>15)</sup> included 103 men, 23 women and 8 children; the genders or names of the children were not given but the personal names of the adult slaves were listed in the Records of the High Court of Admiralty and Colonial Vice-Admiralty Courts.

A cottage industry benefitting the entire village is a dream of the community as Peter Louis, the son of Leon Peter, an *arachchi* (village headman) in the *Kachcheriya* (government office) in Puttalam, told me during an interview (2013). The community live harmoniously with their Sinhalese co-villagers, praying together in the Sirambiyadiya Catholic Church and their children study at the Sirambiyadiya Junior School. None have benefitted yet from the government-subsidised 'free' education available at the tertiary level although academic performance in school has improved. The reasons for drop outs need to be investigated. Any studies on intersectional analysis should consider the parameter that really affect the community and should not be based on pre-existing

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13) C.O. 54,14,North to Hobart, 25 September 1804

14) C.O. 54,11, North to Hobart, 17 June 1804

15) HCA 32/1814/2739

models that are not culturally feasible. The assertion by Sureshi Jayawardena (2016:342) that “race, caste, and colorism form a dialectically interrelated system of oppression that affects Africana people” is however problematic, and she herself states that “colonial interpretations of Brahmanic ideals of caste through a racial lens effectively racialized firmly held local ideas about human difference” (Jayawardena 2016:342). Are scholars introducing race to spaces where that parameter does not exist? That is not to underestimate the inherent need in societies to find categories to differentiate themselves generally linked to socioeconomic groups. But in some spaces, however, differences are linked to imaginary boundaries bound up in perceived phenotypical or genetic coding and presented as discrete categories.

Knowledge transfer in the new homelands through performance traditions and instruments illustrate continuities of Africanity amongst disconnected diasporas. Over sixty years ago, ethnographer M. D. Raghavan (1962), who visited the Afro-Sri Lankan community in Puttalam, before they moved to their current village in Sirambiyadiya, wrote that the main instrument (unnamed) of the Afro-Sri Lankans in Puttalam was a musical bow with a gourd resonator. Music instruments connect dispersed communities

Figure 2: *Nagas* (African lyre) and *Malunga* (African single-stringed bow).



Photographed by Wasim Jamadar, Bhuj, Kutch, a young Sidi who plays both *malunga* and *nagas*

and throw out their common roots.

In Bhuj, Kutch (India), Wasim Jamadar, a Sidi Relationship Manager, working in microfinance is one of seven Sidis playing the *malunga*<sup>16)</sup> (braced musical bow) and *nagas* (African lyre). When he performed *Goma*<sup>17)</sup> in Nairobi at the Samosa Music and Arts Festival, Wasim was invited to migrate to Kenya. However, Wasim, told me: “We are Indian and India is our country” (interview 14 January 2022). *Goma* has been a vehicle for Sidis to travel abroad and also re-connect with Africa. Dressed in animal skins, pinned with peacock feathers and with painted faces, Sidis have performed *Goma* in Ghana, Kenya, Malaysia, Tanzania, United Kingdom and United States. The *malunga* links Sidis to their ancestral Sidi Sufi Saint, Bava Gor and also to Hazrat Bilal, a freed Ethiopian slave chosen by the Prophet Muhammed to be his first *muezzin*.<sup>18)</sup> Malangbhai Sidi (Shroff 2011: 3:36-3:53) says in Gujarati and as translated by Beheroze Shroff, his interviewer and filmmaker “This malunga is our legacy from ancestors who played it. Bava Gor also played it as prayer to the Lord. That’s how we (Sidis) continue to play in his memory” (Shroff 2019:205). Anthropologist, Helene Basu (2003: 243-244) states that “Everybody knows, however, that this is a symbolic kinship relationship since Hazrat Bilal reputedly had no offspring.” Nevertheless, Sidi identity is thereby linked to the heart of Islam (Ali 2016) through their two sacred genealogies (Shroff 2022).

Nkosenathi Ernie Nathi Koela (2019:31), a South African researcher, who plays and also builds musical bows describes the *malunga* as “a calabash-resonated single stringed instrument” and based on the way the bow is “braced centrally, separating the string into two or more segments” (Koela 2019:34) groups the *malunga* together with the *uMakhweyana* played by Swati and Zulu and the *uMuduri* in Uganda and Burundi. Koela (2019:33-34) adds that “The Malunga and cognate bows on the east coast share a connected story in terms of movements of people and trade but also share physiological, construction similarities” (Koela 2019: 33-34). In addition to South Africa, Mozambique, Uganda, Burundi, single-stringed instruments with a gourd resonator are played by African or Afro-diasporic peoples in the Seychelles and Madagascar known as *bonm* and *jejilava*, respectively (de Silva Jayasuriya 2022a, 2022b) and in Brazil as *berimbau* (Catlin-

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16) Gujarati word but etymologically a Bantu word from East Africa (Shroff 2022).

17) Drum or dance in KiSwahili

18) ‘one who calls to prayer’

Jairazhabhoy 2006), which Koela (2019:33) links to Angola. Given that from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries, Kenya, Tanzania, southern Somalia, Mozambique, Lake Malawi region, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, eastern Congo, Comoros and Madagascar were the site of a large scale slave trade (Vernet 2013:1), the links of the instruments are not surprising.

Wasim knows his African genealogy over eight generations and although his family is associated with the military, he is aware of the overlapping diasporas of free and forced migration. Wasim remarks that the Sidi Sufis originated from East Africa and the Red Sea area and that they were part of the Arab and Indian maritime trading networks. He differentiates the European slave trading network, however, as moving Africans from southern Africa to India. He adds that the points of embarkation are reflected in the instruments Sidis play.

Polyrhythmic drumming brings the African roots of the Sidis to the fore. Beating the *mugarman*, African drum which stands on its feet and playing the *musindo* with their hands, strumming the *malunga*, shaking *Mai Mishra* (coconut rattles named after a female Sidi Saint) and blowing *nafir* (conch trumpets) contribute to the authenticity of the performance whilst signalling their difference. In western India, music and dance, have become entwined with religious practices which altogether have ascribed a new role for Sidis and anchor them to Africa, whilst adapting to their hostland. In Gujarat, Sidis have carved out a new identity and they are able to maintain aspects of their heritage by gathering at the shrines of Bava Gor, Bava Habash and Mai Misra, the spiritual triumvirate of Sidi Saints. Alternative histories for Bava Gor exist (de Silva Jayasuriya 2008b: 152-153).

Farida Mubrik, a Sidi banker in Gujarat, established the Sidi Goma al Mubrik Charitable Trust to enhance the economic, social and educational needs of the community. Farida's grandfather was the keeper of the key to the Maharani's<sup>19)</sup> jewellery box and his loyalty was rewarded through a gift of land. Sidis remember with nostalgia the important positions their ancestors held within the royal households of the Maharajahs<sup>20)</sup>, Maharanis, Nawabs<sup>21)</sup> as bodyguards and chief cooks due to their unfailing trustworthiness.

In the southern state of Kerala, a spiritual tradition associated with benevolent

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19) Wife of Maharajah

20) A Hindu Prince

21) A nobleman

African spirits continue to intercede in the lives of the devotees and survives in the memoryscapes of Indians visible through the shrines dedicated to *Kappiris*<sup>22)</sup>, the ethnonym for Africans (Jeychandran 2020: 421) who “occasionally make themselves felt or manifest in front of people” (Jeychandran 2020: 429). Local people locate and renew African sacred and spectral scapes to venerate deceased Africans - martyrs and spirits - who are “inscribed with traumatic memories of the past, and at these sites, the dead actively mediate in memory transactions by casting phantasmagoric revelations of the past in the present - one that is surreal and real at the same time” (Jeychandran 2020:423).

According to Pliny (23 to 79 CE), the Roman writer, enslaved Africans were included in the Aksumite exports to western India (Pankhurst 2003: 189). He (2003:189) adds that the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, a first century commercial manual, recorded that the Aksumite port of Adulis on the Red Sea coast of Africa, and western India were trading partners. The dispersal of Afrodescendants in India, the tasks that they performed in the past and today, and their ancestral roles, reveal the pushes and pulls of migration. Africans originating from various parts of the continent, in several waves, found new homes in different parts of India. Generations of Sidis were born in India. They are able to reconcile their multiple identity as we hear in the Beheroze Shroff (2004) film: “We’re Indian and African”. The total number of Sidis is not known. A figure of 40,000 to 70,000 (Péquignot 2020:92) is too broad and reflects the problem of ascertaining a reliable figure. Farida al-Mubrik (2015) of the Gujarati Sidi community estimates, however, that 75,000 Sidis live in Gujarat alone. Obtaining a more complete statistic depends on self-identification as Sidi and locating Sidis spread out amongst India’s 1.2 billion population. Together with their sense of ethnic identity, solidarity grows and also the dreams of an All India Sidi Association. Given the importance of western India and the Malabar Coast in Indian Ocean trade, it is not surprising that Africans were mobilised to Gujarat, Maharashtra, Kerala, Goa, Daman and Diu. Runaways from the Portuguese in Goa formed maroon communities in neighbouring Karnataka. A few Sidis also live in Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu. Sidis in Lucknow (Uttar Pradesh) are the descendants of the Nawab’s African cavalry and female bodyguards. Africans fought bravely and fearlessly for the

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22) From the Arabic word *qafir* which was one of the ethnonyms for Africans in Asia

losing Nawab, during the Indian Mutiny, in 1857, the turning point of British rule in the sub-continent. English soldiers were not aware that the brave soldiers who fought so courageously to defend the Nawab were women, until after their deadbodies were found in the Sikander Bagh (Llewellyn Jones 2009). A British Officer, Colonel Gordon-Alexander (1898:104) compared their ferociousness to that of 'wild cats'.

Whilst Sidis negotiate their identity through music and religion in contemporary India, narratives of their prominence as leaders in India speak of their military mite, bravery and loyalty. The fourteenth century observations of the Moroccan traveller and jurist, Ibn Batuta, reveals that in Alapur, north of Delhi, the governor was "the Abyssinian Badr..., a man whose bravery passed into a proverb" (Gibb 1962: 224, Pankhurst 2003:192). In Jaunpur, north of Alapur, later in the century, an enslaved Ethiopian called Malik Sarwar was appointed governor and his sons, Mubarak Shah and Ibrahim Shah succeeded him; Ibrahim is remembered as a patron of literature and the arts (Pankhurst 2003: 193). African rule, however, starts in 1487 in eastern India, when *Habshi* palace guards in the Bengal Sultanate overthrew Jalal al-Din Fath Shah and gained control, from their intimate position as palace guards but this rule ended in 1493 (Robbins et al 2006).

As *Iktiyar-ul-Mulk*, a role in the court of Gujarat, Africans Jhujhar Khan and Ulugh Khan played prominent political roles (Commissariat 1938: 470 quoted in Jeychandran 2020: 425). *Habshi* nobles in Gujarat, as *amirs*<sup>23)</sup> commanded battalions and fought against the enemy forces of the Gujaratis - the Mughals and the Portuguese - and also owned land although they were foreign (Jeychandran 2020: 425).

In fifteenth century Deccan, *Habshis* were prominent. Sultan Taj du-Din Firuz Shah (1397-1422) engaged *Habshi* slaves as personal attendants, bodyguards and also in the harem (Pankhurst 2003: 194). *Habshi* Marjan, an African general is inscribed in the *Habshi Kot* (Abyssinian fort), a burial site of African generals. The fortress is situated in Bidar, the new capital built by the successor to Firuz Shah Ahmad Shah I (1422-1435). The eunuch Dastur Dinar and other prominent *Habshis* in the Sultanate include provincial governors Khudavand Khan and eunuch Dastur Dinar and also the Keeper of the Seals, Mahmud (Baptiste et al 2006: 31). Religious affiliations influence the *Habshi* presence and the practice of balancing power between two Sunni Muslim groups in Bjiapur - *Habshis* and Deccanis - was altered by Ali Adil Shah I (1558-1580) who favoured the Shiates and

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23) High ranking officials who were foreign i.e. Abyssinians and Turks

dismissed the Sunnis (Pankhurst 2003: 206). Queen Chand Bibi, an Ahmadnagar princess, dominated Bijapur after his death. A Deccani nobleman, Ibrahim Adil Shah II (1580-1627), seized the dowager queen Chand Bibi and became the ruler (Pankhurst 2003: 206). Habshi nobles emerge again during this unsettled time - Ikhlas Khan, Hamid Khan and Dilavar Khan; Ikhlas Khan became the regent for a short time. Unlike Malik Ambar who held the reigns and provided the spur, Ikhlas Khan was “subservient to a charismatic and extraordinary sultan, Ibrahim Adil Shah II” (Alderman 2006:116). Ikhlas Khan, however, wielded considerable power and prestige in his dual roles as *Wakil ul-Saltanat* (charge of general administration) and *Amir-e Jumla* (finance minister) (Alderman 2006:116).

Unimaginable heights that Africans reached in India are epitomised through the life of Chapu, a *Habshi*, written into history as Malik Ambar. Chapu (born in Harar, 1548) was sold to slavery by his parents, and through the route of elite military slavery became the Regent Minister of Ahmednagar in 1600 (de Silva Jayasuriya 2015). Malik Ambar's extraordinary life and achievements are unsurpassable and his tomb in Khuldabad and biographies (Ali 2006; Tamaskar 1978; Shyam 1968) speak to the respect he commanded as a military leader, strategist and philanthropist. Ambar held the reins and provided the spur, in the context of governance, until his death in 1626 when his son, Fateh Khan, succeeded him. After Ambar appointed Sultan Murtaza II, Ambar's elder daughter Shahir Bano (Ali 2016) became the Sultan's second wife, and the Sultan's sister became a wife of Ambar's son, Fateh Khan. The extent of social mobility is truly unimaginable. Although Ambar's ethnicity and past enslaved status are overridden by his achievements (de Silva Jayasuriya 2009), the stigma of slavery lingers on. The Sultan's jealous senior wife insulted Ambar's daughter - Shahir - due to her father's enslaved status.

Janjira, an island off the west coast of India, became the base for African traders, free migrants, from the thirteenth century. Three hundred years later, from the sixteenth century, the same island became a power base for Africans who ruled parts of India. In 1948, a year after independence, when India's princely states were absolved and incorporated into the new India; Janjira was ruled by Sidis for 330 years (1618-1948) and Sachin, for over 150 years (1791-1948). The democratic system of electing leaders based on merit, aptitude and capability, rather than on social rank and heredity, contributed to the longevity of African rule in India (Jasdanwallah 2011).

Sidi fates and fortunes follow their exposure to activists and politicians. In Shaurashtra

and Uttar Kannad Sidis have been accorded Scheduled Tribe status, which entitles them to reserved quotas in employment and educational establishments. The national Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, and the Ministry of Home Affairs Registrar General of India, and Census Commissioner who oversees the state-level Directorates of Census Operations determine if the criteria for being accorded Scheduled Tribe (ST) status is met (Micklem 2001: 28). This status entitles Sidis to government benefits from assistance programmes - reserved places in educational institutions, jobs in government run services - railways, post office, police force - and subsidies for housing, and other forms of minor financial assistance. ST status is accorded to enhance those who are socially, educationally and sometimes also economically backward, due to their geographical marginalisation. But negotiating their way through powerful bureaucracies to realise their entitlements is a slow learning curve. In 1956, ST status was accorded to Sidis in six Gujarati villages in Shaurashtra - Junagadh, Bhavnagar, Rajkot, Amreli, Surendranagar and Jamnagar (Micklem 2001: 27). Almost fifty years later, in the southern Indian state of Karnataka, Sidis living in three districts - Uttara Kannada, Dharwad and Belgavi - were accorded ST status, in 2003. The majority of Sidis however, are classified as Other Backward Castes. Sidis are heterogeneous in their beliefs being either Muslims (mostly Sunni), Christians or Hindus; cross-religious intermarriages occur, treating 'Sidi-ness' as a caste. Sidis speak the local languages such as Gujarathi, Marathi, Kannada and Telugu. Their religious beliefs and linguistic variability changes across space based on their patrons. Heterogeneous origins of Sidis add to the complexity of their cultural survivals.

Sidis who identify with Yemen as their ancestral home live in Telengana (Andra Pradesh) descendants of the Nizam of Hyderabad in an area called *Siddi Risala* (African Cavalry Guards). Daff<sup>24)</sup> groups - popular drum bands - beat out their roots, at local weddings and other social occasions. Their ancestors were invited by the Nizam to serve in his army; they are not however, descendants of enslaved Africans and emphasise their Yemeni origins (Minda 2020). Sidis are aware of the essentialism of identifying all Afrodescendants as descendants of enslaved people and the association with Africa is played down due to the stigma of slavery. However, in the eighteenth century, Rahut Jung, also known as Sidi Asud Ula, a prominent *Habshi* in Hyderabad was described by historian John Clunes (1828) as "a native of Abyssinia" (Pankhurst 2003:210), exemplifying the

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24) A round single-headed frame drum

heterogeneous origins of Sidis and the variety of ethnonyms due to the dynamics in geographies and nomenclature of geographical entities.

The model of labour intensive plantation economies of the Atlantic World were prevalent in the Creole islands (Mauritius, Réunion, Seychelles, Rodriguez) of the Western Indian Ocean with sugar, clove and date plantations in Zanzibar, Pemba and the Persian Gulf also demanded labour (Sheriff 1987, Hopper 2015). Rising global demands for consumption, Matthew Hopper (2015:6) confirms, had a knock-on effect on the Indian Ocean demanding enslaved people for production of commodities, leading to the development of plantations producing cloves, coconuts, grain, copra, oil and sugar. In the Gulf and Arabia, global demand affected the production of dates and pearls (Hopper 2015:7). “The demand for slave labor in the nineteenth century eastern Arabia was driven by economics rather than religion” (Hopper 2015:7). This shift in trend is significant, given that religion underpinned African enslavement by Arabs where non-Muslims were *qafir* (Arabic for infidel).

Sociological issues such as religion and ethnicity affect the demand for forced labour, and Hopper (2015:7) argues that in eastern Arabia, during the nineteenth century, economic demand out-weighed the religious pulls, a departure from previous scholarly works (Gordon 1989, Lewis 1990, 1993, Segal 2001) which argued that slavery in the Middle East was fundamentally different from Atlantic slavery in three timeless ways: a preference for women, a preponderance of “elite” slavery (soldiers, eunuchs, women in harems, and retainers) over manual labour, and labour limited to the non-productive sector. A similar demand for enslaved within the non-productive sector, in ungainful employment was prevalent further east.

Gulf History specialist Mark Hobbs (2014) notes that slavery in the Gulf was socially rooted. Social integration was facilitated through conversions to Islam and the enslaved worked as domestic servants. Enslaved women outnumbered enslaved men, deviating from the Atlantic world’s gender distribution pattern where plantation labour demanded men. Gender roles were linked to the tasks in the Persian Gulf; enslaved males worked mainly in pearl fishing and date farming. “The forms of slavery that the British officials encountered in Arabia and the Indian Ocean were very different from that which Britain had instituted for its own benefit in the Atlantic, where British ships transported enslaved Africans to the Americas for use in plantations growing commodities such as sugar and

tobacco” (Hobbs: 2014).

### Visibility of Africans in the Far East

European exploration and trade expansion contributed to African movement beyond the Indian Ocean, spilling over to the Pacific. The “Age of European Colonisation” and Portuguese trading activities which began at the end of the fifteenth century started a new phase of African mobilities. Sailing in the Atlantic, down Africa’s west coast, Portuguese ships rounded the Cape of Good Hope and then sailed along Africa’s east coast passing Mozambique, Mombasa, Malindi and India’s west coast. From their Indian base, the Portuguese sailed further east to Southeast Asia and East Asia carrying Africans and Asians. Seafaring Africans and African slaves had travelled with Arab traders to the Far East during the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD) and there was both voluntary and involuntary migration to Japan and China.

Figure 3: *Nanban Byoubu*  
Japanese Screen Painting showing Africans with Portuguese in Japan  
(Courtesy of Kobe City Museum, Japan)



Carrying Africans to Asia had economic costs but what were the trade-offs to the Europeans of this high risk activity? The Portuguese reaped large profits in Asia by exploiting the political situation in the region (Boxer 1948:5). By 1480, the Ming Emperor forbade direct trade between the Japanese and Chinese due to the havoc wrought by the *Wako* (Japanese pirates). The Portuguese exploited this loophole and intermediated trade between the two peoples. The Portuguese enjoyed a virtual monopoly of Chinese silk exports, paying for Chinese silk with Japanese gold and silver bullion. Moreover, the Portuguese obtained a high profit margin by buying Chinese silks at a lower price and selling to the Japanese at a much higher price. Boxer (1948:6) remarks that the Portuguese made even larger profits from the exchange rate fluctuations on gold and silver bullion by disposing of these precious commodities in India and China, respectively. The accidental 'discovery' of Japan by three Portuguese deserters in a Fukien junk in 1542 opened up a new and profitable market which temporarily diverted the Lusitanians from their efforts to reopen the China trade officially (Boxer 1948: 2). The Portuguese sailed to the island of Tanegashima in the southwest of Japan, in 1543, becoming the first Europeans to make contact with the Japanese. When the Portuguese 'discovered' Japan, a firm footing or official trade was not established with China (Boxer 1951:91).

In 1554, the Portuguese reached an understanding to trade in the island of St John (*Shang Chuan/Sanchuan*) which was about fifty miles to the south west of Macau (Boxer 1984: 3). The Portuguese were allowed to settle down, as a reward for their services in expelling a band of pirates (Boxer 1984: 4). Portuguese expansion in the East was most impressive in the China Sea (Newitt 2009:72), where Portuguese interlopers obtained permission to settle down in Macau, in 1556. Macau provided a base for explorations further East and led to establishing a treaty port at Nagasaki, in 1571. The Portuguese Viceroy in Goa had only indirect influence on Macau and Nagasaki (Newitt 2009:73); both fell outside the remit of the official empire.

Historian Charles Boxer (1989) states that Africans had enough money to buy Japanese girls from Shimabara, (a district near Nagasaki), who they took with them to Macau as concubines. These Japanese women were known as Shimabaranona (Shimabara women) and were usually sold by their parents. Nevertheless, they earned a bad reputation due to this practice. The Jesuits, however, tried to curtail this practice but to no avail.

As Elisonas (2008:69) points out, Nagasaki's port was shaped by the Portuguese through the opening of its port to foreign vessels in 1571, when the Portuguese Great Ship from Macau sailed to Japan as described by historian, Charles Boxer (1959:35). By the end of the sixteenth century, both Nagasaki and Macau had been elevated from fishing villages to flourishing seaports. A maritime route from Goa to Nagasaki via Macau utilised diverse human resources in the region and Africans were part of this network. Whilst enslaved African sailors who manned and rigged the ships remain anonymous, Thomas Lockley and Geoffrey Girard (2019) have brought to the fore, the story of the *African Samurai: The True Story of Yasuke, a Legendary Black Warrior in Feudal Japan* who has "managed to slip through the cracks of historical research" (Lockley & Girard 2019:15) which they presume are due to the ethnocentric, and predominantly eurocentric focus of the traditional published history (Lockley & Girard 2019:18). Oda Nobunaga, a Japanese military dictator, who initiated the unification of Japan, demanded that Yasuke become his personal slave who he promoted to Samurai (Boxer 1989).

Macau grew with the profits reaped from the Japan trade between 1550 and 1615 (Boxer 1948: 12). In 1585, Macau was given the status of a City. The new settlement was called *Provocação do Nome de Deos na China* ('settlement of the name of God in China') (Boxer 1948:4) and abbreviated to 'City of the Name of God of Macau to China' (Boxer 1948:3). An illegal trade was carried out with Manila and the most profitable exports were Chinese silks for the Philippines, Mexico and Peru connecting to South America via the Pacific Ocean. Alternative markets - Lesser Sunda Islands of Timor, Solor and Macassar in Celebes, Indo-China and Siam (Thailand) enabled Macau to remain rich and prosperous when the Dutch blocked the Straits of Malacca and throttled Portuguese links with Goa.

Judging from the *Nanban Byoubu*, a Japanese style of painting depicting the 'southern barbarians' were considered as Europeans at the time. Akiyo Aminaka (2006) presents a particular point of view in interpreting the *Nanban Byoubu*, Japanese paintings of the late sixteenth to early seventeenth centuries that show various people in the paintings. *Buobu-e* is a style of Japanese painting, painted mostly by anonymous artists, which depict commerce between Japan and Europe during the Early Modern Period. The word *nanban*, however, was used by the Chinese to describe southern countries and is considered pejorative. She points out that the Japanese did not have a precise idea of the location of *nanban*, because it referred to several countries in ancient documents. The screens consist

of six panels, which are a historical record of the Portuguese arrival in Japan, and the start of commercial exchanges. The centre panels depict the Portuguese Captain followed by presumably African slave-servants in European attire - trousers, shirts, hats - carrying umbrellas for the Portuguese. This procession was called *Nanban gyoretsu* (southern barbarian procession). The Catholic priests are impressive figures dressed in black cloaks. Irrespective of their slave or freed-slave status, Africans had economic power and freedom. The example of Oda Nobunaga and Yasuke suggest the presence of a demand for Africans as bodyguards.

## **Conclusion**

The demand for captive Africans was driven by the need for able and loyal soldiers and bodyguards, a requirement before the advent of the Early Modern empires. Africans succeeded mostly in military, religious and administrative roles. However, we need to go further to understand the nature and extent of authority and power they exercised. This necessitates comparison with other areas of the world. The Atlantic World is the obvious starting point. A nuanced understanding of enslavement is necessary. Whilst plantations and mines demanded hard labour and African captives became factors of input in the production of a triangular trade conducted across the Atlantic, the demands in Asia varied. Productivity and returns do not explain the demand for all captive Africans; preferences and demographic shortages account for some mobilities. Specialised skills, ungainful employment and preferences also drove demand. Some enslaved Africans crossed cultural barriers and achieved great heights due to their abilities. Assimilation and the extent of social and political mobility through acculturation and capabilities was unlimited.

Acculturation dissolved alterity as illustrated through the lives of Malik Ambar in India and Yasuke in Japan. Malik Ambar, however, problematises our *Weltanschauung* implying that alterity was perceived through cultural traits and not through skin colour, or any biological features or inherited physiognomical characteristics that mark him out through the empty word called race. It is noteworthy that Malik Ambar's upward ascent to the most important post in the State was not through anything we could label as race. Perhaps in an India which was a mosaic of Turkish, Mughal, Persian, Arab and European,

the Arabic name and African ethnic roots of Ambar have not been on display. This is significant in a world where much significance has been attributed to race. The upward movement of Sidis is marked by clear institutional signals and Sidi Saints have a role within religious beliefs, rituals and practices which may qualify existing notions and uses of race.

Titus Chakraborty and Matthias van Rossum (2020:5) remark that “an integrated field of slavery connecting East African slavery to various forms of slavery throughout and beyond the Indian Ocean World has yet to emerge”. Postcolonial relations in the Atlantic World and beyond are coloured by slavery and colonialism and a colour-based hierarchy governs power relationships. However, is the same model applicable globally? Or are African-Asian encounters more nuanced? One needs to question to what extent race drove enslavement of Africans in Asia. Further research on global slavery, across time and space, might provide answers to these questions. Shifts in sources of supplies of captives illustrate that economic factors governed enslavement.

Hierarchies of power and systems of differentiating societies based on culture create and exacerbate inequalities in societies. Even though descendants of enslaved Africans are citizens of their adopted hostlands and are indigenised, the stigma of slavery continues. Societies are reluctant to speak about slavery and the histories of enslavement are muted. Taking a global view on slavery and its aftermath is timely, especially during the International Decade for People of African Descent 2015-2024.

The stigma of slavery affects the contemporary status as slave descendants. Role models of high achievers drawn from slave descendants and also education of civil society on the history of one of the darkest chapters of global history will help somewhat to mitigate the atrocities of the past. Slavery has left a lasting legacy. Given the afterlife of slavery which manifests itself in societal issues such as inequity and marginality, slavery is a reality that we cannot brush aside. Recognising the scope and scale of forced African movement to Asia is a precursor to meting out justice. Only through an understanding of the brutalities of the past, can we hope to build a more just future.

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