

AFRO-INDIANS FROM SLAVERY TO STATESMANSHIP

Dr. Shamshad Ali, Associate Professor, Department of History, Eritrea (North-East Africa)

The paper will elucidate the role of the Africans as merchants, soldiers, statesmen, eunuchs and slaves who rose to prominence as well as they have enjoyed a distinguished presence in different parts of India between the 12th and 20th centuries who are better known as Habshis and Siddis. The presence of Africans in India is unique, for nowhere in the world a handful of Africans ruled over non-African population for so long as well as they played a significant role as the builders and keepers of traditional Indian civilization. Africans were being sold as slave-soldiers for India's princely states and they were chosen as slave soldiers in part because of the belief that they were loyal, great fighters and most importantly, despised by the local population. The rationale held that they could hold a position of power, without being able to mount a *coup d'etat* as he would have no support from the general population. Although they came at first as slaves, they were as successful as fighters that they at times usurped power from the rulers they were supposed to be serving that was a process which began in the 12th century or before, and lasted until the late 20th century.

Historically documented diffusion of Africans in the Indian sub-Continent was largely the product of migrations² beginning in the first century and continuing through the 20th and such movement of Africans to the Indian sub-Continent was fuelled by the slave trade which was lubricated by socio-religious factors. Evidence demonstrates that Africans were living in India, as slaves and free individuals, as early as the thirteenth century AD; most of those who make up the Afro-Indian population came in the past five hundred years. Culturally, the Afro-Indians have been accepted into the vast spectrum that is India as have many immigrant groups of the Jews and the Zoroastrians. Like these groups, the Afro-Indians have full claim to being Indian, even if they maintain some of their ancestral traditions. Their history speaks of the African ability to integrate into a land other than that from where they originated and regardless of their ups and downs in Indian history, they have chosen to stay there. Africans in India worked as soldiers, sailors, traders, bureaucrats, clerics, bodyguards and concubines. Almost all of these Africans were Sunni Muslims, and many were slaves conscripted into the slave armies of Indian Muslim rulers and few Hindus and Christians are found in Karnataka and Goa respectively.. It can be argued that the rise of Islam in India had an unprecedented effect on the ability of Africans to rise to power, given the slightly more egalitarian attitudes of Muslims to race when compared to Hinduism.

Slavery was, however, an integral part of the political system of medieval age. As practiced in eastern Muslim polities of this period, the institution of slavery provided a nucleus of well-trained and loyal military followers (the *mamluks*)³ for important political figures; indeed, one of the principal objects of this form of slavery was to train specialists in warfare and government, usually Turks, whose first loyalty would be to their masters. Slave status was *Dr. Shamshad Ali, Associate Professor, Department of History, Adikeih College of Arts and Social Sciences, Eritrea

honourable and was a principal avenue to wealth and high position for talented individuals whose origins were outside the ruling group. It has been observed that a slave was a better investment than a son, whose claim was not based upon proved efficiency. Yet, slaves with high qualifications could get out of control, and often slaves or former slaves controlled their masters as much as they were controlled by them. The beneficial results for the sultanate of this type of political interaction were that some men of talent had room to rise within the system and thus were less tempted to tear it down

and that the responsibilities of government tended to rest in the hands of capable men, whether or not they were the actual rulers.⁴

Africans slaves appear to have been found their way into India from the establishment of Delhi Sultanate in the beginning of the thirteenth century A.D.⁵ Jalal ud Din Yakut, an Abyssinian being a skilled soldier and horseman became a royal courtier in the Sultanate of Delhi. He was a political ally as well as a close advisor of the then reigning sovereign Raziyah Sultana (1236-1240), the first female monarch of the Delhi Sultanate. Yaqut's power and influence grew through his close relationship with Raziyah Sultana, who appointed him to the important position of Superintendent of the Royal Stables. Achievement of such an important post to a Habashi means challenging the power of the Muslim nobles and orthodox leaders,⁶ which led towards hostility with rival Turkish Mamluke members of the ruling family of the Sultanate of Delhi. On the other hand his growing intimacy towards Queen is speculated to have been her lover in the court as well as amongst the nobles. Contemporary historians were also conflicted in their assessment — many including Ibn Batuta record that their relationship was too intimate in public, but others assert that Yaqut was just a close advisor and friend.⁷ A particular incident that provoked the rumours was when Yaqut was observed sliding his arms under the Queen's armpits to hoist her onto a horse, which was seen as a flagrant act of intimacy.⁸ Already resented for being a woman ruler by the Muslim nobles and clerics, Raziyah's proximity to a Habashi slave (considered racially inferior to the Turkish nobles who ruled the Sultanate) alienated the nobility and clerics and soon provoked open rebellion and conspiracy⁹ and Malik Yaqut was eventually killed by those jealous rivals. Thus evidence of an Abyssinian slave evidently from the Ethiopian coast-land-coming to India and acquiring a position of importance among the ruling class and who became a royal courtier of the newly-established Delhi Sultanate. This was the first incident in which a slave-adventurer of Habashi or Ethiopian origin had taken a part in the history Medieval India.

Following the decline of Delhi Sultanate the pendulum of fortune favored four of the Tughlaq officers who declared their independence and made their provincial sultanates. One of them was Malik Sarwar Khvaja Jahan (1394 – 1403), an Abyssinian eunuch was serving as minister established himself at Jaunpur province under the title of Malik-us-Sharq (king of the east). Malik Sarwar¹⁰ and his five successors namely Malik Mubarak Quranfal, Ibrahim Shah, Mahmud Shah, Bhikhan Khan and lastly Hussain Shah are called Sharqi kings who ruled the kingdom of Jaunpur for little less than a century. This was the period of peace and prosperity in the history of Jaunpur witnessing remarkable achievements in the fields of art, architecture, education, trade & commerce etc. For a dynasty whose rule was so brief the Sharqis have left very creditable memorials in their public buildings, and the enlightenment which earned for Jaunpur, in Ibrahim's reign, the title of "the Shiraz of India" is surprising in one of Habshi blood.

Bengal is one of the kingdoms in East India which enslaved African soldiers to protect and expand its territory. Ruknuddin Barbak of Illyas Shahi dynasty was the first king in India to have imported into his court an army of 8000 Habshi guards and soldiers and to advance them in large numbers to high rank and is said to have later on they became a danger to the kingdom.¹¹ Towards the close of Jalal ud Din Fatah Shah's reign the then ruler of Bengal, the African slaves became very powerful and played vital role in the politics of Bengal. In 1487 one of the Abyssinian eunuch started corrupting the other Habshi officers of the palace guards, eventually assassinated Barbak Shahzada and he took the throne

under the name of Ghyath al-Din Barbak Shah.¹² Thus the opening ruler, Barbak Shah as Abyssinian sultan held power for a brief period which lasted only 3-6 months and upon his short rule, he was assassinated by another Habashi, Malik Andil Khan Sultan, who was Jalal-ud-Din's prime minister as well as loyal to Sultan. However, Malik Andil Khan able to assassinate Barbak Shahzadea and subsequently with the consent of nobles and royal family Malik Andil Khan Sultan ascended the throne with the title of Saifuddin Abul Muzaffar Firuz Shah in 1487¹³ and ruled from 1487 to 1490. During his short reign of three years he healed the disorders of the kingdom and restored the discipline of the army. His reputation as a soldier and just ruler inspired respect and fear; and his attachment and allegiance to the Ilyas Shahi house made the people forget his race. His kindness and beneficence reminded warm praises from the historians.¹⁴ Firsthand accounts by Arab historians bestow the reputation upon Firuz Shah as the greatest of all four Abyssinian sultans of Bengal. He was a bold and charismatic leader, while showing secular restraint and generosity towards Muslims and non-Muslims alike. As a testament of his considerable patronage of the artistic and cultural sectors, many mosques, towers, water tank and inscriptions survive today. The Firuz Minar is 84 feet high; a victory tower which was constructed by Firuz Shah located in Gaur endures as one most revered monument in of all Bengal. It stands 26 meters tall with a complex spiral staircase of 73 steps which is a lasting imprint of the short lived African presence in Bengal. Saif-ud-din Firoz Shah was followed by Nasir-ud-din Mahmud Shah II (1490). The real power, however, may have lay with the Abyssinian called Habsh Khan, who was killed by another Abyssinian called Sidi Badr Khan who assassinated Nasir ud Din and seized the throne for himself and ruled for three years (1490-93) as Shams-ud-din Abu Nasr Musaffar Shah.¹⁵ Five thousand of the 30,000 men in his army were Abyssinians. He rebuilt the tomb of Nur Qutb Alamin Pandua, and constructed a mosque at Maulana Ata's dargah in Amapura. During the last few months of his reign the anti-Abyssinian sentiment of the upper caste Hindus and the Ashrafs was reaching a climax. Finally, the last Abyssinian Sultan was killed by his minister Sayyid Hussain Shah, with the assistance of the Hindu military guards. However, Abyssinians in Bengal, especially those in high command, were expelled, as they were then seen as posing a threat to indigenous Indian rulers that is why Hussain Shah subsequently cleansed the administration of the Abyssinian nobles, expelling them from Bengal, there was some reasons to fear that Abyssinian might become a ruling caste. The exiles in vain sought an asylum in Delhi and Jaunpur, where they were too well known to welcome and most them ultimately drifted to Deccan and Gujarat, where men for their race had for many years been largely employed.¹⁶ Thus many of these Africans went to the above mentioned sultanates of India where the local rulers employed them as mercenaries and continuing the military contributions of Africans in India.

Africans have been part of the western state of Gujarat since at least the first century; when the town of Barygasa (Baruch today) was considered an Ethiopian town, populated by merchants from East Africa. There were many Abyssinians who played significant role in the medieval history of Gujarat. History witnessed that many Africans were taken to Gujarat in medieval and post-medieval periods and few of them rose to positions of power and influence. During that period three Habshis bearing the title of Ulugh Khan. One of them Muhammad Ulugh Khan son of Yaqut, known as Shams ud-Dawlah Muhammad al-Habshi, who served as vizier to his father from 1543-4 to 1557-8 and also called Khayrat Khan, who held the title of al-Majlis al-Ashraf al-Ali, and is remembered as one of the patrons of the Gujarat historian Haji ad-Dabir. Muhammad Ulugh Khan appointed as his vizier yet another Habshi, Bilal Falah Khan. According to the Indian historian M.S. Commissariat, "secured the same devotion as his father had enjoyed from the Habashi troops in Gujarat and was thus able to take an active part in the confused politics of the time". Commissariat further explained that the prestigious title of Jhujhar Khan was successively held, by "two Abyssinian commanders" of Gujarat. The first was Bilal Habshi, who was appointed in 1538-9, and was governor of Burhanpur under

Mubarak Shah of Khandesh (1537-1566). He was subsequently killed in battle before the great commercial town of Surat in 1558-9. The second Habshi with the title of Jhujhar Khan was Bilal Habshi's son Marjan Sultani Habshi, who held the fiefs of Bahmanul and Munda.

Other prominent Habshis of this time included Said Safar Salami, who became governor of Surat, in 1537 with the title of Khudavand Khan. Bilal Falah Khani Habshi, vizier to Muhammad Ulugh Khan, who subsequently became an independent chieftain with the title of Khayrat Khan and died in 1563-3; and Fulad Khan Sandal, who ruled the town of Jamud, until his death in 1569-70. Another important Habshi of Gujarat was Shaik Said al-Habshi Sultani, originally a slave of Rumi Khan, he later entered the service of Sultan Mahmud III. On the latter's death in 1554 he joined the great Habshi captain Jhujhar Khan, and received valuable fiefdoms from the latter. Shaik Said managed his land efficiently, and acquired great wealth and collected a fine library, and had over a hundred slaves mainly Habshis, as well as numerous horses and camels. He died in 1576; and is perhaps best remembered as the builder of a famous mosque, known by his name, 'Siddi Said Mosque' in Ahmadabad. Another Habshi, Abdul Kerim Sayfud Muhammad Fulad Khan, the son of the afore-mentioned Fulad Khan, was the ruler of Songir under the kings of Khandesh later he became Haji ad-Dabir's second patron.

Following the disintegration of Delhi Sultanate an officer named Hassan assumed the title of Bahman Shah also known as Alauddin I founded the Bahmani Sultanate in 1347 which was constructed and maintained mainly by native armies of slaves and mercenaries of Abyssinians. The vast Bahmani Sultanate was split up into five Muslim States of Bijapur, Ahmadnagar, Golconda, Bidar and Berar in between 1518 and 1526.¹⁷ The Africans slaves were to be found all of these states in the army as well as in the civil services but in Ahmadnagar they were more prominent. There were other prominent Abyssinians who played leading role in the affairs of the Deccan States in the sixteenth-eighteenth centuries. The Abyssinian mercenaries were always there in their thousands to take sides in any political struggle.

Ahang (or Nehang) Khan was the Abyssinian chief of a small State feudatory to Ahmadnagar. When Mughal Emperor Akbar was seeking to conquer Ahmadnagar in 1586 Ahang Khan joined the heroic Amazonian warrior queen of Ahmadnagar, Chand Bibi, but later on he went against the Queen, besieged and defeated her. However, Ahang Khan continued to be an important figure in the State but retired into obscurity after the State was annexed to the Mughal Empire in 1637. Contemporary with Ahang Khan and Malik `Ambar in Ahmadnagar and Bijapur, were a number of prominent Abyssinian notabilities and military leaders, like Yakut Khudawand Khan and his sons, Shahzadah Khan and Ghalib Khan, who made themselves men of authority. In the State of Bidar during the first quarter of the sixteenth century; Malik Yakut Sultana, a leader of the Abyssinians, in the State of Khandesh under the Farrukhi Kings; Ikhlas Khan, Hamid Khan and Dilawar Khan, Abyssinians nobles, contemporaries of Chand Sultana in Ahmadnagar; and a number of other Abyssinian chiefs with their men in Bijapur State, besides others elsewhere.

The more northerly Kingdom of Ahmadnagar, taking advantage of these serious dissensions, attacked Bijapur in 1567. The Habshis, realizing that they could not defend their city alone, thereupon tendered their resignation to Chand Bibi. This, in the view of the British historian Wolseley Haig, provided "the only example of self-denying patriotism to be found in this strife of factions". The Shiah foreigners then rallied to the defence of the city, and the Ahmadnagar army was forced to withdraw, whereupon the struggle at Bijapur was, however, renewed. Ikhlas Khan attacked his fellow Habshi Dilavar Khan, but was defeated by the latter, who became the supreme ruler from 1582 to 1591. In the latter year he was defeated in a battle with the Ahmadnagar army, as a result of which his power in Bijapur collapsed. He thereupon fled to Ahmadnagar where he found service with Burhan II, who had by then seized control there. The ruler of Bijapur complained at this employment of the former Habshi dictator, but Burhan replied by declaring war. He was, however, unsuccessful, and was obliged to make peace. The Deccanis then rebelled against him, and found a ready leader in Dilavar's old rival the Habshi Ikhlas Khan who failed, however, to capture Ahmadnagar.

Indian Muslims in some cases intermarried with them, and the real Abyssinians as a Semitic people, in spite of their dark colour, could easily be merged among the Indians. The mother of the Ahmadnagar Sultan, Ibrahim Nizam Shah (1595-1996), was an Abyssinian lady, queen of his father, Burhan Shah. His chief minister, a Deccani, allowed Ikhlas Khan to return to Ahmadnagar. Ikhlas then persuaded the king, against his minister's advice, to declare war on Bijapur. Ibrahim was killed, a further struggle for succession ensued. Ikhlas Khan proposed the accession of one prince, while two other Habshis, Ahang Khan and Habashi Khan, supported another. The above struggles, in which the Habshis, as so often, thus played major role, immediately, preceded the conflict between Ahmadnagar and the Mughal Empire which led to the latter's decisive victory in 1597.

During the reign Ibrahim Adil Shah II (1580-1627), a Deccani noble seized the Queen Chand Bibi and made himself master of the realm but soon three Abyssinian nobles, Ikhlas Khan, Hamid Khan and Dilavar Khan drove him from the capital and Ikhlas kahn became regent for short time, however, shortly afterwards he was dismissed by Chand Bibi, but later resumed his dictatorship which was soon challenged by the other foreigners. Thus Africans formerly enslaved—they were called the "Abyssinian party"—took control in Bijapur and the African regent Dilawar Khan exercised power from 1580 and was succeeded by Ikhlas Khan. The Abyssinian party dominated the Bijapur Sultanate and conquered new territories until the Mughal invasion in 1686.¹⁸

The presence of Africans in powerful positions in the Deccan states are testified by historical records of India, who played very significant role in shaping the history of Deccan. Malik Ambar, is the best known of the Afro-Indians due in part to his important role in Ahmadnagar history and to standing up to the Mughals. He was born in Harar, a province of southern Ethiopia in the mid-16th century.¹⁹ There is little information on Malik Ambar's life in Ethiopia except his name at birth, which was either Chapu or Shambu. From Harar, Malik Ambar was moved first to Yemen then to Baghdad where he was enslaved to Kazi Hussein. In this way Ambar was sold into slavery several times around the Arab world in the Hejaz, Mocha and Baghdad where his intelligence, administrative potentiality and loyalty was observed and rewarded. Kazi Hussein recognized Malik Ambar's intelligence and educated him in finance and administration. His last name 'Ambar' was given by Kazi Hussein and upon Hussein's death, Ambar was sold to a slave trader who took him to India where in 1570/1575 Malik Ambar was sold to Chengiz Khan, a noble who served as prime minister to the king of Ahmadnagar, Nizam mul-Mulk Bani.²⁰ Chengiz Khan was himself of an African origin and was one of the prominent Habshis in that area in the late 16th century. Due to his talents Ambar was given a high position in military and administrative affairs by Chengiz Khan in an attempt at strengthening his control over the Habshi where he learnt the working of the government, military and administrative affairs. Following the death of Chengiz Khan, Ambar was sold again to noble family, the Shah of Golkonda and later to the king of Bijapur where his first name, or title, 'Malik' (Like a King) was given to Ambar because the king of Bijapur was so impressed by Ambar's skill. Under the King of Bijapur, Ambar was eventually given command of Arab and Habashi military troops but ended up deserted with the troops under his command after the king refused to grant additional funds for trainees. In 1590, however, he rebelled and formed his own army, comprised of 1,500 men, whom he eventually grew to 10,000 cavalry and infantrymen, many of whom were Africans.²¹ With the passage of time Malik Ambar was able to build an independent army of mercenaries who provided services for various kings in the region and his mercenaries are said to have been of various ethnicities, Arab, African and Deccani. Over the next set of years he fought for various rulers in the Deccan and fended off Mughal efforts to take control of the region. In 1595, the king of Ahmadnagar organized an army of Habshi and the then prime minister, Abhangar Khan hired Malik Ambar's mercenaries to join the established army. It was from here on that Malik Ambar became a champion of the Deccans against the Mughal incursions. Under the minister of the king of

Ahmadnagar, Ambar commanded both Indian and Habshi soldiers.²² In 1602 Ambar decided to seize the kingdom of Murtaza II and made himself Regent-Minister. His astute political machinations, cunning diplomacy and cutthroat guerrilla tactics in warfare, allowed for the inevitable; by 1602 he has seized full power in Ahmadnagar through his control of the military. The Abyssinians in the State of Ahmadnagar joined the local Hindus in giving resistance to the North Indian forces, Mughals and other Muslims and Rajputs, when Emperor Jahangir sought to conquer Ahmadnagar.

Ambar's employment of guerrilla tactics prevents Emperor Akbar and his successor Emperor Jahangir from conquering the Deccan region. However, the Mughal Emperor Akbar was unable to defeat Ambar in the Deccan, a task which was left to his successor, the Emperor Jahangir, who continued to be repelled by Ambar's forces. Although Jahangir largely expressed disdain for the Habashi, he was eventually forced to concede the effectiveness of his opponent's military tactics. By 1616 Ambar was commanding a 60,000-strong cavalry force, using British artillery. In protecting the region from the conquering Mughals, Malik Ambar formed many alliances using artillery obtained from the Portuguese, British and Dutch, and would form a naval alliance with Siddis on the fortified island of Janjira to cut off Mughal supply lines. Thus, Malik Ambar's continued resistance to the invasion of the Mughals posed a big problem to Emperor Jahangir's. As a regent, Malik Ambar changed capitals, founded a new city, Khadki and became well established in the region. He launched several architectural projects including a sophisticated water supply system. Malik Ambar's reign as regent was not smooth he constantly fought with rivals in order to strengthen his position. He died in 1626, aged eighty years old after suffering many defeats from the Mughals though defeated by the Mughals he was never cowed down by their might. Malik Ambar's son, Fatteh Khan succeeded him as regent of Nizam Shah but only for a short while as he was imprisoned in 1629.

He is credited with having carried out a systematic revenue settlement of major portions of the Deccan, which formed the basis for many subsequent settlements. He introduced into Ahmadnagar the new revenue system of Todar Mall, the great Finance Minister of Emperor Akbar, and he also founded the city of Aurangabad. Malik Ambar is said to be the pioneer of guerrilla warfare in the Deccan region. He trained the Marathas and transformed them into excellent riders, warriors, and masters of surprise attacks on the enemy. This helped Malik Ambar gain a reputation as one general who had never lost a battle. Malik Ambar assisted Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan grapple power in Delhi from his stepmother, Nur Jahan, who had ambitions of bringing her son-in-law on the throne.²³ Malik Ambar is especially famous for the Neher (canal), the water system, the rendering of which to this day is a miracle. His plan for the Nehar was met with irony and ridicule. Vazir Mullah Mohammad declared it as a outrageous imagine which would require 'Um-Re-Noh' (Noh's life span), 'Sab-Re-Ayub' (Ayub's patience), and 'Khazana-Qarun' (Qarun's treasure). But Malik Ambar completed the Neher within fifteen months, spending a nominal of sum of two and a half lakhs. This city is situated on the banks of river Kham, a small perennial stream which takes its rise in the neighboring hill.²⁴ Malik Ambar cherished strong love and ability for architecture. Aurangabad was Ambar's architectural achievement and creation.

One of the first remarkable qualities of Ambar's reign was that he was able to seize power and amass such popular support at all. His reign defied the thought that slaves were safe holders of power as their alien status as well as their blackness would not allow them to attain popular support. Both Islamic and Hindu societies were hostile to Africans, both having a clear-cut preference for lighter shades. The Mughal Emperor frequently referred to him as "that Ambar, the black fated one (he was an Abissinian)", "the black faced" and "Ambar of the dark fate" Interesting to note is the fact that all

public buildings erected during his reign and his tomb at his death were built of black stone. This seemed to be a deliberate action on his part and we can surmise from this that Ambar was indeed aware of the colour prejudice that existed around him and he used the black stone to reinforce the dignity in his Africanness and his black skin. When one examines the iniquity of the caste system in traditional Hindu India, the severe colourism that existed in both Muslim and Christian areas and the depressed state that many Africans in India suffered under these systems, Ambar's rule becomes even more significant. In fact, it is certain that his Africanness was what would have won him much support from lower castes irrespective of their religions.

Ambar was also credited with establishing an air of religious tolerance in the Deccan. He built Christian churches, patronized Hindu festivals and still kept his Muslim faith. His egalitarian land reform system also won him much support. Canals and irrigation schemes were developed to improve trade and agriculture and lower rates of taxation were applied to the poorer areas. In the eyes of the common people, he was elevated to hero status. Of critical significance in Malik Ambar's reign is the fact that his 20-year stronghold on the Deccan checked the dreaded Mughal advance. His continued resistance, the strength of his armies and diplomatic skills and shifting alliances allowed him to check both the Mughal advance southward as well as the European advance westward checking the ascendancy of the British Raj across the whole of India. It was said that once Malik Ambar lived, the Mughals could not conquer the Deccan His death in 1626, however saw the collapse of this stability and African power in the Deccan. The reign of Malik Ambar does indeed stand out as an excellent example of the many different contributions of African descended peoples in the region- their large numbers as well as the role they played in the formation of Indian civilization.

Habshis, are a unique tribe that has African ancestry and lives mainly in three Indian states—Gujarat, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh. Historical records indicate that this region was predominantly ruled by the Portuguese during the 15th to 17th centuries and they brought some Africans to India as slaves and sold them to local Nawabs and Sultans, whose descendants, admixed with neighboring populations, comprise the present-day Siddi population of India.²⁵ According to the latest census, their total population size is about 0.25 million.²⁶ The first documented record of Siddis in India dates to 1100 AD, when the Siddis settled in Western India.²⁷ By the thirteenth century, substantial numbers of Siddis were being imported by the Nawabs and the Sultans of India to serve as soldiers and slaves. The major influx of Siddis occurred during the 17th–19th centuries, when the Portuguese brought them as slaves to India.²⁸

The Mughals drew upon the tradition and practice of using African soldiers and sailors for protection, and Siddi captains were appointed admirals of their fleet and received an annual salary of 300,000 rupees.²⁹ The Siddis were employed largely as security forces for Muslim fleets in the Indian Ocean, a position they maintained for centuries.³⁰ According to Ibn Battuta (1304-1377), who journeyed through Africa and Asia, the Siddis "are the guarantors of safety on the Indian Ocean; let there be but one of them on a ship and it will be avoided by the Indian pirates and idolaters."³¹ Some Siddis of the sea were their own masters, settling in the island fort of Janjira and creating a string of fortifications along the coast. The island of Janjira was a formidable fortress entirely surrounded by large walls with 22 rounded bastions. It was also known as Habsan (from Habsha, Ethiopia). Siddis also settled in a coastal village named Murud in the Raigad district of Maharashtra³² once the capital of the erstwhile

state of Janjira³³ on the western coast of Maharashtra. Siddi constituted an ongoing dynasty at Janjira near Mumbai also known as Habshi dynasty.³⁴ There are many canons rusting on the bastions. Well-conceived and well-defended the fort counted 572 cannons, most were made in India and seven came from various European countries. The palace of the Nawab of Janjira at Murud is still in good condition. The first African to be posted at Janjira was Sidi Ambar Sainak ("The Little," to distinguish him from Malik Ambar), appointed by Malik Ambar in 1617. In 1621 he became the first independent Nawab (Prince) of Janjira and reigned until his death in 1642. From then onward Siddis became independent, owing allegiance to Adil Shah and the Mughals as dictated by the times. The rulers of Janjira, who formed their own royal lineage, remained undefeated for almost 300 years. Despite their repeated attempts, the Portuguese, the British and the Marathas failed to subdue the power of the Siddi's, who allied themselves with the Mughal Empire. Not until 1870 were the British—their Bombay garrison included more than 600 Africans in 1760—able to finally defeat the Siddis of Janjira. By that time, they had also become integrated with mainland Indian royalty. It was inhabited until 1972. After leaving the island Janjira, the Nawabs settled in mainland.

The process of assimilation was interrupted with the advent of British rule in India in the 19th century. The British segregated the Indo-Africans from the local population, thus impoverishing the process of assimilation. Today, except for the Royal Sidis and their descendants who are largely integrated into the Muslim upper class, the Indo-African population remains largely farmers or unskilled workers, although some have also become professionals such as doctors, lawyers, teachers and businessmen. Under the extensive Indian affirmative action programs, most Indo-Africans are classified as scheduled tribes, which entitle them to reservations in university seats and other government support. Many Habshi officers were prominent in the Muslim courts of Daccan and the Mogul empire in the 17th century. Today, the Habshi communities have been diminished due to widespread intermarriage with other Muslims.³⁵ Most Africans called Siddis live on the periphery but those in Saurashtra (Gujarat state) and Yellapur (Karnataka state) fall within the category of a Scheduled Tribe. They benefit from the Indian government's affirmative action schemes available for those recognized as socially and economically marginalized.³⁶ Although these communities are the result of a continuous centuries-old phenomenon but they are not widely known since their hidden presence as forest-dwellers, villagers and people on the margins. Those who live in urban areas are not easily identifiable either and are lost in the diversity of cosmopolitan cities³⁷. In Andhra Pradesh, Siddis are associated with the disbanded African Cavalry Guard of the Nizam of Hyderabad. They are nostalgic of their lost past; Indians looked up to them when they accompanied the Nizam on his parades. The story is similarly bleak in Uttar Pradesh, where descendants of the Nawab of Oudh's African Bodyguard and Cavalry Guards live on the poverty line. During the Indian Mutiny in 1857, the ancestors of these Siddis fought bravely and loyally for the Nawab.³⁸ The legends and historical facts on African movement to India indicate that the ancestors of today's African communities in India were soldiers, traders or slaves. The current fates of these communities are a result of diverse histories and varied fortunes. These Afro-Indians are aware of their African past and are hoping to forge links with their 'lost cousins'. Social mobility, out-marriage and religious conversion were also catalysts in the process of assimilation which made Africans invisible in India.

Notes and References

1. African migration into the Indian Sub-Continent has occurred in both voluntary and involuntary waves.
2. *Mamluk* means slave soldier, a member of one of the armies of [slaves](#) that won political control of several [Muslim](#) states during the middle Ages. The name is derived from an Arabic word for slave.
3. "The Early Turkish Sultans" *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2006
4. Kumar Chatterji, Sunity. 1968. "India and Ethiopia from Seventh Century BC." *The Asiatic Society*, 1, Calcutta,
5. Mahajan, V. D. (2001). *History of Medieval India*. S. Chand. pp. 102. ISBN 8121903645
6. *Ibid.*
7. Mernessi, Fatima. (1997). *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*. University of Minnesota Press. pp. 97. ISBN 0816624399.
8. Keay, John. (2001). *India: A History*. Grove Press. pp. 245. ISBN 0802137970
9. Malik Sarvar, who founded the dynasty, was a eunuch, and could therefore have no heirs of his body, therefore his two successors were his adopted sons, the brothers Mubarak Shah and Ibrahim Shah, probably Abyssinian slaves.
10. "The Kingdom of Bengal", *The Cambridge History of India*, Vol. III, Chapter XI,
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid*
13. Sarkar, Sir Jadunath. 1948. *History of Bengal*, Vol. II, p. 139: edit, University of Dacca,
14. Omar H. Ali, "The African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean World", www.africansindianocean.org
15. *Cambridge History of India*, "The Kingdom of Bengal", , Vol.III, Ch. XI
16. All of these states were by the end of the seventeenth century gradually conquered and absorbed into the Mogul empire.
17. <http://exhibitions.nypl.org/africansindianocean/images.php>
18. Conflicting years are given as Malik Ambar's year of birth, he could have been born in 1546, 1548 or 1550 A.D, it is widely accepted: <http://beyondvictoriana.com/2011/05/15/76-the-life-of-malik-ambar-indias-african-ruler-guest-blog-by-eccentric-yoruba/>, dated 25/12/12
19. *Ibid*
20. In 1610, an English merchant, William Finch, writing from near Ahmadnagar (where Ambar had become peshwa, or regent minister), noted that the Habshi general commanded "some ten thousand of his own [caste], all brave souldiers, and som[e] forty thousand Deccanees." Quoted by Omar H. Ali, "The African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean World", P.24, www.africansindianocean.org
21. For detailed study see, Sheikh Chand, *Malik Ambar, "Ehde Afreen"*; Hyderabad; 1929, see also, B.N. Gosawami, *Malik Ambar: A Remarkable Life*.
22. Sheikh Chand, *op.cit.*
23. Qureshi Dulari, "Tourism Potential in Aurangabad," p.7
24. "Indian Siddis: African Descendants with Indian Admixture" *The American Journal of Human Genetics* Volume 89, Issue 1, 15 July 2011, Pages 154–161
25. A. Lodhi. 1992. "African settlements in India", *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, 1, pp. 83–86, for further study see, Don Jaide, , "Sidis (Seydis): The African Kings of India", 21 August 2008, www.africana.com
26. D. Bhattacharya, 1970. "Indians of African Origin", *Cah. Etud. Afr.*, 10, pp. 579–582
27. *Ibid*
28. Runoko Rashidi, "Black Bondage in Asia", *African Presence in Early Asia*, ed. Runoko Rashidi, p139
29. Tom Mountains Ambedkar Journal Website, "HABSHIS AND SIDDIS: AFRICAN DYNASTIES IN

- INDIA.”, www.africana.com, http://www.indo-african-society.org/pages/indo_african_diaspora1.htm
30. For detailed study see, Dunn, Ross E. (2005), *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta*, University of California Press, ISBN 0-520-24385-4. First published in 1986, ISBN 0-520-05771-6.
 31. Hoiberg, Dale; Indu Ramchandani (2000). *Students' Britannica India*. Popular Prakashan. pp. 403. ISBN 0852297629
 32. Janjira from the Arabic 'jazirah' meaning an island
 33. Henry Yule-Arthur Coke Burnell, 1903. *Hobson Hobson, A Glossary of Colloquial Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases and of Kindred Terms: Etymological, Historical, Geographical and Discursive*, ed. By W. Crooke, London, , rep. Calcutta, 1986 p.806
 34. Joseph E. Harris, "Malik Ambar: African Regent-Minister in India", *African Presence in Early Asia*, ed. Runoko Rashidi, p154
 35. Shihan de Silva Jaysuriya\South Asia's Africans A Forgotten People _ History Workshop.htm,21/12/12
 36. *Ibid*
 37. *Ibid*