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## **The Africans (Siddis) of India: Histories, Cultures, and Arts**

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### **Introduction**

This is the story of Africans who have lived outside the African continent and traveled to South Asia (now Pakistan and India) across the Indian Ocean since the early first millennium (about 1800 years ago), focusing on their histories, cultures, and arts. It considers two different, but related histories: 1) those who came principally from the Horn of Africa (Ethiopia and Somalia) with the expansion of Islam into South Asia and beyond (12<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries) and 2) those who were enslaved by the Portuguese, carried to Goa-India, and then escaped to create their own independent communities in Northern Karnataka-India (16<sup>th</sup> century to the present).

### **Histories**

Africans, known as Siddis or Habshis in India [1], have lived and worked in South Asia for almost two millennia. Over that long span of time they have contributed to Indian

politics, economics, religion, culture, and the arts in countless ways. Their histories recount the achievements of many renowned persons, as well as the unsung struggles of countless others – stories of stunning victories and achievements as well as crushing defeats, stifling oppression, despair, recovery, and renewal. Through all of these changes and enormous challenges, against seemingly insurmountable odds, Africans have survived and, at times, thrived. These are the stories of individuals and communities, the women and men from Africa and their descendants who have helped to shape contemporary India.

The earliest evidence of Africans in India dates to about the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries CE (Chauhan 1995:2) when they came as merchants, sailors, soldiers, and “slaves” from the regions of northeastern Africa -- Abyssinia/Ethiopia, Sudan, and Somalia. But we must understand the socio-historical meaning of the term “slave” in the Medieval Islamic Indian Ocean world, for it is very different from the institution of “chattel slavery” created and refined by Europeans in later centuries in the Atlantic world. As Amitav Ghosh (1992:259-60) explains, the arrangement was probably

...more that of patron and client than master and slave, as that relationship is now understood. If this seems curious, it is largely because the medieval idea of slavery tends to confound contemporary conceptions, both of servitude and its mirrored counter-image, individual freedom.

In the Middle Ages institutions of servitude took many forms, and they all differed from 'slavery' as it came to be practiced after the European colonial expansion of the sixteenth century....In the Middle East and Northern India, for instance, slavery was the principal means for recruitment into some of the most privileged sectors of the army and the bureaucracy. For those who made their way up through that route, 'slavery' was thus often a kind of career opening, a way of gaining entry into the highest levels of government.

It was precisely by such means that many Siddis rose to positions of great trust, power, and authority in the military and governmental ranks of various rulers in India between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The stories of some of them are outlined in the following account.

Traveling mainly by sea, Arabs and Africans sailed on the Southwestern Monsoon winds and traversed the Red and Arabian Seas to the region of Sindh – the area of the Indus River Valley, site of the ancient Harappan Civilization that now straddles the modern nations of Pakistan and India. The lands of Kutch and the ports of the Shaurashtra Peninsula were their first ports of call, places like Cambay, Surat, and Chaul.

From the 6<sup>th</sup> - 7<sup>th</sup> centuries CE until the arrival of the Portuguese at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Arabs dominated the sea routes of the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean and came with many Africans, primarily from the areas adjacent to the Arabian Peninsula. The Africans from the coastal communities of East Africa were renowned as expert sailors

and navigators. They quickly became an important factor in the development of Arab maritime domination in the Indian Ocean. They also had longstanding and widespread reputations as warriors – fierce, strong, courageous, and loyal (because they had no other allegiances except to their rulers, commanders, and troops). [2]

As Arabs expanded their cultural and economic presence and power in the Indian Ocean, they also forcefully spread their new Islamic faith, often relying on the expertise of their professional African soldiers. In these various ways, Africans made their presence felt far beyond the shores of Africa.

One of the earliest Africans to make a name for himself, not for his military prowess, but for his abilities as a merchant, later became a widely venerated Muslim saint or *pir*. His name was Baba Ghor (Gori Pir). Some say he came from Abyssinia, but another widespread account claims that he was a Hausa or Fulani merchant from the famous trading metropolis of Kano in what is now northern Nigeria, West Africa. He traveled to Sudan on his *haj* or pilgrimage to Mecca. From there, he traveled east (probably on an Arab ship) to Sindh and eventually to the area of Kutch where he established in perhaps the 13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup> century what was to become a major precious stone (agate/carnelian) industry in Gujarat. The most precious and expensive type of agate is the deep blood red carnelian bead called *bavagor* that must be dried and heated slowly and carefully so it does not break in the firing, which enhances the richness of the color. Over the years Baba Ghor's reputation as an important, powerful, and devout man spread. After his death, he became venerated as a saint and his tomb at Rajpipla near Ratanpur has now

become a major pilgrimage site, especially for Africans and their descendants in India and beyond, but also Hindus and others [3].

Over the centuries, Siddi Muslims have evolved an elaborate sacred healing and performance tradition of music, dance, and trance associated with Baba Ghor that takes place at his tomb in Rajpipla, and at various memorial tombs scattered across India. These rituals of worship and healing are a complex mixture of African, Hindu, and Muslim elements. “As a mystic Sufi saint, Baba Ghor’s divine blessing (*baraka*) is mediated through the active participation of devotees in the daily renewal of the tomb’s ornamentation and by music and dance” (Dewey and Meier 2001). Such performances are known as Goma, a name that may derive from East African drumming and dance traditions known as Ngoma. Goma instruments include drums called by their Swahili name and a large single-stringed bow and gourd instrument called *nang*. It is almost identical to ones from Mozambique and Angola that were re-created by Africans who were enslaved and carried to Brazil where this instrument is called *birimbau*. [4] The Baba Ghor tomb complex at Rajpipla also contains the tombs of his sister Mai Mishra and his brother Baba Habash. The tomb of Mai Mishra is supervised by a female ritual specialist and many respected mediums for both Baba Ghor and Mai Mishra are female. [5]

In contrast to the economic and religious renown of Baba Ghor, most Siddis came to prominence because of their military prowess and administrative expertise. One of the first was Siddi Malik Kafur – an African “enslaved” in Baghdad, taken by one of the

generals of the Muslim rulers at Delhi in 1299, and soon elevated to a high position by the Sultan who gave him the title of Malik Naib, “Deputy of the Kingdom.” Over the next sixteen years he masterminded the expansion of the Khalji dynasty deep into the Deccan (southern India), and as far as the Arabian Sea ports of Dahbol and Chaul (Sadiq Ali 1995:35-9). But the consolidation of Muslim rule from the north, enforced in large measure by the presence and strength of African troops, came only with the establishment of the Bahmani dynasty in 1347. Many Persians and Turks -- statesmen, soldiers, and craftsmen -- came to the Deccan, and along with them, thousands of Africans who, despite their status as “slaves,” were renowned as soldiers (*janhju*) and rose through the ranks to positions of power and authority. The racist attitudes of the Persians and Turks, and the Siddi tradition of intermarriage with local women, led to a new society known as the *muwallads*. They were not considered foreigners and often allied themselves with the indigenous peoples of the Deccan known as the Dakhnis. During the next two centuries of the Bahmani kingdom and its successors in the Deccan, Africans played many important and varied roles, as administrators of vast territories, personal advisors to kings, as well as high-ranking officers in the armed forces, like the well-known Dastur Dinar (Sadiq Ali 1995:50-55).

The fifteenth century witnessed the further rise of Siddi presence and power in India. In Bengal, the ruler Ruka-ud-din-Barbak (1459-1474) was said to have about 8,000 African “slaves.” But because of their political and military influence, they were expelled by one of Barbak’s successors, Ala-ud-din-Hussain (1493-1519), and said to have migrated to Guajarat and the Deccan (Sakar 1948:135 and the Cambridge History of India, VIII:

1928: 271). These exiles would have swelled the ranks of Siddis already active players in the politics of Western India and the Deccan, and may have contributed to their growing power and authority both along the Western or Konkan coast of India (where they were headquartered at the marine fort of Janjira), and in the Muslim realms of the Deccan. The Kolaba Gazetteer (rev. ed. Bombay, 1964, p.128) states that by the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century “they [Siddis] sprang forth as a political power on the West Coast of India...under the Nizam Shahi dynasty of Ahmednagar, later became tributaries of the Adil Shahi Sultan of Bijapur and subsequently of the Moghal [sic] emperors. They managed to survive in spite of all the efforts of the Marathas to destroy their power, sometimes by skillfully developing friendly relations either with the English or with the Portuguese....”

### **Siddis of Janjira**

Let us consider the Siddis of Janjira on the Konkan coast. How they came to power is still uncertain. They may have come with the Arabs during the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries as sailors and soldiers in the service of various Muslim navies and armies that were conquering large areas of the coast and the Deccan plateau. They may have also come as independent traders looking for new markets (see Banaji 1932:xx). By the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, one named Siddi Yakut had achieved the rank of Admiral in the fleet of Bahadur Gilani, son of the Bahmani governor of Goa (Chauhan 1995:19). But the Siddi rise to prominence came with their longterm rule (almost 300 years) from their stronghold, the island fortress of Janjira that came to be known as Habshan -- “Land of the Africans.”

[6]

One story tells of how they captured the fort and came to power about 1490. It was in 1489 that the founder of the Nizam Shahi dynasty at Ahmadnagar, Malik Ahmad (1490-1508), began a six-month siege of the fort, trying to defeat the Koli ruler who controlled it. After many months, the story goes, he looks dejectedly at the fort and said to his general Salabat Khan and Khan's African "slave" Siddi Yakut Khan, "who can take a fort whose moat is the sea?" The general was silent but Siddi Yakut ran down the rocks, jumped into the sea, and swore he would not return unless with the head of the defeated captain of the fort. King Ahmad sent a boat after him but Yakut raised up out of the water striking the boat with his sword and saying he would not return unless the king sent his ring as a token of his command. This the king did and Yakut wrapped it in his turban and returned to shore. "Pleased with his courage, Ahmad promised that, if Janjira fell, Yakut should command it." One night several months later, Siddi Yakut Khan accompanied by a large force of African soldiers, swam across in a surprise attack, overpowered the defenders, and captured the fort. For his bravery and loyalty, King Ahmad named Siddi Yakut captain of Janjira fort – a position subsequently held by Siddis for most of the next 300 years, despite the rise and fall of various powers (both Indian and foreign) in the region (Chauhan 1995:19-21).

Another legend says the Siddis conquered the fort by a military ruse. Siddi merchants asked permission from the Koli king who controlled the fort to anchor their ships in Janjira's harbor during a monsoon storm and to keep their goods in the fort for safekeeping. After much persuasion, the head of Janjira fort reluctantly agreed. That night, the Siddis unloaded several large crates and then invited their hosts to a dinner and



drinks. After they were suitably inebriated, the Siddis opened several of the large crates, from which sprang dozens of warriors armed to the teeth. After a fierce battle, the Siddis prevailed and began their long reign as rulers of Janjira (Sadiq Ali 1995:158). This was to be only the first of the many instances of the military genius and daring for which Siddi soldiers became famous (or infamous, if you happened to be an adversary!).

Over the next centuries, the Siddis at Janjira replaced the original wooden fortifications, built and greatly enlarged the gates, guard towers, and ramparts, reinforced the earlier ones, built two large water tanks with an enormous supply of fresh water to adequately serve the growing fortress community, and constructed many impressive buildings including several mosques, a palace, women's quarters, a law court, a public meeting hall that rose five storeys, a smaller 3-storey hall for private audiences, several streets with blocks of multi-storeyed houses, a hill citadel/fort (70 meters high) to house the armory and serve as an observation tower with a 360 degree range of vision for perhaps a distance of 30 miles, and a vast assortment of cannon of various sizes, including several enormous ones, three cast in India (one is the third largest in India) and seven in Europe (Spain, France, Sweden, and Holland) (Chauhan 1995:8-9). At its height in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, Janjira must have been an impressive walled city with an estimated population of perhaps 2000 or more (**Fig. 1**).

Over the next three hundred years, various powers both foreign and domestic (the Portuguese, Dutch, British, Marathas, and Mughals) vied for control of the sea and land trade routes and products. Janjira fort was a prime military target for it commanded the

large natural bay at the mouth of the Rajpuri/Danda Creek. The village of Rajpuri grew up on the mainland about one kilometer from the main eastern gate of the island fort. Danda fort, the headquarters of the Siddi's land holdings was about two miles southeast of Rajpuri. In 1618, Siddi Khan was appointed governor; in 1620, Siddi Yakut Khan succeeded, and he by Siddi Ambar, also known as Sanak -- "the little" -- to distinguish him from the great Siddi Malik Ambar who ruled Ahmednagar until his death in 1626 (see below) (Sadiq Ali 1995:159). In 1636, while Siddi Ambar (Sanak) was governor of Janjira, Ahmednagar was finally conquered by the Mughals and ceded to Bijapur. The importance of Janjira had increased greatly and after promising to protect the Bijapur trade and pilgrims to Mecca, the Siddis of Janjira were given control of the entire coast from Nagothna to the Bankot River and their leader was raised to the rank of Wazir. According to Siddi law, the position of Wazir went to the first officer of the fleet, and not the son of the governor. Bijapur records name Siddi Ambar, Siddi Yusuf, and Fateh Khan as Wazirs during the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Many naval powers tried unsuccessfully to capture Janjira. The British tried several times in the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and the Marathas later in the century. In fact, the Siddis were a major problem for Shivaji and the Marathas who suffered major defeats at the hands of Fateh Khan in 1649, and again later in 1660. They never conquered the Siddis of Janjira who continued to rule the fort. Like the carved image of a tiger or lion trampling four elephants at the main gate of the fort, the Siddis defeated all the powers who tried to take over "the Land of the Africans" on the West Coast of India which in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries included several other coastal forts as well as the city of Surat.

At about the same time the Siddis of Janjira came to power, another Siddi rose to become perhaps the most famous of them all – Malik Ambar (**Fig. 2**). The emergence of the successor states to the Bahmanis, along with the Mughal capture of the fort at Ahmednagar in 1600, set the stage for the rise of Malik Ambar – ruler of one half of the Nizam Shahi kingdom for nearly 26 years (Sadiq Ali 1995:63ff). Malik Ambar, his original name was Shambu, was born in Harar, Ethiopia in 1550. Sold in infancy by his poor parents, he was taken to the slave markets of Baghdad. His master, Qazi Mir, re-named him Ambar and, treating him well, raised him as one of his children and educated him in Arabic lore and literature. When Mir traveled to Ahmednagar, he sold Ambar to Malik Dabir -- an African and a famous minister of Murtaza Nizam Shah. By the age of 45, Malik Ambar had created an army of over 1500 cavalry and infantry and distinguished himself as a fine military strategist and courageous warrior. He gathered many Maratha soldiers to his banner and harassed the Mughal forces from all directions. He soon earned the reputation as the “inventor of guerrilla warfare.” An effective diplomat and statesman as well, he orchestrated the marriage of his daughter to Prince Ali who became the king with a title of Murtza Nizam Shah II, and Malik became the Wakil-ul-Sultanat – Prime Minister. By 1607, after several defeats and some stunning victories, Malik Ambar had expanded and consolidated his lands and built a large guerrilla force that defeated the Mughal army several times between 1608-12. In 1617 he suffered a major defeat from the Mughals but recovered several years later to bring the Nizam Shahi Kingdom to its greatest glory.

Besides his exploits as a soldier, Malik Ambar was famous for his administrative abilities. He introduced a comprehensive system of land revenue reforms that greatly strengthened the state and brought barren land under cultivation. He reorganized and refined his military into a very effective and flexible fighting machine, and he built many civil structures – fortifications and impressive town gates, palaces, mosques, bazaars, public baths, schools, and cisterns and aqueducts (known as the Ambar canal) for a waterworks system that is still used today in Aurangabad. His tomb, and that of his wife are impressive structures in the royal cemetery of past rulers near Ajanta and Ellora in the Deccan (**Fig. 3**).

Between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, Siddis continued to distinguish themselves in various ways. In the Kingdom of Bijapur, several Siddis (Kamil Khan, Kishwar Khan, and Ikhlas Khan) served as Regents during the reign of Ibrahim Adil Shah II (1580-1627). Diliwar Khan, another powerful Siddi, was a high officer in the Bijapur army. After winning several important battles and ruthlessly displacing his political rivals, he ruled the kingdom as Regent until his own demise in 1590. Throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Siddis held powerful positions in the courts of rival powers, all vying for control of the Deccan. Some held high military ranks in the Adil Shah military, others in the court of Bijapur, and still others in the ranks of the Mughals and Marathas (see Sadiq Ali 1995:109-140).

### **Siddis/Habshis in Hyderabad**

Africans have lived and worked in Hyderabad since the Medieval era, perhaps the 14<sup>th</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup> centuries or earlier. Many were first in the service of the Raja of Wanaparthy who employed them as soldiers, watchmen, and personal bodyguards. Over the centuries, Siddis distinguished themselves in a variety of ways. Some became important court officials of the Nizams. They were given the elevated title of *khanazahs* (protégés). Others were merchants, religious leaders, and builders/architects. One famous Siddi, Miya Mishk, was a religious leader who built a well-known mosque near the Salar Jung Museum as well as a palace in a village on the way to Golkonda Fort. Others continued to serve as warriors and privileged bodyguards for the Nizams and nobles of Hyderabad. Two large gates at Golkonda Fort were the posts for special African soldiers. Also near the fort is an enormous Baobab tree said to have been brought from Africa and planted by Siddis to mark their arrival and allegiance to the rulers of Hyderabad. This massive tree still flourishes today as a reminder of the presence and perseverance of Africans in Indian history and culture.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Siddis in Hyderabad were organized into a formal army battalion called the Siddi Risala in the personal service of the Nizam. One unit, called the African Cavalry Guards or AC Guards, was an honor guard for the Nizam and was given a special residential area in the city not far from the palace where many of their descendants live today. They were famous for their military prowess, strength and courage. They are also renowned as musicians and entertainers. One, Abdullah Bin Mehboob, who was a famous field hockey player, leads the Arabi Daff Party band. His father and grandfather were honored by playing their Afro-Arabic (Daff) music for the

Prime Minister of India J. Nehru in New Delhi on January 26, 1960. Abdullah still continued this musical tradition in 2004, playing for many different kinds of celebrations including the annual Festival of India (Mehboob 2004:PC).

These are only a few of the many histories of achievement of Africans who came to India during the rise and spread of Islam in South Asia. There are today, Siddi descendants living scattered in many states of India, principally Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, the Konkan /Malabar Coast, as well as the Coromandel Coast and eastern India as far north as Kolkota [Calcutta] and Bihar. Communities can be found in many parts of Western India in both rural areas and urban centers like Bombay/Mumbai. But the two major concentrations of Siddis are in Gujarat, especially the areas of Junagarh, Broach, Surat, and the forest areas of Gir in the Shaurashtra Peninsula, and Northern Karnataka, south and east of Goa. It is to the Siddis of Karnataka that we now turn.

## **The Siddis of Karnataka – History, Culture, and Art**

### **History**

The cultural origins of the first Africans enslaved and carried to Goa by the Portuguese are uncertain but they probably come from the areas of the southeastern Africa, both along the coast as well as from the interior of what are today the countries of Mozambique and Tanzania. But the trade in human beings was very widespread and pervasive throughout much of eastern Africa from the coast of Somalia and Kenya in the

north, all the way to the port of Sofala in the south, as well as deep into the interior of Central Africa. Thus it is very difficult to know with certainty where the ancestors of the Siddis of Goa and Karnataka came from. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, even after the 1842 Anglo-Portuguese Treaty “outlawed” slavery in Portuguese India (but “very incompletely” according to Alpers) [7], the Portuguese enslaved many Macua [Makua] people from the area of northern Mozambique and brought them to Western Madagascar to work sugar plantations. Some Macua may have then been taken to Goa.

Ethno-linguistic research among the Siddis of Goa and Northern Karnataka did not provide answers to the question of African linguistic origins. Geralda de Lima Angenot and Oziel Marques da Silva found that Siddi-Konkani spoken in Goa and along the coast is neither an African nor creolized language, “but is only a specific hybridized dialect of the Konani language which has integrated several successive external linguistic influences” – these being Bantu, pidginized Bantu, creolized Portuguese Konani, and others more recently (Angenot and da Silva 2008: 315-330; see also Lodhi in the same volume). In 2015, I attempted to collect oral histories among Siddi elders but with little success. I worked in three Siddi communities – one (Mainalli) was predominantly Catholic, one (Kendalgi) mostly Muslim, and Gunjavati (mixed Catholic and Muslim with a few Hindus). Each seemed to have a different history of migration and movement over the last several centuries, yet I was unable to elicit detailed oral histories of events or migrations. I hope future scholars have more success, for it is crucial for African Diaspora studies since so many of these histories have never been recorded or valued. Perhaps my failure resulted from a case of “historical amnesia,” an intentional or

purposeful *forgettingness*, for as the historian Hayden White (1987) reminds us, the histories we tell ourselves and others are what we *choose* to remember of the past. Many Siddis told me that they were never told their family histories of migration, and that elders spoke about such matters only after the children were sent away. Perhaps this comes from a desire to suppress or forget a sad, traumatic, oppressive past? This may also come from an effort to become more a part of Indian society, integrated rather than seen as outsiders or immigrants? As a result, we still know little of the period from the 16<sup>th</sup> century until 1857-59 when British accounts record the exploits of a Siddi leader named Bastian (Sebastiao, and thus connected historically to the Portuguese in Goa), who wreaked havoc along the Goa/Karnataka border in Uttara Kanada, looting and burning villages (and attacking British colonial establishments?) as part of the 1857 revolt or “uprising” against British rule (Shirodkar 1998). Thus the history of the Siddis in Goa and Northern Karnataka remains unknown. I had hoped to assist them in recovering, recording, preserving, and celebrating it, passing it on to their children, and sharing it with others, but was unsuccessful. Sadly, I am reminded of a proverb from the Yoruba people of West Africa who say, “A river that forgets its source, dies.”

Beginning in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Portuguese enslaved and carried Africans to their Indian Ocean stronghold on the Western coast of India at Goa. They were brought to work mainly as domestic servants for rich merchants and colonial officials. Over the next generations, they escaped bondage and fled into the thick rain forests of the Western Ghats Mountains where they established free, independent communities. After the “official” end of Portuguese slavery in India (Anglo-Portuguese Treaty of 1842), some



may have just left Goa to join others in the Western Ghats. Thus the Siddis did the same as their enslaved sisters and brothers taken to Brazil by the Portuguese, who fought for their freedom and escaped to establish communities called in Brazil *quilombos*. The most famous of these many *quilombos* in Brazil was called Palmares that survived for most of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The same liberation history happened throughout the Americas as well, with the *palenques* of Colombia, the *cimarrones* of Panama and Mexico, and the *Maroons* of Louisiana, Jamaica, Surinam, and Guyana. In Karnataka-India, many Siddi speak Konkani which means their ancestors lived near the coast of Goa and traveled southward toward the Karwar area, and then moved inland in search of freedom and safety in the forests of the Western Ghats. They established communities, hunted, foraged, fished, and farmed the land until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century when Indian Independence in 1947 brought crucial changes with new challenges. The new government established large parts of the Western Ghats (and other forest areas where Siddi lived) as Forest Reserves and the land they had cultivated, considered *terra nullius* (land belonging to no one) by the government, meant they were legally land-less. Gradually they were removed from the forests as the government increased its control of these forest areas. In 1970s the Karnataka government and Forest Department increasingly restricted Siddis in the use of natural resources. Landlords, liquor sellers, money-lenders and others “infiltrated their habitat” (as one Siddi elder told me) and adversely affected Siddis economically and socially. Essentially they were forced off the land and denied ownership of those places they had transformed. Their history is one of continual displacement from one forest area to another, and then to the edges of those forests where they survive with a combination of subsistence farming, seasonal wage-labor, and increasingly in the last fifteen years,

male contract-labor (modern day indentured-service that amounts to a new form of slavery) in the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere.

### **Cultural & Religious Identities**

Despite their marginalization, Siddis vote in large numbers (83%) and some say they prefer to be called “Indians” rather than “Africans” – by name rather than by “Siddi,” perhaps in order to avoid castification where their classification is seen as low. This naming preference may be evidence of a desire to be more incorporated as citizens in the new nation-state, however, there are other government actions and laws that have worked to counter this. One such program is part of legislation designed to protect the rights and privileges of the less powerful in India, the so-called “Scheduled Tribes.” It is a kind of “affirmative action” attempt to give certain advantages (like food, housing, education, political representation, etc.) to India’s many marginalized peoples, to “level the playing field,” but as a result they must emphasize their “differentness.” Siddis of Karnataka were given such status in January 2003, but this has required that they identify themselves officially as Siddi, and incorporate this designation into their names and official documents. Thus opposing forces are operating in issues of self-identity for these Indians of African descent. Too, religion plays a role, as the previous essay in this volume makes clear. Muslim identity may tend to be universalizing, but in an increasingly Hinduizing nation in recent years, this has been counter productive. The same may be said of those Siddis who are Catholic or Christian. Such religious groups are small minorities in the context of a growing Hindu fundamentalism linked to national politics. [8]

### **Art of the Siddis of Karnataka**

Despite their challenging circumstances/situation, Siddis have survived and created self-sufficient, resilient communities and vibrant arts, music and dance, and patchwork quilts. There are many African communities with rich artistic traditions scattered across this planet. We may be familiar with the history and artistry of African peoples and their descendants in the Americas, but we know little or nothing about Africans in other parts of the world, especially those in South Asia.

While they have adopted, adapted, and integrated many cultural aspects of the Indian peoples with whom they have lived for generations, Siddis have also retained and transformed certain cultural and artistic traditions from Africa. The performing arts are strong, especially certain music (drumming and song) and dance traditions such as *damam* (**Fig. 4**). In the visual arts, one tradition stands out – the art of patchwork quilts known as *kawandi*.

### **Siddi *kawandi*/quilts**

Walking through a Siddi village one sees a colorful array of quilts draped over fences, hung on lines or spread on low roofs to be aired and dried in the sun. Some are bright and newly sewn. Others show the effects of regular use. These wonderful textiles are the traditional beds and covers of the people, made with love by women, especially the elderly, for their progeny – children and grandchildren. This textile tradition is not unique

to the Siddis – other neighboring cultural groups create similar work. Yet Siddi quilts have a distinctive style that sets them apart from those of other groups. The quilters are women, generally older women who can no longer work in the fields. Younger women who have learned the skills from their mothers or female relatives have also become well-known quilters. Those with the best reputations are sometimes commissioned to make quilts for friends and neighbors in exchange for goods or sometimes cash.

### **The Creative Process**

The women gather pieces of old and worn-out clothing from family members and friends and bundle them together. When they have enough to make a quilt, they go to the market to purchase several items: a cotton *sari* (traditional dress of Indian women consisting of a piece of fabric usually five to six meters (approx. 16'- 19') long that is draped around the body); thick, white cotton thread and needles; and additional bundles of used clothing or cloth remnants if needed. At home, they begin the work sitting on a shaded verandah, or inside the house near a window or doorway with enough light (**Fig. 5**). Sometimes several women (friends or relatives) will work together to create a quilt. At other times they may work alone whenever they have a free moment during their long labor-filled days. Whether working alone or in groups, they sometimes sing, choosing from a large repertoire that has been passed down for many generations. If they want to create a large quilt, they may sew two *saris* together to make a wider piece that becomes the backing for the patchwork facing of the quilt. Then they begin to select pieces of cloth for the patchwork design, sometimes cutting or tearing them to different sizes, sometimes using

them unchanged. They start at one of the corners of the *sari* and begin to work their way around, usually in a counterclockwise direction, fixing the patches with a running stitch that eventually covers the entire quilt, both patchwork top and *sari* bottom. Some women create running stitches that are closely-spaced (1/2 inch apart) and small, others spread them farther apart. The stitches exhibit a distinctive rhythm that is part of the “visual signature” of the artist along with the colors, sizes, shapes, and arrangements of the cloth patches. Some women incorporate parts of garments uncut, like the neckline of a child’s blouse, or an old shirt with some of its buttons still attached. Others cut small square or rectangular patches of brightly colored cloth (*tikeli*) to place on top of other larger patches in contrasting colors (**Fig. 6**). One woman favors a kind of step pattern of small squares that descends diagonally across a field of large multi-colored rectangles. Others decorate their corners with a series of parallel chevrons that end in small detached squares, a design said to be favored by some Muslim Siddi women. Depending on need, a quilter may choose to create a thicker or thinner quilt. To create a thicker one, she does extensive overlapping of her patches as she works inward toward the center of the quilt, or slight overlapping to keep it thin. As she works, she will take care to smooth down each piece so that it lays flat on the *sari* backing and the other patches already attached by the running stitch. Sometimes she will fold under the uneven or ragged edge of a patch, but at other times, she may choose to leave it rough-edged. When she is nearing the center of the quilt and the end of her creation, she may include a “design flourish.” Sometimes a Catholic Siddi woman will sew one or more crosses. A Muslim quilter may incorporate a crescent or mosque silhouette. Others will vary or intensify the straight-lined running stitch with a cluster of stitched patterns in the central patch. Occasionally a

specially selected cloth from a favored discarded garment, or highly decorative *sari* with sequins, will be used in the center. After working from the outer edges to the center (the reverse of most Western quilters, and regarded as a more difficult, challenging way of working), some quilters finish the edges with a row of stitches that seals the backing to the patchwork. One seemingly mandatory decoration is the sewing at each corner of the quilt one or more square patches folded twice to form a multi-layered triangle called *phula*, or “flower.” These serve no specific function, yet they are essential to a properly finished or “dressed” Siddi quilt and are a distinctive style element. As one Siddi quilter explained to me, “they must be there, if not, the quilt would be naked!”

### **Aesthetics**

Siddi quilts are highly individualistic and unique, yet quilters share many clear and precise opinions about quality and beauty, and the need to “finish properly” a quilt with *phulas*/flowers at the corners. The size and shape of the quilts and their patches vary significantly from quilter to quilter. Sizes generally fall into several categories and are measured by a “hand” – the length between the elbow and fingertips of the quilter, which can thus vary. The size categories are: large/family (6x6 hands); double (5x6 hands); single (3x5 hands); and baby/crib (2x3 hands). Some quilts are quite regular and orderly, others are more varied, dynamic, and “unruly” in terms of colors, patterns, and scale. Some have no or few small patches scattered over the surface, others are be-jeweled with lots of small, colorful patches (*tikeli*), and these quilts elicit much praise for their painstaking artistry. Quilters unanimously admire work with straight lines of small, regular,

closely-spaced and carefully rendered running stitches, and the rhythms created by the patterns of stitches and patches. In terms of color, Siddis prefer bright and light colors and patterns, which makes sense given their interior domestic contexts – dark sleeping rooms in homes with small, shuttered windows, only recently supplied with electricity. When not in use or folded in piles in a room, *kawandi* are displayed outside, hanging from roofs, clotheslines, or fences in order to air out and dry in the sun. Their bright colors and vibrant patterns contrast sharply with the brownish red earth and tiled roofs. The beauty and artistry of the finest quilts sometimes prompts friends and neighbors to commission a quilt from a master quilter, but most are made by and for a family member.

### Uses

Quilts are traditionally made for family members as sleeping mattresses or covers to keep them warm during the cool, damp Monsoon nights (May-September). Small, crib-sized ones are often highly decorated with bright colors and lots of small patches. As quilters explained, these are to “entertain and enliven” the children. These fill wooden cribs suspended from the rafters of Siddi homes. Larger ones come in sizes to accommodate one, two or more family members. Ones for three or more persons are seen as auspicious for they imply progeny -- a prosperous, growing family with children. Old or tattered quilts may be repaired with additional patches both in front and back, but when they are no longer useful for sleeping, they serve other purposes – some may be re-cycled into newly stitched quilts, others will be used for cleaning, a door mat, or a verandah shade, until they fall apart and return to earth.

A Siddi quilt/*kawand* is the visual history of a family and its fashions. A quilt documents the well-worn, discarded clothes of family members over the previous years. Mixing together vibrant array of patterns, colors, and textures from all kinds of fabrics, these patchwork quilts reference faith and summarize the fortunes and the styles of family members as they embody the artistic sensibilities of their makers – the women of Siddi communities (Fig. 7).

### **Comparisons with African American Quilts**

The same may be said of their African American sisters, the quilters of Gees Bend in Alabama (Arnett et al 2002). Both quilting traditions use the discarded textiles from clothing worn by family members, like the jeans from one Gees Bend quilter's deceased husband that she used to keep alive his memory and keep him at home. The improvisations in the making of Siddi quilts makes them similar to those of Gee's Bend, but the process is different: Siddi quilters start from the outside and work their way to the center, while Gees Bend quilters don't. The flowers and lozenges in the corners of Siddi quilts don't appear in Gees Bend where the quilts generally have large-scale patches, and a more muted color palette than the Siddi ones. These two independent artistic traditions are separated by time and space but joined by circumstance for they both share a history of "make-do" with limited resources. Comparable histories of scarcity and bondage have produced extraordinary art (like the Blues and Jazz and Capoeira) and remind us of the



adage that “necessity is the mother of invention.” The need for warm, stimulating, energizing colors and patterns has created these beautifully inventive quilts.

### **Siddis in India – Present and Future**

Siddis continue to confront and grapple with the issues of identity in Indian society. Are they Indians? Africans? African-Indians? Or Indians of African descent? And how Siddis construct their identity as either Africans or Indians, is being shaped by not only by themselves but by other Indians in the context of on-going tensions concerning race, class/caste, gender, and especially religion. Now that the communalist tensions between Muslims and Hindus have intensified with the election and policies of a rightwing Hindu fundamentalist government, these matters have taken on even more importance for those who don't “fit” the mythic Hindu model. Siddis who are Christian or Muslim, or even those who are Hindu, are seen as “outsiders” or “marginal” to a “Hindu State.” India in recent years has moved in the direction of creating a Hindu state, not unlike Pakistan as a Muslim state. Discussions and intensified debates about celebrating “multiplicity” and multiculturalism in India, versus the “purity” of a Hindu state, highlights the growing divide and affects directly a kind of “double-distancing” of Siddis on the basis of race, religion and origins.

### **Siddi and the Wider World**

In the last 25-30 years the traditional isolation of the Siddis, both in India and beyond, has changed. With the publications of Edward Alpers (1967) and Joseph Harris's seminal work in 1971, scholars both in India and globally began to study and write about their histories and cultures. By the 1990s this literature began to spread and led to the University of Iowa's Crossroads project in the Indian Ocean World. In the present millennium, the pace of international exchanges has accelerated.

One example is the touring of the Siddi Goma performance group initiated by Amy Catlin-Jairazbhoy (2004; 2008). They performed in the UK and the USA at numerous venues. I was honored to introduce them when they came to perform at the UW-Madison World Music Festival some years ago. As a result of this musical project, they produced several CDs and DVD videos of their work and gained widespread publicity for their work. The growing number of scholars interested in the Indian Ocean World (IOW) participated in a UCLA conference organized by Ned Alpers and Allen Roberts in April 2002. In 2006, I helped to organize an international conference and workshop put together by Kiran Kamal Prasad and Jean-Paul Angenot called *TADIA: The African Diaspora in Asia* that was held at the University of Goa, Panaji, India. The four-day event included both academic papers by scholars of the African Diaspora in South Asia as well as Korea, but more importantly, a two-day workshop organized and led by Siddi leaders from different communities – both those in Gujarat and Mumbai, as well as those from Karnataka. They were meeting and networking for the first time in their long history in India. This was an important watershed moment, but tangible, positive outcomes from this historic encounter are still awaited. In recent years, as more and more African

students, because of costs and the difficulties of obtaining student visas and financial aid for study in Europe or the United States, have come to India to study in universities, some of them in regions where Siddis live (Hampi, Bangalore, and other places in Karnataka). As a result, Siddi encounters with African students have sparked renewed interest in tracing their African roots and routes. And finally, with the visibility of the Siddi quilts as a result of our (this author and Sarah K. Khan) exhibitions, sales, public lectures about the Siddi Women's Quilting Cooperative, more and more American artists and students are making the effort to learn about the Siddis and visit them in India. In all these ways Siddis are learning and experiencing a world beyond the shores of India, at the same time that people, primarily scholars, students, and artists, are finding out about a little-known, yet long-standing African Diaspora in South Asia. Hopefully these exchanges will bring benefits to both in the future.

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## Figures

**Fig. 1 – View of Janjira fort.**

**Fig. 2 – Portrait of Malik Ambar.**

**Fig. 3 – Tomb of Malik Ambar.**

**Fig. 4 – Siddi elder playing the damaam drum.**

**Fig. 5 – Siddi woman sewing a *kawand*, patchwork quilt.**

**Fig. 6 – *Tikeli* or small patches in a quilt.**

**Fig. 7 -- Siddi baby *kawand* with *phula* in the corners and *tikeli* in the center.**

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## Notes

[1] variants of this name in the European [Portuguese, English, and Dutch?] literature are: Sidi, Siddle, Siddee, Siddy, Sidy, Sedee, Scidee, Scidy, Sceedy, Scydee, Sciddee, Sciddie. The word is thought to come from the Arabic word Sayeed for “mister” or “sir” – a term of respect throughout the Arab and Islamic world of Northern Africa and the Middle East. In the Portuguese literature, they are often referred to as Mulattos, Kafre or Kaphris (Caffree, Coffree, Kafra), and Habshi Kapir, from the Arabic term kafir=unbeliever/pagan (see Prasad 1984:71-3). An alternative term used in some places is Habshi, derived from the Arabic term for Abyssinia/Ethiopia (Al Habish) and thus Habshi meaning a person from the land of the Blacks or Habash. In Marathi documents, they are referred to as *shamal* or “black faced” (Chauhan 1995:1).

[2] Baba Ghor (Gori Pir) is honored among Muslims (especially Afro-Indian/Siddi and Sufi Muslims) in many Indian towns and cities today where his memorial tombs (*chillas*) are located, as well as among the Indian Islamic diaspora (primarily Sufi) in London and elsewhere. (Dewey and Meier 2001).

[3] Sikandar Badshah, a Siddi with high-rank in the Indian Railroad, remarked on their historic character trait of “loyalty” saying “Only we [Sidis] could stand outside the bedroom of Maharajas.” (Catlin-Jairazbhoy and Alpers 2004:7).

[4] The earliest Siddi migrants who came with the spread of Islam and live in Gujarat still speak and sing in a language that combines Gujarati and the East African language of Swahili. They could have come from anywhere in eastern Africa, from Ethiopia and Somalia in the north to Kenya and Tanzania/Zanzibar in the south.

Hear Arnold Blake’s 1932 and 1938 recordings of Siddis in Hyderabad, Gujarat and the Makran coast (India/Pakistan border area) and Nazir Ali Jairazbhoy’s recordings of Pakistani Siddis in the Smithsonian Institution Folk Life Festival Archive 1975/76.

[5] See Helene Basu and Catlin-Jairazbhoy and Alpers (2004) for more on Siddis of Gujarat and history of royal patronage and this widespread patron/client relationship (*jajmani*). Siddis served as bodyguards and high ranking military for Rajasthani royals and others. And some became rulers themselves, like the Sidi Nawabs of Sachin (Dr. Nasruddin Khan), Siddi Nawab of Cambay (Mirza Mohammed Jafar), and Nawab Mohammed Salabat Khan, the Babi of Balasinor.

[6] -- The Muslim traveler Ibn Battuta wrote in the 14<sup>th</sup> century that Siddis were the “guarantors of safety on the Indian Ocean,” possibly a reference to the Siddis of Janjira (Catlin-Jairazbhoy and Edward Alpers 2004:10) They were responsible for transporting pilgrims to Mecca and Arabian horses to the armies of South Asia, and later, instrumental in ousting the British from Bombay in 1673 (See Sadiq Ali 1995: 165).

[7] Alpers 1975 and 2004:31 citing Chaterjee 1999 and Walker 2001. Alpers also mentions (p.37, note 2) that Sonia Bouketo, a PhD student at Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Science Sociale, Paris was in 2004 considering research on the history and origins of the Siddis of Uttara Kanada. I tried without success to find her.

[8] People of African descent in India, and South Asia generally, have continued to be considered “aliens,” a term that was used in a 1983 documentary film on the Siddis of Gujarat entitled *Alien Homeland* – This despite the fact that they came during the Medieval era of Muslim expansion, and those in Goa and Karnataka who have lived there since the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. Yet they are still considered “foreigners” by many Indians today. And most Indians don’t even know of their presence in India. This “othering” may be partly due to their distinctive physical appearance – dark skin and tight curly hair – and their chosen history of escape and isolation in the thick forests of the Gir Forest of Guajart or the Western Ghats. And in the present political climate of heightened Hindu nationalism and the maginalization of Muslims, Buddhists, Sihks, Christians, and Adivasis (ancient, indigenous, “tribal” people), Siddis are seen as part of these “others” and thus outsiders to a mainstream, predominantly Hindu “nation.”

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**Sources -- Revised, expanded, and up-dated from “India Bibliography” sources on Africans in South Asia (compiled by Henry John Drewal, Berehoze Shroff, and Alisa Cannizzo) in *African Arts*, summer, 2013, pp. 26-29.)**

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