Afro-Asian Capital and Its Dissolution

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The English courtier and poet of the late sixteenth century Edmund Spenser expressed the contempt of the freeborn Englishman for the bonded thus: “For why should he that is at libertie, make himself bond? / Sith then we are free borne / Let us all servile base subjection scorne.”1 In the Mughal empire at almost the identical moment, an eighty-nine-year-old man carved the opposite sentiment in marble: “This old slave of the court, Mahmud, the stirrup-holder, does not feel any shame in serving the kings and the good” (Persian text: az ghalami padshahan va az ghalami khuban na-darad ‘ar bandah-i-dargah qadim-al-khidmat Mahmud rakab dar va sar afraz kardah).2 The military-economic dominance and the hegemony of the aristocratic Englishman has led to a divorce between the historical realities of state formation in the subcontinent and the political theories through which the latter are studied. This divorce has been substantively negated by historians of early modern empires that connected the globe in the period before the Treaty of Westphalia.3 This essay addresses this historiography in three parts. The first part locates the use of the term bandah (sing. “slave”) in some epigraphic records. The records say very little about terms such as Habsi (Abyssinian) or Sidi (likely derived from Sayyid, a title of eminent descent from the Prophet Muhammad) until late in the seventeenth century. Only official titles survived in the records of the earlier periods.4 The second part of the essay outlines the ways in which Mughal chroniclers wrote about such figures. The third points to the processes that undercut the Mughal-Deccani bureaucratic systems in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It concludes with a summary of the theoretical-philosophical implications of obscuring this past in the present.

1. Spenser, Complaints, lines 129–34.
3. For an illustration, see Subrahmanya, “Hearing Voices,” and Subrahmanya, “Holding the World in Balance.”
4. The record of original titles is especially important for the sultans of Bengal-Bihar identified as Habsi only by later Persian historians such as Farishta. For epigraphic references to the rulers, see Karim, Corpus, 215–33, and Siddiq, Epigraphy, 227–39.
Terms and Records

Two questions arise regarding the epigraphs dated between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries: To whom did a person belong, and over how many generations did a relationship of clientage develop between descendants of a master and ancestors of an erstwhile slave? I have discussed the first question, with reference to monastic and clerical property, in an earlier essay. This essay focuses on the second. Epigraphs identify first-generation male slaves of the sultan’s household-entourage as “Sultani” (belonging to the sultan). This was true not only for the famous Altamish and Aibeg in northern India (who went on to become sultans and commanders themselves), but of many other male figures of the period. Such males were recruited as cadets into a soldier’s establishment and trained to hold significant posts and titles in a particular military-administrative corps. Personal attachment (as a slave) grew into naukari (from nokor, sing.), a term that represented a cluster of relationships—such as that of personal retainer, loyal friend, comrade in arms, and bodyguard. Those especially trusted with confidential assignments were the “favored slaves” (bandah-i-khass). As their master’s agents and delegates, they traveled to, and governed at, outposts of an empire that remained territorially disaggregated. As office holders, such men were part of the administrative elite. Take the royal bandah-i-khass of Gujarat in the mid-fourteenth century, Mufarrah Sultani, for example. At least two epigraphs identified him by his title of ennoblement (Malik Ikhtiyar-al-daulah va al-din), his official employment as the royal in-stand bearer (dawidar/dawatdar), and his claims to social eminence as the “pride of the elite and the nobles” (mafkhar al-khawass va al-umm). Examples in his generosity, martial skills, and justice (Hatim-i-Tayy, Rustam, and Naushirwan). A pattern of delegated authority, effectively exercised by the sultans’ slaves, also prevailed in western Asian and the African mainlands at the same time.

A second characteristic feature of west and south Asian political hierarchies pertained to the reproduction of dependence. Both Islamic legal interpretation and the sultanate administration incentivized the production of loyalty by divorcing the reproduction of the jural status of the slave (Persian bandah, Arabic ghulam) from that of the physical reproduction of persons in households containing slave women. The latter, once they bore children to the master, were elevated as umm-i-walad, a dignified state claimed by two women, who in one case even built a step-well and a mosque to commemorate their erstwhile master. Their children would have been of the lineage of the father. If the parents served in a greater household, such children were referred to as “of the household” (khanahzada) as well. As clients, the latter were expected to grow closer in trust and intimacy with the lineage of ex-masters and mistresses. When they were men, they often succeeded in establishing their lineages in a modicum of secure holdings of wealth and dignity through their employment. For instance, a record from western India identifies a Shaban, son of a Tuhfa Sultani, who had built a mosque (in 1452 CE) and endowed it with 6 ploughs’ worth of land in the village of Rakhival (close to modern Ahmedabad, Gujarat). Since the builder was also a favorite of the ruling sultan, a royal decree declared the garden as well as its trees and wells to be the perpetual property of this man’s descendants—both in the sons’ and in the daughters’ lines—and forbade the sultan-

5. Chatterjee, “The Locked Box.”

6. For a step-well and a mosque built by a Kafur Sultani in the early fourteenth century, see Desai, “Khalji and Tughluq Inscriptions from Gujarat,” nos. 488–89, 50–51, and for fuller history of the region in this period, see Sheikh, Forging a Region.


8. For the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, see Wink, Al-Hind; Anoooshahr, The Ghazi Sultans; Jackson, The Delhi Sultanate; Kumar, “Bandagi and Naukari”; for continued significance of male and female slaves in households and governments, see Eaton, A Social History; Ali, Malik Ambar; Sreenivasan, “Drudges, Dancing Girls, Concubines”; Chatterjee, “A Slave’s Quest for Selfhood”; Chatterjee and Guha, “Slave-Queen, Waif-Prince”; and Chatterjee, Gender, Slavery, and the Law.


10. Among the most recent are Babaie et al., Slaves of the Shah, and Toledano, “Ottoman Elite Enslavement.”


12. Desai, Arabic, Persian, and Urdu Inscriptions, nos. 12–14, 2. For other men and intersected persons (Khwajasera Bashir) identified as Sultani, see ibid., 2–10.
ate’s other officials from interfering with this estate. In sum, the second generation of a slave of a sultan (Tuhfa Sultan) had successfully established a domain autonomous of the sultan’s own taxation regime.

Identical patterns characterized those whom later records identified as “African”—such as the slave (‘abd al-Sultan) of Ahmad Shah Bahmani.\(^3\) This man, Malik Parvez, had been the son of a Qara’anjaf (lit. clove), but a twenty-one-line panegyrical to himself on a mid-fifteenth-century pillar that he had had constructed identified him only as the appointee of the sultan, wielder of the seal (shaped like a fish) and flag; other epigraphs provide his title as Malik-us-Sharq (Lord of the East). By the seventeenth century, then, such Afro-Asian men had merged into groups of native-born in the subcontinent: both were identified as dakhani (of the Deccan) in contrast to those who were afaq (associated with those of Central Asian genealogies).\(^4\) When such Dakhanis became governors in their own right, they conformed to the idealized notions of kingship held by their Hindu subjects and bureaucracies. The general Malik ‘Ambar illustrated this idealized kingship. As a local governor under the Nizamshahi sultanate, he confirmed the gifts of substantial lands to various Brahmans.\(^5\) Such gifts included lands given to a Vaisnava (Hindu) priest serving at the famous shrine at Pandharpur. These gifts were crucial to the development of monastic authority and wealth at such sites because they allowed the Brahman recipients to extract unpaid labor services (veth and begar) from people living on those lands. By acting to preserve local jati hierarchies and privileges, such governors upheld an idealized model of Hindu kings outlined in the dharmasastric texts as well. They did not act as a racialized laboring group, as many of their contemporaries exported to the Atlantic plantation economies in the same period were.

Moreover, if inscriptions on buildings sponsored by such Afro-Asian men provide any clues to how such men thought of themselves, those sponsored by Malik ‘Ambar are just as telling as those of the eighty-nine-year-old with which this essay began. They identify ‘Ambar in terms of his piety, not by the color of his skin or by his geographical origins: his own descriptors for himself were a “benefactor of humanity,” “defender of the devoted servant of the Lord of the Earth and Sea,” and “pillar of the kingdom.”\(^6\) Only from his son’s generation do we get their successors identified as “Sidi.” Especially in construction intended for pious purposes, men such as Malik ‘Ambar’s son, Sidi Sunbul, described themselves as the “humblest of the slaves of the court” (bandah-i-kamtarin-i-dargah), but nothing in their military careers suggested that they were at all weak.

However, the generational transformation of slaves into client-bureaucrats and governors sat at odds with their contemporaneous Iberians’ terms of social differentiation. The dominance of the Catholic Church among the Iberians from the twelfth century had enabled the Christian community to understand itself to be “made of a shared substance,” and that shared substance was blood.\(^7\) This self-understanding had allowed the spilling of the infidel’s blood as well as circumscribed the terms of endearment and consanguinity to a very narrow circle. Thus when the same Christian community in the Iberian Peninsula conducted naval hostilities against Arab and African Muslims (“Moros”) and Jews and exiled them from the kingdom in 1492, the same blood-based thinking took effect in the use of casta as a collective noun for biologically distinctive species. Iberians used the noun casta in conjunction with an idealized “purity of blood” or limpieza de sangre.\(^8\) As Tatiana Seijas tells us, black skin was taken to be the sign of bad blood.\(^9\) Such homologies had both legal and economic effects when the Portuguese set up colonies at Calicut and Cochin (in Malabar, south-

\(^{13}\) Haig, “Inscriptions from Daulatabad”; Kadiiri, “Inscription of the Bahmanis.” The Bahmani kingdom was established in the mid-fourteenth century and lasted until the early sixteenth; for a comprehensive view of the period, see Eaton and Wagoner, Power, Memory, Architecture.

\(^{14}\) Khalidi, Muslims in the Deccan, 84.

\(^{15}\) On grants to twenty-seven Brahmans between 1601 and 1625, see Tamaskar, Life, 297–99; for the wording of such grants, see Ambar’s grant to Akoba in Kadam, “ Forced Labour,” 58–59.


\(^{17}\) Anidjar, Blood, 39–78.

\(^{18}\) Guha, Beyond Caste, 26–27.

\(^{19}\) Seijas, Asian Slaves in Colonial Mexico, 18.
ern India), Goa, Daman, Diu (on the west coast of India), and Hugli on the east coast. The Inquisition acted as an instrument for segregating Bengali Catholics from their cohabitants, the Moors: conviction of the former often meant they were transported for sale elsewhere. Portuguese traders sold India-born slaves to the Spanish in Manila after separating them by the color of their skin: women who were “pretty fair and comely” and “olive-coloured” were sold as concubines at high prices, and “café girls from Mozambique and other places in Africa” were sold for less. Furthermore, using these modes of categorizing people meant that preexisting work associations, marital and birth-based clans, dormitories, and monastic tenants of the Buddhist, Hindu, and Islamic lineages of those who lived in the Iberian colonies or in their vicinities were also judged on the basis of the degree of admixture of blood each had from Jews or Muslims. Terms such as creole and mulatto/mulatta represented particular degrees of blood-based hybridity. By the eighteenth century, Portuguese dictionaries had confirmed the practices of the past by equating casta with botanical genus or race.

European uses of casta failed to convey the complex of privileges and proscriptions that attended all subcontinental collectives governed by local regimes. Among groups that relied on the secretarial and ritual skills of Brahman pandits in the subcontinent, jati was the closest equivalent for a birth-defined group. The four-fold moral-occupational ranking system known as varna in Sanskrit remained fluid because local governors treated each group in ways that shifted with the needs of the local political economy. As scholars of precolonial western India have found, the social-economic standing of each jati was open to public contest and adjudication. Tests of jati standing occurred regionally, and in terms of the group’s practices relative to food, occupation, liturgy, not in terms of purity of blood. Both collective (that is, other groups interacting or refusing to interact with members of a jati) and individual authorities, such as lay princes or their delegates or representatives, adjudicated claims of jatis to honor, income and access to practices, and resources and sites used by others. A good example might be that of a group that dealt with bodily wastes such as hair and nails—the barbers. Although ritually ranked as lowly, evidence from the sixteenth century shows that Hindu barbers from a place in Vijayanagar were exempted from paying taxes by their local governor, and they then received a grant of tax-free land that belonged to the Raichur fort. By the mid-seventeenth century, Muslim barbers (hajjam) in the Adil Shahi sultanate of Bijapur (that followed) secured identical exemptions from such taxes on the grounds that their compatriots elsewhere enjoyed these remissions. While such exemptions were shared by high-status groups, such as learned Brahmans, favored bankers, local governors could also deny access to precious goods—such as potable water in a dry region—to some groups, as one seventeenth-century governor did in the case of a step-well in Rajasthan. The condition of each occupational guild, association, marriage group, or clan (jati) depended on the particular use a local political-military force might have for it.

Therefore, when it came to Afro-Asians in the precolonial subcontinent, the appropriate question to ask was whether or not such groups were inevitably assigned to the status of lower-ranking jatis in each regional economy. The historically accurate answer is no. Scholarship on the Deccan in the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries establishes this firmly. Far from being
outcaste or even marginal castes, many young and adult males originating in families from the eastern or northern African mainlands were both devout disciples of various Islamic teachers as well as members of a highly prized soldiery. Indeed, so powerful were such corps by the seventeenth century that individual commanders of Mughal-Rajput armies from the north actively sought to win over such Afro-Asian commanders serving the Shi’a courts of Bijapur and Golkonda. For instance, in 1663, the Rajput commander Jai Singh informed the Mughal emperor that he had written to the “Habshis” to join the Mughals and “gain elevation by the grant of mansabs.”

A mansab was a bicameral rank: the first number (called zat, very close to the Sanskrit jati) indicated the personal genealogical, social, and cultural respectability of an appointee, while the second number (termed sawar) listed his responsibilities toward the raising of troops and men for the state. This system allowed the deployment of both heads of clans as well as commoners from Persian, Turkic, Afghan, Rajput, and Maratha groups; African soldiers and sailors were only one among such a polycultural imperial bureaucracy.

The funds that each mansabdar was allowed to use to maintain his household and raise troops and horses were drawn from revenues assigned on a place, town, or market, which was termed jagir. As Habib explains the system, there were some especially favored local hegemons, like Rajput chiefs, who obtained mansabs and whose own ancestral domains were considered to be a very special type of jagir—nontransferable, hereditary, and known in official terminology as watan. The practice was to assess summarily the total revenue of their territory at some figure and then assign to its ruler a rank for which the sanctioned pay would be equal to that figure. To hold a watan was to hold a specially favored place among the Mughal mansabdars. While other chiefs were expected to pay an annual tax (jama), watan-holders were only expected to pay a fixed annual offering (peshkhash), regarded as both hallmark of and substance of submission, but paid directly to the imperial treasury.

Incorporation into Mughal mansabdar-jagirdari only burnished the access to, and accumulation of, wealth and power in Afro-Asian clans. The careers of many Afro-Asian inductees thus followed the same graph. One was Sidi Miftah, commander of the fort of Udgir, who resisted Mughal arms for three years (1693–36 CE); after gunpowder blasted a gate, he negotiated with the Mughals and became a mansabdar. Another man, Randola Khan, descended from a long line of Afro-Asian or Dakhani soldiers, joined the Mughal administration sometime before 1658 CE. He was given the title Rustami-i-Zaman, deputed to conquer western Kanara (modern Karnataka), and thereafter, his family held the south Konkan-Kanara district as their jagir. Epigraphs from the 17th century refer to the highly ranked Randola Khan as the “exalted ghazi.” This man’s administrative writ also extended to parts of seventeenth-century Rajasthan. A bilingual record of 1682–83 from Kota shows that though the emperor had prohibited the levying of nonagricultural taxes (or sa’ir) especially on the traders and the Brahmins (zunwardar) of a town there, the latter agreed to pay half these sums to the agents of Randola Khan, the jagirdar.

Mughal Historians and the Representation of a Mughal Nobility

Mughal chroniclers, contemporaries of such soldier-bureaucrats, were thus respectful of such Afro-Asian mansabdars. Khafi Khan, a native of Bukhara (Central Asia), served as a secretary to a Mughal officer in the Deccan during the latter half of the seventeenth century. He had lived in the vicinity of Surat, the preeminent port on the west coast of India that had been annexed by the Mughals in 1572. Not only did he know about the Sidis from others, he also personally knew one of the main leaders, the man referred to in his narrative as Sidi Yaqut. Thus he reported that his sources...
included hearsay “from the men of that country,” but also personal testimony “from Yaqut Khan himself.”\textsuperscript{32} Khafi Khan’s account, based on both personal knowledge and eyewitness testimony, reveals admiration for Yaqut’s courage and strategic planning. It also provides fairly detailed accounts of the military-naval strategies by which Yaqut and his fellow corpsman or brother, Khayriyat, combined to take control of a line of forts in the region away from the Maratha generals, equally potent rivals of the Mughal governors of the time. A second Mughal chronicler, the Brahman Ishwardas Nagar, also lived on the west coast (Pakpattan, Gujarat) and held these Afro-Asian personages in great respect.

Both chroniclers provide glimpses of the ways in which slaves of soldiers could eventually rise to high office and rank. Khafi Khan described Habshi battalions serving under the command of an Afghan governor in the Konkan in the late 1670s. He noted that the “entire administration of the Jazirah and most of his household affairs” were in the hands of Sidi Sunbul, Sidi Yaqut (I), and Sidi Khayriyat. Each man in turn had ten Abyssinian soldier-slaves trained by him. When their master—the Afghan governor—contemplated the surrender of the island to the Marathas, the three Abyssinian commanders imprisoned him, declared Sunbul as their chief, and negotiated with the Mughal commander (the Rajput Mirza Raja Jai Singh) directly for an honorable rank in the Mughal mansabdar-jagirdar structure.

The chroniclers clarify the extent to which the maintenance of social honor and rank were part of negotiated submission. Ishwardas Nagar identified Sidi Yaqut as the commander of the fort Danda-Rajpuri. This chronicler’s narrative attributed to Yaqut the specific demand: “From today I accept the overlordship of the Emperor and join the imperial service, but I should not be asked to wait upon the subedar of Deccan and be given from the treasury of the port of Surat every year, one lakh and fifty thousand rupees for the maintenance of the artillery [topekhana] and the fort. I will not permit passage to the ships of the enemy but shall (allow) free passage to the imperial ships.”\textsuperscript{33} As a result of such negotiations, the three Abyssinian men were inducted into the Mughal bureaucracy, but they were inducted as watandars. Their forts were never given in jagir to other Mughal officers, and whenever they were mentioned as having sent any money or goods to the imperial treasury, the term used for these payments was peshkash, not jama. Thus Khafi Khan, when he was called to court (in the Deccan), said of Sidi Yaqut, “[He sent] several lakhs of rupees as a peshkash, and supplied two or three thousand infantry with necessary equipment for siege.”\textsuperscript{34} In other words, what these local historians sought to convey was the treatment of such Afro-Asians as ancestral chiefs, or watandars.

Both Mughal chronicles also enable historians to understand the ways in which such local potentates were critical elements in the extension of Mughal dominance over Maratha forces in the peninsula and in preserving Mughal command over a coastline, critical to keeping pilgrimage and mercantile shipping lanes open to Muscat (in Yemen) and the Persian Gulf in general. This was especially significant in the period after 1680 for the stability of the Mughal Empire. After 1680, the Maratha sirdars were joined by a rebellious imperial prince (Muhammad Akbar, the third son of Aurangzeb). When their forces in turn appeared to have joined those of the Portuguese and Dutch on the outskirts of Pancholi, Mughal armies sent to smash this alliance suffered terribly from scarcity of food and supplies. Khayriyat Khan and Yaqut Khan saved the day by bringing ships full of grain to the camp.\textsuperscript{35} Khafi Khan credits the corps with having captured and drowned at least a hundred of the Maratha sailors (khalasis) in one such encounter. These encounters were as fateful for the Abyssinian commanders and fleets

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\item was known by another name (Sidi Ambar, according to Khafi Khan; Sidi Surur according to later scholars), then inherited the dead man’s title and was alive in 1729–30 CE: for construction sponsored by the latter, see ARIE, 1561–62, appendix D, nos. 137, 139–41; for the complete history see Jasdanwalla, “The Sidi Kingdom of Janjira.”
\item Haq, Khafi Khan’s History of Alamgir, 229.
\item Ahmad, Futuhat-i-Alamgiri, 85. The editor suggests that the history was composed in either 1699–1700 or 1701.
\item Haq, Khafi Khan’s History of Alamgir, 506.
\item Ahmad, Futuhat-i-Alamgiri, 143.
\end{itemize}
as they were for the Marathas. On the one hand, the latter entrenched themselves along the forts of Colaba (part of modern Mumbai) in order to destroy the Abyssinian command of the sea. On the other hand, the successes of the Abyssinian navies and armies in holding a sea-lane open and their success in maintaining networks of news reporters around the littoral meant that they were the ones who could confirm whether or not a rebel prince (Akbar) who had set sail from Surat had arrived at Muscat.31 The work of the Sidis in both providing military and naval intelligence to the Mughal court and in keeping the English factors and governors in Surat and Bombay from becoming overmighty subjects was acknowledged by all seventeenth-century French and English servants of the respective commercial companies.32

The Sidis were also recognized by rapid promotions given to these significant members of the Mughal administration in the late seventeenth century. By the time Sidi Sunbul died, he had been promoted to the mansab of 900.33 After his death, Sidi Yaqut’s successes against the Marathas, of which he kept the Mughals informed, led to frequent promotions from the imperial court. By 1696–97 (the thirty-ninth year of Aurangzeb’s reign, to be precise), when Sidi Khayriyat Khan died, he had risen to the post of commandant of Bari and fort of Rahiri.34 Promotions were always recorded in terms of an officer’s elevation of both zat and sawar. So the careful mention of these ranks of the three Afro-Asian commanders was significant in the Mughal histories: Sidi Sunbul was given a mansab of 400 zat/200 sawar, Sidi Yaqut 300 zat/100 sawar, and Sidi Khayriyat 200 zat/100 sawar. These were certainly not on the scale of zat-sawar that long-serving grandees such as the (Hindu) Rajput officers of the administration enjoyed. But nor were they the lowest rungs of the ladder, such as that of the 50 zat status assigned to the (free) son-in-law of a favored slave woman in Aurangzeb’s household.35 Just as significant for its time, a direct sum of five thousand rupees was offered in cash for expenses and a flourishing jagir in the vicinity of the fort of Surat, the main commercial entrepôt of the west coast, which the Marathas continued to covet.

Since the ranks were negotiated individually, there was quite a variation among Sidi commanders even as they submitted to Mughal forces. This is obvious from Ishwardas Nagar’s description of Sidi Masud Khan, the chief administrator (wazir-im-mullaq) and commander-in-chief (sipah salar) of the kingdom of Bijapur:36 His outpost was located in the very strong fortress of Adoni, high on a hill opposite the Maratha-held Painghata. When Sidi Masud found his soldiers amenable to compromise with the Mughal armies, he too negotiated a surrender of the fort. In exchange, he received an imperial confirmation of the watandari of the fort of Mudgil; he was personally assigned 7000 zat/5000 sawar mansab; his son, Sidi Khan Muhammad, already commanding the fort of Bangalore (in Karnataka), was given a 5000 zat/5000 sawar mansab.

The final test of imperial elevation lay in the sphere of inheritance. One of the least discussed aspects of Mughal economic legislation is the place of wala (mutual obligations of manumittor and client freedman) in Mughal policies of inheritance from each of their mansabdars. In Sunni jurisprudence, the manumittor (or senior mawla) counted as one of the heirs of a freedman; in Shia jurisprudence, the manumittor (or senior mawla) or his/her direct descendant could claim to be the first of the heirs of a freedman or freedwoman. From the imperial perspective, such decisions were based on a complex mix of factional politics, the economic prosperity of the area from which the jagir drew its revenue, and the need to transfer intergenerational loyalty and strengthen an imperial government. A decision to let a deceased mansabdar’s jagir be passed to his heirs was not a natural decision: it signaled that the imperial bureaucracy had decided to treat the heirs as an honorable lineage autonomous in its proprietary authority. Significantly, in the case of the Sidis of Janjira, the
Mughal officers did not resume the wealth or estates of the dead Sidi. Sidi Yaqut was allowed to inherit all the worldly goods of the dead Khayriyat. This included not merely a huge sum of money. It also allowed Yaqut to take Khayriyat’s widow and young sons to Yaqut’s island fortress. Khafi Khan takes pains to record that when Sidi Yaqut died, he left behind an adopted Sidi Ambar as his successor. The instruction left for this Sidi Ambar befitted a Mughal watandan: it was better to mortgage one’s person and belongings to pay the annual tribute to the imperial court than to allow the administration of one’s own country to go into the hands of others.47 So well understood were the principles of watan-holding by other Mughal bureaucrats that they agreed among themselves that “only the Abyssinians and particularly those trained by Sidi Yaqut could administer those mountainous regions, command the fort of Rahiri and keep the sea passage to the House of Allah open.” The emperor confirmed the policy and allowed Sidi Ambar to be promoted from a junior to a senior mansab and to inherit the title Yaqut Khan. The epigraphic evidence leaves little doubt that the Mughal historians who described these honors bestowed on individual Siddis were accurate: the epigraphs show an entire dynasty, of Yaqut’s daughters and sons, who alone were buried inside the fort.48 By extending honorable treatment from life to death, including in matters of succession to titles and inheritance of property, the Mughal bureaucracy confirmed the status of particular dynasties of Afro-Asian and Dakhani sailors and soldiers.

Among the variables that affected the consolidation of social capital by such Mughal mansabdars was marriage. Some of the favored Rajputs had earned this prestigious position by giving their daughters and sisters as brides to individual Mughal princes.49 Although we have very few details of the Afro-Asian marriages, what we do have suggests that these too were prestigious ones. Just as the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Rajput mansabdars patronized major Vaisnava, Jain, and Saiva monastic lineages and sites along the Indo-Gangetic plains, the Afro-Asians patronized classical Arabic learning and strengthened their claims as pious and compliant Muslims by bestowing their own daughters as brides to men of Arab and Sayyid lineages. The biographical dictionary compiled in the eighteenth century and known as the Maathir-ul-umara describes a Jamal Khan Habshi, a commander of a hundred troops under the early Nizamshahi dynasty, as a disciple of a Yemeni Arab, Mir Sayyid Muhammad, settled in Jaunpur (modern Uttar Pradesh, India), who proclaimed himself as the Mahdi sometime in 1501 CE.50 Such millennial figures and movements were common to Buddhist, Zoroastrian, and Islamic pasts. What was distinctive about this moment was that it came so close upon another mid-fourteenth-century Mahdavi proclaimer who had been killed for having declared himself against the ulema.51 Although this particular Jaunpuri Mahdavi shaykh and his successors died by 1524, it appears that Jamal Khan’s patronage brought the shaykhs’ more pacific descendant, Saiyyid Ihlad, to western India, where Ihlad’s son was married to Jamal Khan’s daughter. The biographer makes it plain that in this marriage the incoming groom, though a Saiyyid noble with genealogical claims to descent from the prophet, was the one who gained materially from the affinal relationship with Jamal Khan. The groom became master of goods and undertakings. An Afro-Asian who married his daughter into the social and theological aristocracy of his time was no doubt a powerful potentate as well as one who had accumulated a great deal of symbolic capital to his credit in the precolonial networks that existed across the Indian Ocean world.

These twin devotional and affinal relationships were key aspects of social capital, the accumulation of which was the goal of much economic and political activity of early modern mansabdars. Noteworthy in this regard were the relationships between Afro-Asian generals and sayyids (descendants of the Prophet Muhammad) from the Hadra-
mansabdari (southwestern Arabian Peninsula), long considered a center of Islamic learning. The Hadrami shaykhhs were skilled in Shafi‘i jurisprudence (one of four madhhabs in the Sunni tradition). Engseng Ho has provided the example of texts produced in the Muslim Sultanate of Gujarat (western India); one of these, written in 1603, was by a shaykh ‘Abd al-Qadir b. ‘Abd Allah Al‘Aydarus which presented a disciple from Ethiopia (Habashi), the slave (mamluk) Rayhan Badr al-din Jahankirkhani. The biographer represented the slave as having given his teacher, the Arab shaykh, “many poems and expended whatever he possessed in his service ... both this slave and all he owned was for his master.”

This lineage of Hadrami shaykhhs was beloved not only of the Nizamshahi sultan but also of the Sultan’s vazir, Malik ‘Ambar, and after the latter’s death, of his son.55

A very similar picture of patronage by yet another Afro-Asian commander of Nizamshahi forces emerges in the biography of Sidi Miftah, the commander of the strong fortress of Udgir. After the Mughal conquest of Udgir in 1636, this commander was incorporated into the Mughal mansabdari-jagirdari system on a fairly significant rank (of 3,000) and given a title (Habsh Khan) and jagir (in the Nandair district in modern Maharashtra). This figure too is described as a great disciple-cum-patron of a mystic, a ‘Baba Firuz dirvesh in the town of Pathri. Apparently, it was Sidi Miftah who bore the monthly and annual expenses of the shaykh’s monastery (khanqah). When the said Baba died, the disciple built his tomb in Pathri, a shrine that was a site of pilgrimage until at least the mid-eighteenth century. This devotee’s jagir became one more node in the network of Arabic learning: Sidi Miftah settled “many Arab Saiyyids there . . . sent for many valuable books from Arabia.”

Even in the early eighteenth century, Mughal biographers and chroniclers continued to revere the memory of these Afro-Asian commanders for their devotional identities thus: “There was Bilal, the servant of the Apostle of God / After 1,000 years, there came Malik ‘Ambar.”56 Indeed, if such figures saw themselves as pious followers of a variety of shaykhhs and sayyids, and their Central Asian contemporaries saw them as princely and honorable figures with enormous political and symbolic capital, then from which period and why has their memory been vitiated? Did it coincide with the proliferation of regional or subimperial governments in the eighteenth century, as an expansive Mughal mansabdari-jagirdari system was reconstituted by multiple lineages and factions in the subcontinent?

If we follow the lead of the chroniclers in treating watandari privileges closely, we see that the early eighteenth century was marked by greater pressure on some Sidi dignitaries’ ability to maintain their hereditary privileges. Habsh Khan’s grandsons were not treated as watandars in their grandfather’s and father’s place: villages in their jagir were assigned to other Mughal appointees. The Sidi’s grandsons resisted, only to have the eldest imprisoned. Only the Nizam-ul-Mulk Asif Jah, who would shortly establish a successor state of his own in Hyderabad, secured the release of this Sidi grandson. Although we do not hear of the specific ways in which the forces of the Nizam continued to rely on these eminent men of impeccable social capital, Munis Faruqui has noted that this Mughal provincial governor had begun recruiting artillery forces of his own in the 1700s, both intimidating his peers and resisting his superiors at the same time.

Something of this possible military career path may have remained available to other Afro-Asians in other Mughal provinces as well, such as in Bengal in the mid-eighteenth century. Bharatchandra, a poet at the court of Nadia, counted among the Brahman raja’s entourage a Habshi Imam-baksh, the leader (pradhani) of the habshi, who superintended the supply of elephants, horses, and camels for the household court.57 Such eighteenth-century poets did not merely place habshi males as superintendent of guards at fortresses in their narrative poetry.58 They emphatically located them as

52. Ho, “Names beyond Nations,” 219. I thank Uday Chandra for drawing my attention to this publication.
54. Beveridge, Maathir-al-umara, 1596.
55. Ibid., 536.
56. Faruqui, “At Empire’s End.”
58. See “habshir thana” at the entrance to Bard-dhaman fortress in ibid., 210.
figures who commanded the respect of other leading men (sardars) even when they described them as “habshi ghulam” of a powerful kotwal (an officer with superior policing functions). 59

In the eighteenth century, though the stresses of the Mughal bureaucracy were showing, some successful Afro-Asian lineages remained in their old areas of settlement. Some preserved their watan even against the gradual English annexation of western and central peninsular regimes. By 1818, when an aggressive English East India Company wiped out the independent Maratha chieftdoms in central and western India, the Sidis in Janjira were recognized as a “native state.” 60 But these were no longer regimes with the power to protect their clients. Their modes of burnishing social capital—by means of patronage of learning, their command over the physical reproduction and training of the young and of immigrants—on lands controlled by them as patrons were gradually eroded in the nineteenth century.

The Reconstitution of African as Subaltern in British Colonial Navies

Cedric Robinson reminds us that a “structured ignorance” of such pasts legitimated the racialization of the most difficult regimes of labor extracted from African bodies transported to the plantations. 61 However, one of the little understood aspects of the process by which such ignorance was generated was itself historical. As commercial competition among various European companies sped up from the latter half of the seventeenth century, so did a search for competitive advantages. Access to labor was one of the key grounds of such advantage. Thus Iberian and Catholic modes of adjudication and punishment gradually turned the Bengali or Cochin Catholics into a lesser-ranked judication and punishment gradually turned the vantage. Thus Iberian and Catholic modes of adjudication and punishment gradually turned the vantage. Therefore, an aggressive English East India Company wiped out the independent Maratha chieftdoms in central and western India, the Sidis in Janjira were recognized as a “native state.” 60 But these were no longer regimes with the power to protect their clients. Their modes of burnishing social capital—by means of patronage of learning, their command over the physical reproduction and training of the young and of immigrants—on lands controlled by them as patrons were gradually eroded in the nineteenth century.


61. Robinson, Black Marxism, 81–82.


64. Chatterjee, “Abolition by Denial.”


in order to bond those found guilty to labor on Iberian galleys, gunpowder factories, and church-based hospitals. This trend continued into the eighteenth century, when, as Lauren Benton tells us, Iberian reliance on such laborers constructed a greater military presence in a chain of islands in an imperial system. 62 That Iberian project merged existing mechanisms of banishment and impressments, gathering up deserters from armies and merging them with exiles of criminal convicts to penal servitude.

Competition led to the emulation of similar tactics by the English company. From the 1770s, the British East India Company navies too began to enroll whatever laboring bodies it could take off other European powers’ boats. In 1795, when the British East India Company took over coastal Ceylon (named Sri Lanka from 1971) from the Dutch, the company’s hunger for manpower grew manifold. From 1801, the British governor of the island had authorized the secret purchase of Africans at the Indian ports of Bombay and the Portuguese-held Goa, Daman, and Diu all along the west coast. 63 An expense statement from 1804 shows that the British governor of the island had spent a substantial 20,219 rix dollars to buy seventy-nine grown African men and nineteen African boys capable of bearing arms (and two women) and in transporting them all to Colombo.

From 1807, and in the Indian Ocean in particular, parliamentary abolition of British trade in slaves had a contradictory effect: British naval patrols of both Crown and company took valuable crew off others’ boats and ships, and did so without paying compensation to the owners. 64 This was more or less admitted by the governor of Sri Lanka in 1805–11, when he said that the 500–600-member “Negro Regiment” “had been scraped together out of Prize vessels.” 65 As Benton and Lisa Ford put it, similar British naval measures on the Atlantic expanded the reach of British admiralty courts (with jurisdiction over prize money) but did not disrupt the notion that slaves
were human property or suggest that trafficking in them was a universal crime. Benton and Ford do not discuss is whether this also constituted a kind of primitive accumulation, per Karl Marx, of laborers in the hands of the British.

A closer look at the evidence suggests that this question should be reopened. By the 1830s, British Indian naval tactics of stopping and searching all European ships on the suspicion of carrying slaves, as well as taking both freedmen and slaves off the boats, turned a vast Indian Ocean into what Edward Alpers identifies as a “British lake.” So-called rescues allowed British navies and colonial officials to absorb Afro-Asian youth found on these ships into a laboring group in British-controlled workshops. For instance, in 1835–36, seventy young African boys and girls (between six and fifteen years old) were forcibly taken off the Arab-commanded dhows sailing between Porbandar (port in Gujarat) and Bombay. Instead of the secretarial, soldiering, and treasury work that had previously been open to such African children, the Muslim boys were now either sent directly to work on the boats of the British Indian navy or handed over as private servants to British naval officers such as a Captain Henderson, the agent for clothing the army, who had estates in the Cape of Good Hope. Yet others were given to British police constables, army officers, and clerks in the British Indian bureaucracy. The girls were put to domestic service in establishments managed by individual British and Portuguese functionaries in Bombay. Their new employers contracted “to feed, clothe and protect them,” and above all, bring them up as Christians. On the Indian Ocean then was perfected the device that enabled British naval power to move thousands of “liberated” boys and men “into long indentures, generating profits for their captors and for a web of ancillary agents.” For in the 1840–50s, rescues continued off boats sailing from Aden even though many of the young men taken off these boats were freedmen, working as naval crew in boats plying between Aden, Karachi, and Bombay. Many of these men were turned to work for British boats in the same seas. Given this evidence, one should see these rescues as primitive accumulation on the high seas that did not precede, but paralleled, the making of metropolitan and industrial capitalism of the United Kingdom.

“Liberation” also enabled the initiation of a process that resulted in what Marxist historians would identify as the abstraction of labor. There were reports that in the 1830s, when a cargo of children was rescued from boats, seventeen of the young African Muslim boys and eleven of the girls “refused to serve Christians,” they were sent off with local Portuguese (Catholic) gentlemen. Many of these young Muslims resisted (“were wayward,” says the note). Their reluctance was overcome by putting them directly in a British-run school, “saying nothing about religion,” but yoking them indirectly to a Protestant ethic of time and work. Christopher Brown suggests that to “convert slaves to Christianity in retrospect tends to look more like an attack on the Africans’ cultural inheritance... an attempt to colonize the spirit to better exploit the body.” Such schooling of the spirit and body was, however, the beginning of the process of abstracting the Muslim out of these bodies. Only the most stubborn, usually young boys, could evade a mandatory Christianization and secure lodging in the houses of local Muslims. By 1856, such African

68. Secy to Govt of Bombay to Secy Gol, 22 Aug 1836, National Archives of India, Delhi (hereafter NAI), Foreign Political Consultations (hereafter FPC): NAI, FPC, 19 Sept 1836, nos. 10–16. The boats came from the imam of Muscat and sailed by the Arabian Sea touching on ports commanded by princes in small estates on the west coast of India who were not yet subordinated by British arms or treaties. These ports were home to specialist mercantile and trading groups, who contracted with the Arab boat owners to navigate to and back from Bombay. For an illuminating glimpse of women investors in such trades, see Sheikh, “Jibhabhu’s Rights to Ghee.”
70. Benton and Ford, Rage for Order, 118.
71. For Nasib the khalasi, see correspondence in the Oriental and India Office Records (OIOC), British Library: OIOC, 1/4/2066/9/48; for Mubarak the Hyderabadi sailor rescued as an “Abyssinian slave,” see OIOC f/4/2157/103/48.
72. NAI, FPC, 19 Sept 1836; see entries of 19 Feb. 1836, Enclosure 37; 23 Feb 1836, Enclosure 40.
73. Brown, Moral Capital, 58.
74. For an instance of this resistance see the case of ten- to thirteen-year-old Muslims named Saagar, Salman, and Kamas: NAI, FPC, 24 Jan 1838, no. 11, Enclosures 1–12. For oaths signed by a "Fazleedar Bare Miyan" and “Hyderally Cassimjee” to bring the boys up as “domestic servants,” see NAI FPC, 28 March 1838, no. 18.
children were all being sent to an orphanage set up at Nashik called the British Indian Institution. The missionary who superintended this institution also believed that the rescued young men (some of them actually learning the “Maratha alphabet under a pandit”) were only “born to hard labour and require it for health.” Mid-nineteenth-century colonial antislaving operations in the Indian Ocean show that more and more young children from Afro-Asian coastal societies—speaking Arabic as well as Swahili and related dialects—found their way to British institutions such as at Nashik.

One can only surmise that such schools had a place in the transformation of Afro-Asian bodies into subalternity, locating them as eventual creators of surpluses that gathered in hands elsewhere. This process of accumulation thus continued for other regimes and households of the subcontinent as well. In 1859, when the Shi’a potentate in Awadh (Wajid Ali Shah) had his kingdom annexed to British India, all fifty-four males in his household who were of African descent were liberated. But twenty-nine of these, between the ages of fifteen and thirty-five, were then reemployed by the local colonial administration as sweepers and jail wardens. Thus they went from positions of intimacy with a prince to the status of petty cogs in the colonial wheel.

Furthermore, abolitionism simultaneously allowed the company administration to unravel and reconstitute Mughal interstate diplomacy between states on the west coast of India and those of the Persian Gulf and eastern African coasts. These relationships had been based on mutual recognition of identical laws of property, securities, and mortgages. Boundaries of proprietorship were scrupulously maintained in such diplomatic contexts. For instance, Hindu rulers like the rao of Kutch (Maharao Sri Dayasinhji) had given shelter to six African Muslim slaves when they complained at the capital Bhuj that they had been starved by the captain of an Arabian Sea vessel passing through Mandavi. The rao had allowed these slaves to live as members of his household. But when the navigator of the vessel proved to the rao that the slaves belonged to a near relation of the Shi’a imam of Muscat, the rao immediately restored them to their rightful owners. This was not, however, the way in which British officers after the dissolution of the East India Company’s charter of trade (in 1833) treated either the African Muslim subjects or the property even of the Hindu Vania mercantile agents of a distant (Shi’a) imam of Muscat. Take for instance the fate of the ten Sidis (four boys between the ages of ten and sixteen and six girls of undisclosed ages), sent by the imam’s relations to their Bania commercial agent in India (at Rajkot, a man called Madhoji). All were simply taken over by the company’s officers and brought up by a private Christian orphanage run by a Doctor Wilson.

For sure, Mughal bureaucracies had absorbed their rivals’ administrators, too. But they had done so at considerable expense to their own treasuries. Moreover, until the eighteenth century, most Muslim courts and judges had favored the slave-born (khanahzada) in ways that the British colonial regime did not. From the early nineteenth century on, company taxation and military policies came down hard on those ex-slaves and freedmen who served as treasurers and stewards (khwajaserai) in most princely households. As company subsidiary alliances dispossessed the lay Muslim lordships, they also despoiled the wealth of the intersexed Mughal stewards (khwajaserai). For instance, in households of the Shia who governed Awadh and Murshidabad in the early nineteenth century, many well-established khwajaserai (such as Almas Ali Khan, Darab Ali Khan) had accumulated huge estates. Their wills left some parts of their estates in waqf; the rest of their estates were claimed by the male Nawabs who were direct descendants of the original manumittors.

75. Chief Sec. GOBy to Beadon, Sec. to GOI, 30 March 1859, NAI, Home Education, 29 April 1859, nos. 1–3.
76. See letter of R. R. Cousins, Asst. Minister of Trinity Chapel and Superintendent of African Asylum to the Sec. to Govt., General, 15 February 1859, and Director of Public Instruction to Chief Sec. to Govt., 7 March 1859, and Chief Sec. GOBy to Sec. to GOI, 23 June 1859, NAI, Home Education, 15 July, nos. 1–2.
77. Sec. to Government of North West Provinces and Oudh to Sec. to GOI, Foreign, 5 April 1878, NAI, Foreign General B, May 1878, nos. 169–71.
78. For precolonial interstate relations in the Afrasian Sea, see Patel, “Maritime Trade.”
79. Asst Resident Bhuj to Secy to Govy of Bbey, 11 Feb. 1836, NAI, FPC [Foreign Political Proceedings], 23 Feb. 1836, Enclosure 64.
80. Extract Poll Progs. GOBy, 16 Nov 1836, Enclosures 1–12, in NAI, FPP, 6 Feb. 1837, no. 7.
of such men, Shari’a provisions of wala (the mutual obligations of manumittor and manumitted) made pious Islamic manumittors appear as hindrances to the smooth operation of British private capitalists keen to establish indigo, tea, and coffee plantations in such estate-held lands. A clause in Act V of 1843 prohibited any master from claiming anything from another person on the grounds that he or she had been a slave. This clause was directed at those Muslim masters whose descendants claimed to inherit property on the basis of wala. When the Nawab of Surat died in 1842, it was found that he had left behind a daughter born of his former slave-concubine; he had emancipated the concubine the day before he had married her ritually. In 1877, this widow had died, leaving two granddaughters. The dead man’s niece (brother’s daughter) claimed the cash and immovable property, over and above the claim of the granddaughters. The judge of Surat argued that the Act V of 1843 rendered the plaintiff’s claim inadmissible. The High Court of Bombay upheld this position. By 1879, so did the Privy Council, holding that the operation of Islamic legal institutions (such as wala) constituted a “disability” in the lives of descendants of freedmen.81

Identical policies were also implemented vis-à-vis the indirectly ruled groups of native sovereignties left over from the older Mughal-Rajput systems of shared governance. Since the early nineteenth century, the Shia and Sunni ruling houses found themselves learning new doctrines of “illegitimacy” as a result of birth from a slave mother. By the 1840–50s, multigenerational households and establishments among the landholders in Rajasthan and Central India received the same message.82 In the later 1860s and 1870s the project of reconstituting legitimate lineages was extended across the Indian Ocean littoral, to include the Hindu (Vaisnava) and Jain allies of various Arab and African potentates as well.83 British abolitionist officers set about reconstituting Gujarati Bania households with African servants along racialized lines, attempting to drive African Muslims out of their favored statuses along the Arab-Persian-Sindhi (Pakistan) littoral.84

However, at the same time, British administrators sought to create allies among the Indian princes by granting some of the latter a special dispensation regarding the employment of such African-born boys and men. Thus after the Revolt of 1857, when the British government of India sought allies among erstwhile native sovereigns, a nizam of Hyderabad was allowed to display his household force of mounted cavalry called “African Cavalry,” many of whom had been first-generation imports of the 1850s.85 It is likely that descendents of such Afro-Asians in the twentieth century became part of what ethnographers working in Hyderabad at that date encountered as chaush, a unit in the nizam’s army.86 But such ethnographers also reported that their modern Hadrami interlocutors distanced themselves from these descendents (of erstwhile patrons) by calling them “false Arabs.” The disaggregation of a once-vibrant network of connections was complete.

By the late nineteenth century, such efforts came together in an officially choreographed disruption of geopolitics as well as affinal and devotional networks that had enmeshed many households and regions across the Indian Ocean. Spies working on behalf of British naval patrols and residents at Aden reported that a pious Hafiz Abdul Qayum had set sail from Mecca to Bhopal with four women who had been slaves in various parts of the Arabian Peninsula. The man was caught and put on trial. Although all the members of the Bhopal household gave evidence that what looked like a purchase was an act of emancipation

82. Major, “Enslaved Spaces,” 315–42.
83. For family firms that operated across Kachchh, Bombay, Muscat, and Zanzibar, see Goswami, The Call of the Sea, 191–238; for the offense that British abolitionist officers gave to all parties, see ibid., 255–56.
84. For descriptions of Africans in Kutchee households in Zanzibar, see British Consul to Acting Ch. Secy Gby, 22 Jan 1869, NAI, Delhi, FPP, A, July 1869, no. 229.
85. See Robbins Collection, in Robbins and McLeod, African Elites; for an explanation of this troop, see Khalidi, Muslims in the Deccan, 86.
86. Manger, Hadrami Diaspora, 51; for postcolonial ethnography of Yemeni-Habshi chaush, see Basu et al., “Daff Music,” 288–303, and Basu, “The Sidi and the Cult of Bava Gor in Gujarat.”
valued in Islamic law, their pleas did not prevent the Hafiz from being imprisoned. Furthermore, colonial officials took this opportunity to condemn the Hafiz’s patron, a man of eminent Sayyid ancestry and considerable immersion in Arabic and Quranic exegesis, Muhammad Siddiq Hasan Khan, of being a “low seditious scoundrel.”87 Suspecting him of being a Wahhabi and of sending envoys to Mecca in order to secure support for a claim as a spiritual leader in British Bhopal, the British government of India deposed this man from the administration of Bhopal by 1885. The fact that he was the husband of the ruling begum provided him no protection.88

Racializing Memory and History, Erasing Connected Pasts

At the same time that it happened in the Atlantic world, abolitionism also produced a rhetoric about working groups in the Indian subcontinent as slaves. Officials of the British East India Company in the late eighteenth century (Charles Grant in 1792, H. T. Colebooke in 1794) in particular equated the Vedic varna, sudra, with the status of slaves on the pattern of the plantations of the Northern Atlantic economies.89 This was amplified by Baptist missionaries like William Ward (1821) in their letters to the leaders of the transatlantic abolitionist movement in Bristol, Boston, New York, and elsewhere.90 Such address was effective. It allowed many planters to employ Indian cultivators on indentures, especially after 1833. Within India, especially after 1837, when the company’s court of directors decided to move to producing more cotton (in order to make Britain independent of the United States), they even recruited (white male) overseers from the American Deep South to discipline Indian peasant cultivators for the same purpose.91 By 1841, ideologies of racism and violence toward Indian peasant cultivators had become normative. Unhappily, the persistent pairing of African bodies with the most horrific forms of labor regimes in North American and Caribbean plantations also provided the gauges for measuring the limits of white working conditions and wages. Indeed, even Charles Dickens adapted abolitionist discourse to speak of the (white) London poor in his novel Bleak House.92 African bodies also provided the analogue of the (presumed white and male) waged laborers who found themselves in chains in Marx and Friedrich Engels’s Communist Manifesto.93 Until the 1850s, Marx also praised British rule in India for having dissolved those “village-communities” that he found “contaminated by distinctions of caste and by slavery.”94 European and North American suffragists, emerging from the transatlantic abolitionist movements, appropriated the identical narratives in their own political projects in the late nineteenth century.95

These discursive moves were strengthened by ideas of scientific racism of the early Victorian ethnologists and geologists, which reinforced the ideology of racism as disguise for economic political extraction. Together they allowed three insidious aspects of nineteenth-century abolitionism to remain unchallenged. These were (a) the equation of all “African” bodies with hard labor and all “slavery” to merge into total disenfranchisement that allowed the complete marginalization of South and west Asian histories from the nineteenth century until the present; (b) the implicit legitimation of the reuse of Afro-Asian men and boys in British colonial armies and navies as the substance of “emancipation”; and (c) a subtle erasure of Muslim lay and devotional identities by privileging the emancipation of the European female and the (Hindu and Buddhist?) Sudra. The shifting status of the Sudra in particular had a considerable impact among the colonized literati of the subcontinent. Thus the doctrine of the Aryan race—believed to have originated in some sandy, arid mountainous terrain in Eurasia and descended into the Gangetic plains, turning the...
aborigines there into slaves (dasa)—returned with great effect in vernacular Indian discourse from the late nineteenth century. In one particular case, relying on this doctrine as learned from a “Dr Prichard,” Jyotiba Phule, a literate non-Brahman (of the gardener caste), replaced the terms Aryan with Brahman and slave with Sudra. Enthused by transatlantic abolitionist discourse and encouraged by Union victories in the American Civil War, Phule hailed the “good people of the United States” who had shown “self-sacrificing devotion in the cause of Negro slavery” in his pamphlet Ghulamgiri. In it Phule called on his countrymen to perform a similar emancipation of their “Sudra brethren from their Brahman thraldom.”

Ghulamgiri showed that to be politically active in nineteenth-century British India was to be well versed in abolitionist rhetoric, and even to endorse Euro-American claims to saviorhood. This rhetoric did not distinguish between monastic or lay attachments or concede that Afro-Asian Muslims and princes had sustained many Brahmins, as well as granted them the powers that were now anathema in the twentieth century. In participating in a continuing elision of historical modes of attaching and accumulating social and moral ritual capital, Phule’s pamphlet vernacularized an ongoing cultural distance from the Afro-Asian histories of the subcontinent. These in turn were amplified in the twentieth century, when multiple political parties and movements impelled colonial and postcolonial historians to find the same equations in records of antiquity.

A second discursive position, also growing since the late nineteenth century, paralleled this relearned theory of Aryan nationhood. Members of the older Mughal-Nizamat administrative regimes, some with older scholarly traditions of Urdu-language histories and genealogies, presented themselves with origins outside the territorialized nation. These genealogical histories, while accurate, were published just when the majority of the rural and non-Muslim subjects of regimes such as those of the Nizams were being organized in new solidarities by forces of religious-linguistic and ethnocentric nationalisms in the subcontinent. The latter were thus given the ideal opportunity to represent the cosmopolitan Mughal-Afrasian and Central Asian pasts as a Muslim one; from the early twentieth century, these cosmopolitan bureaucracies and scribal cultures were identified as both “foreign” and “feudal.” Thus long-resident Afrasians, Hadrami, Afghan, Persian, and Turk/Uzbek alike began to appear to Indian (Hindu and Buddhist) nationalists as “aliens” in their own homelands. By 1947, this transformation of attitudes was confirmed in a partition of the subcontinent. In 1948, when the Congress-led Indian Parliament sent a military force into Hyderabad, the general in charge decided to deport especially those Indians who claimed Afghan and Arab genealogies. No leader of any Indian secular political party objected. In 1971, an independent and elected government of democratic India abolished all princely states and privy purses (the Twenty-Sixth Amendment of the Constitution of India). This further transformed erstwhile Afro-Asian elites into commoners, only a handful of whom retained middle-class status.

A third momentous event characterized the 1950s–70s, when global intellectual and political hegemony was transferred from the British Empire to the United States. The study of the “African diaspora,” born in the US during these decades, led to a recolonization of historiography. The theoretical assumption driving these studies was that all Africans, like all Jews before them, had experienced exile, alienation from original homelands and universal minoritization in all the cultures and polities in which they had found themselves.

96. See the dedication in Phule, Ghulamgiri; for Christian missionary influences on Phule, also see O’Hanlon, Caste, Conflict and Ideology, 128–49.
97. See Ambedkar, Who Were the Shudras?, and Sharma, Sudras in Ancient India.
98. See Datla, Language of Secular Islam, 96–97.
Instead of acknowledging the peculiarity of the plantation model of slave use, these studies presumed upon a universalization of plantation economies even where none were to be found. In 1992, the scholar Sanjay Subrahmanyam objected to this diasporization on behalf of Indo-Iranian “nobles” and literati in Mughal India. However, no scholar of Afro-Asians in Mughal India mounted as determined a challenge on their behalf even though many had filled identical posts and offices. In 2005–6, Richard Eaton published his chapter on Malik ‘Ambar. However, since Eaton did not directly place such figures within the coeval systems of caste in the subcontinent, the issues regarding the honorable and respectable status of such figures appeared to have remained unresolved for many global scholars, who believed that Afro-Asian settlers had never been given full citizenship in South Asian pasts.

By foregrounding social reproduction within and by precocious administrative structures and processes in the subcontinent, this essay has tried to suggest the plural possibilities available to Afro-Asian populations before colonial-style abolitionism devalued those other modes of belonging and honor. This essay concludes that all global and local scholars alike might adopt a longue durée perspective on social reproduction in order to prevent the conceptual flattening of all histories as well. It is especially important to understand that Afro-Asian lineages belonged in the bureaucracies and structures of nobility and wealth in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century subcontinent, before some of them were made into subalterns. Not only should this history give us all a corrective in general conceptual terms. It is also necessary to understand the history of Afro-Asian belonging in the subcontinent before the onset of transatlantic abolitionism changed the terms against such members of local societies. Only when we understand both of these histories will we be able to decolonize the narrative of connected Indian Ocean pasts. One can only hope that that day is very near.

References


101. Subrahmanyam, “Iranians Abroad.”


103. Campbell, “The African-Asian Diaspora,” 308; also see Campbell, Abolition and Its Aftermath; Klein, Breaking the Chains; and Major, Slavery, Abolitionism, and Empire.


