

Identifying and Empowering Afrodescendants in South Asia and the Gulf
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Mister Chairman, distinguished participants, it is an honour to have been asked to speak about Afrodescendants at this important conference.

My interest in the African diaspora began when I came across a community of Afro-Sri Lankans almost 20 years ago, during fieldwork for my doctoral research on Sri Lanka Portuguese, a creolised Portuguese, an important lingua franca in the island for 350 years until English took over this role (de Silva Jayasuriya 2003; de Silva Jayasuriya 2008). Speaking Portuguese pulled Afro-Sri Lankans apart from other villagers and connected them to the colonial regime which ended in 1948 (de Silva Jayasuriya 2006). As people in-between the colonisers and colonised, their fate changed with the political dynamics that followed stability and then independence.

I was privileged to have met Sir Rex Nettleford, Chair of the UNESCO Slave Route Project, when I served as a member of the Scientific Committee of the Slave Route Project,

and then as its Rapporteur. Over lunch, in Paris, Sir Rex said to me: “We know what happened on the Atlantic but I would love to know what happened on the east side of Africa”.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Why are African migrants in the Indian Ocean World invisible? (de Silva Jayasuriya & Pankhurst, R 2003). It’s a long story and I’m going to make a start. I am going to speak about:

**I Identifying and
II Empowering Afrodescendants and then I’ll make a few
III Recommendations**

I. As for Identification and Mapping Afrodescendants in Asia

- **An estimated 12.5 million captives moved across the Sahara, East Africa, Red Sea and Indian Ocean to Asia over a long time span, between 800 and 1900 CE (Lovejoy 2000), that is over 1,100 years.**
- **A similar number of captives – an estimated 12.5 million - were moved forcefully across the Atlantic over a much shorter period – between 1440 and 1870 – over 430 years.**
- **Identifying Afrodescendants in Asia is a challenge (de Silva Jayasuriya & Angenot, J-P 2006). Genetic finger printing may assist because out-marriage has dissolved ethnic**

borders. But there are communities with a social and cultural memory of Africa. Memories are reservoirs of the past. When histories have not been recorded, oral traditions are all the more important in re-constructing the lost past.

- **The eastwards movement of Africans is entangled with free movement of Africans as sailors, soldiers, servants, missionaries and administrators, for example.**
- **But that is not to underestimate the eastwards slave trade for which colonisation was a catalyst.**
- **Recognising the scope and scale of forced African movement to Asia is a precursor to meting out justice.**

Several generations were born in Asia, and Afro-Asians are today indigenised and assimilated (de Silva Jayasuriya 2010). Changing political scenarios and the loss of patronage have pushed Afrodescendants to the periphery. In the forests and villages, they are invisible. But in cosmopolitan cities, Afrodescendants merge into the diversity making identification problematic. Self-identification assists where physiognomical changes and cultural transformations have occurred because, Ladies and Gentlemen, Afrodescendants cannot claim an African identity based on skin colour.

- **Professor Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch (2014) argues that colour-based racism is engendered in the transatlantic slave trade to which sub-Saharan Africans fell victim. Although captives were previously white or Asiatic, from the 15th/16th centuries, to be black and to be a captive was synonymous.**

- Slavery, colonialism and racism, are therefore all entangled.
- Race and colour are independent variables in the Indian Ocean World, Race being determined by one's paternal roots.
- We cannot view the entire world through the same lens. In the Indian Ocean, enslaved people were from diverse racial backgrounds. However, slavery was never racially codified (Ali 2011 <http://exhibitions.nypl.org/africansindianocean/index2.php>).
- The concept of 'otherness' has been constituted as race. But, as we all know, race is a socio-political construct. Race does not exist biologically.

And now moving on to the story of Malik Ambar. Malik Ambar, an Ethiopian captive who became the Chief Minister (*Peshwar*) of Ahmednagar in India, in 1600, problematises our *Weltanschauung*. Ambar held the reins and provided the spur, in the context of governance, until his death in 1626 when his son, Fateh Khan, succeeded him. After Ambar appointed Sultan Murtaza II, Ambar's elder daughter Shahir Bano (Ali 2016) became the Sultan's second wife, and the Sultan's sister became a wife of Ambar's son, Fateh Khan.

The extent of social mobility is truly unimaginable. But the stigma of slavery, unfortunately, lingers on. The Sultan's jealous senior wife insulted Ambar's daughter - Shahir - due to her father's enslaved status.

Mughal paintings, depict Malik Ambar as different from the Sultan in terms of skin colour. But Malik Ambar's stature and authority is also evidenced in the paintings.

The imposing tomb of Malik Ambar, in Aurangabad, which memorialises his authority and philanthropy. Public memory holds Ambar in high esteem as a military leader, Prime Minister, strategist and philanthropist. Thus Ambar's ethnicity and past enslaved status are overridden by his achievements (de Silva Jayasuriya 2009).

Janjira, an island off the west coast of India, which epitomises free and forced movement of Africans, called Sidis. This 13C African trading base, became the powerbase for African rule of two Indian states - Janjira and Sachin – from the 16C. African rule continued for 330 years [1618-1948] in Janjira and for 157 years [1791-1948] in Sachin only to end after India's independence when the princely states were absorbed into the new India (Indian Union), in 1948. Nowadays, a few hundred African royals who still live in India (Robbins & McLeod 2006) provide a sense of pride to other Afro-Indians, most of whom fall below the radar due to poverty and helplessness.

Now I'm going to talk about the differential statuses of Sidis. Some Sidis have been accorded Scheduled Tribe status. The national Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, and the Ministry of Home Affairs Registrar General of India, and Census Commissioner who oversees the state-level Directorates of Census Operations determine if the criteria for being accorded ST status is met (Micklem 2001: 28). This status entitles Sidis to government benefits from assistance programmes - reserved places in educational institutions, jobs in government run services -railways, post office, police force - and subsidies for housing, and

other forms of minor financial assistance. ST status is accorded to enhance those who are socially, educationally and sometimes also economically backward, due to their geographical isolation. But negotiating their way through powerful bureaucracies to realise their entitlements is a slow learning curve.

Sidis are spreadout in various parts of India. In the western state of Gujarat, according to community estimates, there are 75,000 Sidis. In 1956, ST status was accorded to Sidis in six Gujarati villages in Shaurasthra's - Junagadh, Bhavnagar, Rajkot, Amreli, Surendranagar and Jamnagar (Micklem 2001: 27).

About 50 years later, in the southern Indian state of Karnataka, an estimated 60,000 Sidis living in three districts - Uttara Kannada, Dharwad and Belgavi – were accorded ST status, in 2003.

Today Sidis in big cities such as Mumbai (Maharashtra) are taken for African tourists until they speak - they speak Gujarati, Marathi, Hindi ... the local Indian languages – and shock Indians who do not know that Africans have lived in India for hundreds of years! Sidis say “We’re Indian and African” as can be heard in the film produced by the Indian researcher and filmmaker, Beheroze Shroff (2004). They have no problem with their hybrid identity.

At Lucknow, in Uttar Pradesh, live the descendants of the female African cavalry guards who fought so bravely for the King, Wajid Ali Shah, during the Indian Mutiny of 1857, a fierce battle and turning point in British-Indian relations in the subcontinent. British soldiers, were not aware that they were fighting women until after their deadbodies were found on the battlefields!! (Llewellyn-Jones 2009). A British Officer, Colonel Gordon-Alexander (1898:104) referring to the ferociousness of their fighting described them as ‘wild cats’.

There are Sidis also in other states: an estimated 12,000 in Telengana (Andra Pradesh), descendants of the African Cavalry Guards of the Nizam of Hyderabad.

A small number of Sidis live in the former Portuguese enclaves of Goa, Daman and Diu.

All these Sidis, other than those that live in Shaurashtra and Uttara Kannada, are categorised as ‘Other Backward Caste’ regardless of their religious affiliations and socioeconomic status.

From Soldiers to Sidi Saints in western India. Bava Gor and his siblings – Bava Habash and Mai Mishra – who came from Africa are powerful Sufi Saints. Hindus, Muslims, Christians and Zoroasthrians venerate these Saints due to their mystical powers. Sainthood overrides issues of race and ethnicity.

In neighbouring Pakistan, the shrine of another Sufi saint, Mangho Pir, is serviced by the Sheedis in Karachchi. Another community of Sheedis live in the Sindh in northern Pakistan. The Urdu pronunciation of Sidis is Sheedis.

Cultural contributions of Afro-Sri Lankans was brought to the fore by a former President, Ranasinghe Premadasa (1989-1993). Traditional performances of this devout Catholic Afro-Sri Lankan community are called *manhas*. Performances have become a source of income on which they have become reliant. But they are in desperate need of a marketmaker to get a foothold in the market. Their agency has manifested in the formation of a twelve member music group called – *Ceylon African Manhas*.

They desire a cottage industry which would benefit the entire village. They live in harmony with the others in their village and out-marriage is the norm. They receive a free education subsidised by the government at primary, secondary and tertiary levels. Despite the resources from central government, none have yet benefitted from a university education. However, though academic performance has improved recently, their levels of achievement are still low due to high drop out rates, the causes of which are in urgent need of investigation.

Drums and rhythms introduced by Africans have become part of the Maldivian culturescape. *Bodu Beru* meaning ‘big drum’ is the main tourist attraction and is

accompanied by *Baburu lava* (African song) and *Baburu nisun* (African dance); Africans were called Baburu.

Moving to the Persian Gulf:

Mark Hobbs, Gulf History specialist at the British Library in London notes that slavery in the Gulf was socially rooted. More women than men were enslaved and, were domestic captives. Males worked mainly in pearl fishing and date farming.

“The forms of slavery that the British officials encountered in Arabia and the Indian Ocean were very different from that which Britain had instituted for its own benefit in the Atlantic, where British ships transported slaves from Africa to the Americas for use in plantations growing commodities such as sugar and tobacco”.

[source: <https://www.qdl.qa/en/manumission-not-abolition-british-mediations-over-slavery-gulf>]

An Ethnomusicologist, Aisha Bilkhair Khalifa (2006: 228) remarks that, in the Gulf, African identity is recognisable through forms of song and dance called *zar*, *nuban* and *laywa* carried over from Ethiopia, Sudan and Kenya.

Now about Iraq, Timothy Williams wrote in The New York Times (2 December 2009) that:

“Officially, Iraq is a colorblind society that in the tradition of Prophet Muhammad treats black people with equality and respect”. But Williams adds that the stigma of enslavement denies Afrodescendants even menial jobs and prohibits them from out-marriage in Iraq.

In Iran, as the slave trade was abolished, more and more indigenous Iranians were captured and enslaved.

Descendants of the enslaved, from all ethnocultural backgrounds, have integrated and/or assimilated within the society (Mirzai 2017:213).

II. Empowering Afrodescendants

How do we minimise inequality?

- **Policies are mostly made on the hoof in response to short-term pressures. But policy formulation should be based on serious research.**
- **We need a nuanced understanding of the African diaspora.**
- **Africans were in demand as cavalrymen, jockeys, soldiers, bodyguards, musicians, entertainers, midwives, herbalists, nannies, concubines, eunuchs, spirit healers, missionaries, entrepreneurs, pearl divers, fort builders, water carriers, milemen, postal runners and labourers in plantations.. A very long list!**

- **Geographical distance from Africa, isolation, assimilation, homogenisation and cultural hegemony have suppressed African identity in the diaspora.**
- **It is imperative that Cultural diversity: of Afrodescendants should be nurtured.**
- **Negative connotations: associated with the blackness of Africans should be rectified. Black cannot and must never be equated to captive.**

III. Recommendations

- **We need to introduce histories of the African diaspora and African cultures to Asian school curricula through pedagogical material including films.**
- **We need to highlight a range of African role models, historical and contemporary, to break the established stereotypes.**
- **We need to memorialise the achievements of Africans in Asia.**
- **We need to resource the agency of Afrodescendants, their music groups, their NGOs, their entrepreneurship and their efforts in giving back to their communities.**
- **We need sustainable development programmes for Afrodescendant communities.**
- **Mapping Afrodescendants and acknowledging and preserving their cultural legacy is a matter of urgent necessity.**

But, above all, it is an act of justice.

Thank you for your attention

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