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## FROM AFRICANS IN INDIA TO AFRICAN INDIANS

**ABSTRACT** The first migrations of people from Africa to the Indian Subcontinent took place about fifty-sixty thousand years ago. However, most of the Indo-African population of India came to the Subcontinent in the last five hundred years. They became naturalized to both the Indian culture and the Indian way of life reasonably quickly, they became involved in politics and social disputes, and many of them rose to a high authority in the Indian society. The aim of the article is to show the status development of Africans in India and the change in social attitude towards them, by means of an analysis of examples chosen from the history of African settlement in India.

**Key-words:** Africans in India, Habshi, Siddi

Specialized literature, mainly from the realm of genetics,<sup>1</sup> supplies us with reliable and scientifically verifiable data about the African descent of approximately 600 million citizens of the Republic of India. However, the origins of only about 250 000 of them can be proven with historical data, whereas the lineage of the remaining overwhelming majority can only be verified by anthropological studies or/and genetic tests.

Over the course of centuries this large part of India's population has been given different names which are partly synonymous, and partly they prove early or later attempts to differentiate the "Africans of India" according not only to their place of origin, but also to the time of their arrival on the Subcontinent. Among these names the most important for this study are historical terms like Habshi, Kaffir, Sidi, Siddi, Siddhi, Shiddhi, Seydi, Chaush<sup>2</sup> or the terms which are a result of modern-day academic research, like Negritoes and Proto-Australoids.

The aim of the article would be to briefly describe the place occupied by the people of African origin in the Indian past and present. Special attention will be devoted to selected individuals or groups who have played a memorable role in the history and politics of the Subcontinent, from the beginning of 13th century until the advent of the era of European colonization. The selected cases will be placed in the general context of the history of African settlement on the Subcontinent, with brief references to the present situation of the African population in India.

## 1. BEFORE THE SIDDIS – THE NEGRITOE AND PROTO-AUSTRALIDS

Even though the names Negritoes and Proto-Australoids are relatively new, proposed only in 1935,<sup>3</sup> from the point of view of chronology, they refer to the people who, most probably as the first incomers, came to what is now India from the African con-

<sup>1</sup> An extensive list of studies dedicated to this subject is provided, among others, in: A.M. Shah et al., 'Indian Siddis: African Descendants with Indian Admixture', *American Journal of Human Genetics*, Vol. 89, No. 1 (2011), pp. 154-161, at <<http://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajhg.2011.05.030>>, 18 January 2016.

<sup>2</sup> See: S. de Silva Jayasuriya, 'Identifying Africans in Asia. What's in a Name' in: S. de Silva Jayasuriya, J. -P. Angenot (eds.), *Uncovering the History of Africans in Asia*, Leiden–Boston 2008, pp. 11-26. Here it is worth noting that according to de Silva Jayasuriya's assumption, *the Portuguese chroniclers equated ethnic groups to castes in India*. See *ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> B.S. Guha, *Census of India*, 1931, Vol. 1: *India*, P. 3: *Ethnographical*, A: *The Racial Affinities of the Peoples of India*, Simla 1935, Simla 1935. In the article we follow the first ever classification of the people of India, done by an Indian scholar and still being considered the most authentic. B. S. Guha was a physical anthropologist, a Harvard graduate (1924) and the founder and first director of the Anthropological Survey of India. The term "racial group" which Guha used in the 1930s, today is regarded, to say the least, as ambivalent. However, being of course aware of this bias, we refer to Guha's classification in line with his original nomenclature, yet understanding the term 'racial group' in the same way as 'population' or 'peoples' are now understood. Moreover, we are quite convinced that originally it was used with the same intention.

continent. Both the names were given to (two among the six) racial groups of Indian people, singled out by B. S. Guha.<sup>4</sup> He based his classification on several physical dimensions which he studied on a representative sample of the population, during the 1931 Census.

As the research evidence almost inevitably proves, both the Negrito<sup>5</sup> and Proto-Australoids,<sup>6</sup> unlike other Africans in India, were not brought to the Subcontinent as slaves. Their arrival was rather the effect of a mass migration, the first wave of which most probably happened about 60,000 and the second 50,000 years ago.

Apparently, the ancestors of the Negrito<sup>5</sup> came in the first wave, and their progeny includes the Andamanese and Nicobaris,<sup>7</sup> Kadars,<sup>8</sup> Kanikkars,<sup>9</sup> as well as Muthaiwans, Paniyans, Puliyans and Uralis,<sup>10</sup> who live in the hills of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Karnataka. Some traits of the Angami-Nagas also make it possible to consider them among the Negrito<sup>5</sup>.<sup>11</sup>

The second group, Proto-Australoids, came to the Subcontinent most probably in the second wave of the migration. Nowadays the members of this racial group live in central and southern India, mainly in the hills and forests, creating small, isolated

<sup>4</sup> The remaining four groups in Guha's classification include: the Mongoloids, Mediterraneans, Western Brachycephals and the Nordics.

<sup>5</sup> According to Guha's study, the Negrito<sup>5</sup> are characterised by short stature (150 cm), frizzy-hair, bulbous forehead, flat nose, slightly protruding jaws, small chin, black skin colour, weak hands, and long arms.

<sup>6</sup> Among their main features Guha names black skin colour, wavy to curly hair, broad and flat nose, short stature and prognathous jaws.

<sup>7</sup> Andamanese (Andamanese people) and Nicobaris – is a collective term for the native inhabitants of the Andaman Islands, an area of the Republic of India, located in the southeastern part of the Bay of Bengal. They are hunters-gatherers who seem to have survived in almost full isolation for thousands of years. Today, approximately only 400-450 Andamanese remain. This small remaining group maintains its independence, refusing most attempts at contact made by outsiders. Among them there are such tribes as Jarawa, Onge and Sentinese, out of which the latter remain detached from the other tribes of the region. They live a secluded life and have developed an individual identity. They are the only known primitive people known in the contemporary world to live in complete isolation.

<sup>8</sup> Kadars – a small Negrito tribe inhabiting the hills in the Indian state of Kerala.

<sup>9</sup> Kanikkars – is one of the important tribes among the tribal communities who have settled down in Kerala, well immersed within the rest of the population. Kanikkars are financially secure, though the level of literacy among them is not much above 50 percent. They have their own mother tongue, Kanikkaran, which is at least several centuries old.

<sup>10</sup> Muthaiwans, Paniyans, Puliyans and Uralis – small Negrito tribes inhabiting the hills in the Indian state of Kerala.

<sup>11</sup> The question of counting Angami-Nagas among the Negrito<sup>5</sup> is still discussed in specialized literature. Generally, they are a tribe native to Nagaland, a state in North-East India. However, Dr. Hutton has pointed out the sign of Negrito<sup>5</sup> among the Angami Nagas. [...] Supporting this view [...] many scholars say that Angami Nagas are the descendants of Negrito race and of course they were mixed with the Mongolian tribes afterwards. See: S.K. Sharma, U. Sharma (eds.), *Discovery of North-East India. Geography, History, Culture, Religion, Politics, Sociology, Science, Education and Economy*, Vol. 5: *Assam. Economy, Society and Culture*, New Delhi 2005, p. 166.

communities in different parts of India, such as Gond,<sup>12</sup> Khonds,<sup>13</sup> Bhil,<sup>14</sup> Santhal,<sup>15</sup> Bonda,<sup>16</sup> Kol<sup>17</sup> and Munda.<sup>18</sup>

The ancestors of the members of both the groups, together with the native population of the Subcontinent, might have been among the builders of the Indus Valley civilization, oppressed later on by the invaders from the North. Due to the lack of written historical documents (or perhaps due to our inability to access them), their exact role is still difficult to specify. However, with the passage of time, they became mainly tribal people who are a permanent component of the Indian population, constituting two large ethnic groups. Moreover, the genetic legacy of the two migrations can be found in approximately 60 percent of the population of South Asia.<sup>19</sup>

## 2. THE SIDDIS

The position of the Siddis (to use the most commonly applied term) is altogether different. Thanks to the existing written data we can more or less determine the time when they started to be brought to the Subcontinent as slaves, as well as the places in Africa which they were taken from.

<sup>12</sup> Gond – a large tribe of Central India of over ten million people, inhabiting the states of Madhya Pradesh, eastern Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh, Uttar Pradesh, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh and Western Odisha.

<sup>13</sup> Khonds – tribal people of India, with the total population of 430,000, living in the states of Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha and West Bengal. During the British rule, the Khonds became best known for their practice of human sacrifice, known as *Meriah* and performed to increase the fertility of the earth.

<sup>14</sup> Bhil – primarily the native people of Central India, one of the largest tribal groups with the total population of over thirteen million, inhabiting the states of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Tripura and the area of the border with Bangladesh. They have settled also in the Tharparkar District of Sindh in Pakistan.

<sup>15</sup> Santhal – an indigenous tribe, who live mainly in the Indian States of Jharkhand, West Bengal, Bihar, Odisha, and Assam. There is also a significant Santhal minority in Bangladesh and Nepal. They are one of the largest tribal communities in India, of approximately seven million.

<sup>16</sup> Bonda – an ancient tribe numbering approximately 12,000 people who live in the isolated hill regions of the Malkangiri district of in the Indian state of Odisha. Only 6% of them are literate and the life expectancy of the tribe is so low they are in danger of becoming extinct.

<sup>17</sup> Kol – a large tribe found in Uttar Pradesh (approximately 140,000 people), mainly in the districts of Mirzapur, Varanasi, Banda and Allahabad. Most of the members of this group are landless, and support themselves by collecting firewood and leaves from the forest and selling these at the local markets.

<sup>18</sup> Munda – a tribal Indian ethnic group, living mainly in Jharkand, Assam, Odisha, West Bengal, Chhattisgarh, Bihar, Tripura and Madhya Pradesh (and also outside India – In Bangladesh). They belong to the so-called 'tea tribes' (the descendants of people brought to Assam by the British to work as indentured labourers on their tea plantations) and are the largest among these tribes, with the population of about nine million.

<sup>19</sup> R. Revathi et al., 'Phylogeny and Antiquity of M Macrohaplogroup Inferred from Complete mt DNA Sequence of Indian Specific Lineages', *BMC Evolutionary Biology*, Vol. 5, No. 26 (2005), at <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1186/1471-2148-5-26>>, 15 January 2016.

The first verifiable mention of trade between Africa and India can be found in the relation of the Egyptian queen Hatshepsut's expedition to Punt (most probably modern Somalia), which took place circa 1495 B.C.<sup>20</sup> Whereas in *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (1st-3rd century C. E.) we come across the earliest information about the slave trade taking place on the coast of East Africa.<sup>21</sup> However, most of the Indo-African population of India came to the Subcontinent in the last five hundred years. Reasonably quickly they became naturalized to both the Indian culture and the Indian way of life, they became involved in politics and social disputes, and many of them rose to a high authority in the Indian society.

Over the centuries the people brought to the Subcontinent from Africa acquired different names, but now the general denomination used for the Afro-Indians is Siddi.<sup>22</sup> The author of an extensive article dedicated to the names given to people of African origin in Asia, Shiha de Silva Jayasurya, states that: *Initially, Africans in India seem to have been called Habshi.*<sup>23</sup> *Then the word cafir*<sup>24</sup> *seem to have been introduced by the Portuguese from the late 16<sup>th</sup> century up to the 18th century. The word Kaffir (from the Arabic word qafir which means 'non-believer') does not imply that one's origins are African. It is not a derogatory term, in this context. [...] It is not clear exactly when the terms Habshi and Kaffir began to decline in use. The term Sidi seems to have been introduced by the British in the 19th century. Sidi describes Africans in Gujarat and Karnataka today. Africans in Andhra Pradesh call themselves Chaush as they identify themselves with Yemeni Muslims. They have a multiple identity and also call themselves Sidi among other ethnonyms.*<sup>25</sup>

Siddi, as de Silva Jayasurya also claims, *was originally a title of honour given in Western India to African Muslims holding high positions under the kings of Deccan [...]. Many scholars have implied that Sidi derives from Syd meaning 'master' or 'ruler' in Arabic.*<sup>26</sup>

<sup>20</sup> See e. g.: A.H. Zayed, 'Egypt Relations with the Rest of Africa' in: G. el Din Mokhtar (ed.), *General History of Africa*, Vol. 2: *Ancient Civilizations of Africa*, London–Berkeley 1981, pp. 136-154.

<sup>21</sup> See: *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea. Travel and Trade in the Indian Ocean by a Merchant of the First Century*, transl. from the Greek and annotated by W. H. Schoff, Bombay 1912, pp. 13, 25, 27, 29, 33, 34, 36, at <<https://archive.org/details/periplusoferythr00schouoft>>, 10 January 2016.

<sup>22</sup> *The Afro-Indians are generally known as Sidi/Siddi/Sidhi or Habshi/Habsi. These ethnonyms partly tell us that they were in the employ of Sayyads, the Muslim rulers of India, and partly that they came from Ethiopia.* See: A. Y. Lodhi, 'African Settlements in India', *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1992), p. 83. Also: *The terms Habshi and Siddi could well be generic terms for the migrants from diverse African regions, which are now known as Nigeria, Sudan, Mozambique and Ethiopia, who adopted India as their homeland.* See: K. Sahni, *Multi-stories. Cross-cultural Encounters*, New Delhi 2011, p. 183.

<sup>23</sup> According to the author of these words, Al-Habash was the Arab name for Ethiopians, *the Semitic-speaking Ethiopians call themselves Habesha or Abesha, and also in Asia people of African origin have been known as Abexin, Abeuxm, Abisi, Abyssinian, Habshi, and Habsie.* See: S. de Silva Jayasuriya, 'Identifying Africans in Asia...', pp. 10-11.

<sup>24</sup> *Words which the Arabs used to describe non-Muslims became ethnonyms for Africans as the Europeans adopted Arabic term. English travellers reported of cofferes (a word they used for Africans) in India. Apparently, the majority of cofferes in Goa had come from Mozambique.* See: *ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

However, as he also points out, there are scholars who believe that *the Word Siddi has its origins in Saydi which means 'captive' or 'prisoner of war' in Arabic*.<sup>27</sup>

Nowadays the Afro-Indians, here referred to as Siddis, live in coastal Karnataka, Gujarat, and in some parts of Andhra Pradesh.<sup>28</sup> They are mostly members of the tribal population and are generally thought to be the descendants of slaves brought to India from East Africa and – more precisely – from the Bantu-speaking areas of the region.<sup>29</sup>

We know no exact date when the first Siddis came to the Subcontinent, but it seems to be a generally accepted conviction that it must have happened at least 700 years ago, if not earlier.<sup>30</sup> They were brought on ships by Arab merchants who sold them as slaves to Indian rulers.<sup>31</sup> Soon they became to be known as powerful warriors as well as very loyal servants. Therefore they held many positions at court, were often used as soldiers and some of them even played important roles in the armies and in political warfare. The greatest of them became rulers, others bought their freedom or escaped and finding shelter in the forests created independent communities. In history there are registered cases of African slave women becoming queens of the Muslim monarchs. Today the majority of the Indian Siddis live in poverty, generally not aware of their great past of which the history books provide several illustrious instances.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

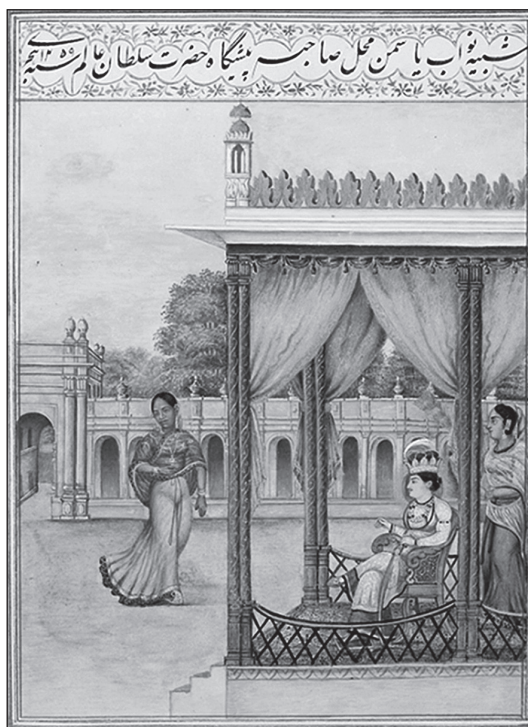
<sup>28</sup> *There are about 250,000 Afro-Indians, i.e. Indians of African origin, in India, settled in the state of Gujarat bordering Pakistan and, in the states of Andhra Pradesh in south-central India (former Kingdom of Hyderabad), Maharashtra (formerly Bombay State), Kerala and Karnataka in the south, and the former Portuguese territories of Daman, Diu and Goa. In Gujarat they are found in the districts of Ahmedabad, Amerli, Jamnagar, Junagadh, Rajkot, Bhavnagar, Broach/Bharuch near Ratanpur, and the former Kingdom of Cutch/Katchch. They are normally settled in areas of their own, but in Ahmedabad, Broach and Cutch they live in mixed areas as they do in parts of Andhra Pradesh.* See: A.Y. Lodhi, 'African Settlements...', p. 83.

<sup>29</sup> See e.g.: A.M. Shah et al., "Indian Siddis...", pp. 154-161.

<sup>30</sup> *Black slaves from the Coastal strip f Ethiopia to Mozambique were carried by Arab slave traders to various parts of the Muslim world, including India. Their presence is recorded since the early establishment of Muslim rule during the Sultanate of Delhi (13th to 16th centuries). African slaves continued to be imported to Western India until the late 19th century. Teotonio de Souza [...] reports on manumission in Goa, the headquarters of the Portuguese Estado da India [...]. This is substantiated by a document in the Archives at Goa [...] entitled Cartas de Alforria aos Escravos 1682-1759 [which] reports of a slave, Natalia, who was recorded as belonging to Abassy (i.e. Habshi) caste.* See: S. de Silva Jayasuriya, 'Identifying Africans in Asia...', p. 11.

<sup>31</sup> *It appears that a large number of Sidis came, or were brought, to India from different parts of Africa as soldiers to serve in the Muslim armies of the Nawabs and Sultanates – hence their Muslim Faith and relative absence of the Hindu caste system among them. Many were officials in the Muslim, and later Hindu, armies and royal bodyguards and rose to power in more than one place [...]. Some were singers and drummers. [...] The Sidis of Jambur are supposed to have originally come from Kano in Nigeria via the Sudan and Mecca after their Hajj pilgrimage. Their leader was a wealthy merchant by the name of Baba Ghor who first settled in the Rajpipla Hills near Broach and Cambay (Khambat) where he developed mining and trade in agate [...]. Some Sidis came to India as special servants in the courts of Muslim Nawabs and Sultans, while some came as herbalists and midwives. A few were brought by Indian merchants returning home from Africa, and a few were brought as slaves especially in the Portuguese territories.* See: A. Y. Lodhi, 'African Settlements...', p. 84.





**Illustration 1.** Yasmin Mahal, wife of Wajid Ali Shah<sup>32</sup> (1822-1887), the last king of Oudh in Uttar Pradesh.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>32</sup> This ruler of Awadh is said to have had his personal bodyguards who were female African soldiers dressed in red jackets and tight-fitting, rose-coloured silk trousers. See: R. Llewellyn-Jones, *The Last King of India. Wajid Ali Shah, 1822-1887*, London 2014. The same author also describes the involvement of the nawab's African guards in defending his realm during the siege of Lakhau in the time of the Sepoy Rebellion: *During the siege and the subsequent recapture of the city in March 1858 African men and women were involved in the thick of the street fighting. One man in particular, strategically placed at the upper window of a house overlooking the Residency, was nicknamed with grim humour 'Bob the Nailer' by the British troops because of the number of victims he shot and killed. The female African sniper had been perched in the branches of a large tree overlooking the Sikanderbagh, a walled garden containing a small house and mosque built by the Nawab for one of his wives, where hundreds were killed during the advance on the Residency. The sniper and other 'African negresses' among the dead at the Sikanderbagh were armed with superior rifles, unlike the Indian rebel fighters who carried old-fashioned muskets. Moreover in the words of a British officer who was an eyewitness, 'they fought like wild cats, and it was not till after they were killed that their sex was even suspected'. Why these men and women supported their former master, the slave-owning Wajid Ali Shah, rather than the British who had prohibited slavery, can be answered from British government records in the Delhi National Archives. See: R. Llewellyn-Jones, 'Africans in the Indian Mutiny', *History Today*, Vol. 59, No. 12 (2009), at <<http://www.historytoday.com/rosie-jones/africans-indian-mutiny>>, 12 January 2016.*

<sup>33</sup> <https://seetobehumanityearth.wordpress.com/2014/11/14/eastiseverywhere-tysavestheworld-rare-images/yasmin-mahal-wife-of-wajid-ali-shah-the-last-king-of-oudh-in-uttar-pradesh/> (public domain), 24 January 2016.

### 3. SELECT CASES OF INDIVIDUALS OR GROUPS OF AFRICAN ORIGIN IN INDIAN HISTORY AND POLITICS

The African slaves in India had made their contribution to the society at large. They were employed by the monarchs to defend and support their domains but they were also used as cheap labour. Initially, armies of these slaves were enlisted by Muslim rulers to safeguard their own interests. The Portuguese too adopted the same policy and later the Hindu rulers also started engaging them in their armed and naval forces.<sup>34</sup> However, the instances when the slaves became rulers, or even created their own well-maintained and long-lasting kingdoms,<sup>35</sup> constitute the most astonishing part of their history on the Subcontinent. The cases chosen for further discussion include the individual achievements of Jamal-ud-Din Yakut, the brief outline of African Habshi Dynasty of Bengal and presentation of the role played by the Africans (Habshis) in the Deccan Sultanates of Bijapur and Ahmadnagar, with particular attention devoted to the most outstanding among them – Malik Ambar.

**3.1. Jamal-ud-Din Yakut** was most probably the first African slave who became almost a legend as his social status has changed dramatically within a reasonably short period of time. His illustrious (but also tragic) career began during the reign of sultan Iltutmish, the third ruler of the Slave Dynasty (or the Mamluk Dynasty), who were the founders of the Delhi Sultanate and its rulers in the years 1206-1290. The dates of Yakut's life are not exactly known, but with some certainty they can be established sometime between 1200 and 1240 (the historians are quite certain about the year of his death). Yakut was a Siddi, or a Habshi, most probably Abyssinian by birth, who rose from the position of a slave to the rank of a nobleman.

The court of Iltutmish was a place where many slaves were employed for military duties. However, the distinction between the slaves and the nobility had to be firmly kept. Especially, because the ruler himself came to Delhi as a slave and advanced to the rank of a province governor after gaining the trust of his master, sultan Qutub-ud-din Aibak. Already before the sultan's death he was powerful enough to succeed him, with the sufficient support of the nobility. Iltutmish's reign lasted for twenty six years and,

<sup>34</sup> R.R.S. Chauhan, *Africans in India. From Slavery to Royalty*, New Delhi 1995, p. 240.

<sup>35</sup> As for example the island-fortress named Janjira, placed on the coast of the Indian state of Maharashtra, which is also called Habsan (belonging to Habshis, the African land). The word Janjira is a corrupted Marathi version of the Arabic *jazeera* (an island). It is one in the chain of forts ruled by Abyssinian chiefs and sailors from Janjira to Due. They had their own boats, horses and foot soldiers, and were able to sustain armed resistance to the Portuguese and Marathas in the 17th-18th centuries. There is an interesting legend (perhaps not as well-known as the one of the Trojan horse) about an Abyssinian leader who, around 1489 AD, in a merchant's disguise convinced the rulers of the island to allow him to send to them three hundred boxes with some precious goods. However, in reality, in every box there was a soldier and by such a deception the Abyssinians were able to take control over the Janjira fort. See e.g.: D. R. Banaji, *Bombay and the Sidis*, Bombay 1932, p. xx.



before he died, for the first (and also the last) time in the history of India,<sup>36</sup> he appointed a woman, his daughter Raziya, as his heir.

Raziya sultan (as she wished herself to be called, since it was the only proper title of a ruler and not sultana that could be mistaken for being just a wife of a sultan), came to the throne in 1236, after overcoming the reluctance of the Turkish nobility and their intrigues which resulted in first placing her brother on the throne of Delhi, and she ruled for almost 4 years (until 1240). About her reign, the great traveller Ibn Batuta wrote: [...] *the army agreed to place [...] El Malika Razia, upon throne, who reigned four years. This woman usually rode about among the army, just as men do. She, however, gave up the government, on account of some circumstances that presented themselves.*<sup>37</sup>

The name of the “circumstances” mentioned by Ibn Batuta was without a doubt the one of Jamal-ud-Din Yaqut. With Raziya’s support his status at court suddenly rose, and the former Abyssinian slave – and now the keeper of the royal stables – became the closest adviser and the only confidant of the ruler, so – the second (if only) person in the country. As a scholar of the Delhi Sultanate Peter Jackson rightly pointed out, the sources for Raziya’s reign are quite limited. In fact, there was only one historian at her time, Ghurid Menhaj-e Seraj (d. ca. 1260), who recorded her actions as a ruler, though his remarks are rather cryptic.<sup>38</sup> From what he writes about the relationship between Raziya and Yaqut a reader can get only a vague picture of a man on whom the queen depended upon to the point of self-destruction, because the fact that Yaqut, *who was Lord of the Stables*, [and] *acquired favour in attendance upon the Sultān*,<sup>39</sup> must have caused a lot of envy among the Turkish nobility – envy that finally resulted in Raziya losing the throne and then both of them losing their life.

Moreover, the story about this relationship goes beyond the life of court politics. It becomes a tragic love-story, of an unmarried queen who fell in love with a black-skinned slave and made him the most influential person in the Delhi Sultanate. A Mughal historian of the mid-fourteen century wrote: *I am told that she came out of purdah suddenly, discarded her modesty and became jovial. One day, she put on male attire and cap and came out of the exalted palace. [...] Then, I heard that for another six months that daughter of the renowned king continued to hold a public durbar; everyone high and low used to enjoy the sight of her face. After a month or two, she began to ride escorted by the State of-ficers. This having continued for a full six months, everybody from the lowest to the highest became suspicious of her. I am told that a slave of the Ethiopian race used to stand by her side when she mounted her horse. With one hand he used to hold her arm and help her to*

<sup>36</sup> *She was the only woman ever to become a ruler in India in her own right. That is, she did not replace a deceased husband or proxy as regent for a son or nephew. She was not a queen, but a crowned king...* See: J. Brijbhushan, *Sultan Raziya, Her Life and Times. A Reappraisal*, New Delhi 1990, p. 117.

<sup>37</sup> See: Ibn Batuta, *The Travels*, transl. from the abridged Arabic manuscript by the Rev. S. Lee B.D., London 1829, p. 113.

<sup>38</sup> See: P. Jackson, ‘Sultān Raḍiyya bint Iltutmish’ in G.R.G. Hambly (ed.), *Women in the Medieval Islamic World. Power, Patronage, and Piety*, New York 1998, pp. 182-183 (*New Middle Ages*, 6).

<sup>39</sup> Juzjāni Menhāj-e Serāj, *Tabaqāt-e Nāseri*, transl. into English by H.G. Raverty, Vol. 1, Calcutta 1995, pp. 642-643.

*mount her horse firmly. When the grandees of the State noticed the liberties he took openly, they felt scandalized and said to one another privately: 'From the way this demon has made himself more powerful in the State than other servants, it would be no wonder if he found his way to seize the royal seal.'*<sup>40</sup>

After this description, the same author moves on to some more general statements about female nature, which are supposed to justify the removal of Raziya from the throne by the Turkish aristocracy. He writes: *All women are in the snare of the devil; in privacy, all of them do Satan's work. [...] At no time can faithfulness be expected of women. [...] In public women look better than a flower garden, but in privacy they are worse than a fireplace. When the passions of a pious woman are inflamed, she concedes to an intimacy even with a dog. If a man places confidence in a woman, she makes him a laughing stock. A woman is a sign of danger wherever she [may] be, since she is of devilish disposition. To wear the crown and fill the throne of kings does not benefit a woman; [...] A woman cannot acquit herself well as a ruler, for she is essentially deficient in intellect [...] since attainment of high position on her part would make her intoxicated.*<sup>41</sup>

With the course of time, the story of Raziya's love for Yaqut became more and more a tale of an ambitious upstart and a weak woman, who lost everything not being able to control her emotions. What is also more and more evident – is the strength, intelligence and perhaps some incredible charm of the Ethiopian slave which the female ruler simply found irresistible: *It was not that a virgin Queen was forbidden to love – she might have indulged herself in a submissive Prince Consort, or revelled almost unchecked in the dark recesses of the Palace Harem – but wayward fancy pointed in a wrong direction, and led her to prefer a person employed about her Court, an Abyssinian moreover.*<sup>42</sup>

How accurate are these reports when it comes to their relationship on the personal level would be impossible to determine. However, what seems to be true, is the dramatic end of the story. Raziya's attachment to Yaqut, even if only emotional, became a threat to the Turkish aristocracy, as well as the high-rank military. The issue was not only the low status of Yaqut, but also the colour of his skin. Consequently, an uprising against Raziya's rule broke out. Together with Yaqut she decided to escape from Delhi, but they were captured and (according to the most popular version of the story) Yaqut was killed on the spot and Raziya was taken prisoner and forced by the circumstances to marry the one who started the rebellion against her. Soon after, while trying to regain the throne of Delhi, she was murdered (and so was her husband).

**3.2. The Habshi Dynasty of Bengal (1486<sup>43</sup>-1493)** was a dynasty of the four rulers: Ghiyas ud-din Barbak Shah (r. 1486-1487), Saif ud-din Firuz Shah (r. 1487-1489), Qutb ud-din Mahmud Shah (r. 1490) and Shams ud-din Muzaffar Shah (r. 1490-

<sup>40</sup> 'Esāmi, *Fotuh al-Salātin*, transl. into English by A.M. Husain, London 1977, p. 253-54.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 254.

<sup>42</sup> E. Thomas, *The Chronicles of the Pathān Kings of Delhi*, London 1871, p. 106.

<sup>43</sup> The date, 1486, is given as according to several reliable sources. See e.g.: R. Pankhurst, 'The Ethiopian Diaspora to India: The Role of Habshis and Sidis from Medieval Times to the Eighteen Century' in

-1493), which ruled Bengal for six years. However, its presence is yet another example of the will power and strength of Africans in India.

During the time of the Delhi Sultanate, Bengal was a state of a considerable independence from the capital, with a fairly mixed population which needed a firm but tolerant ruler, who would on the one hand manage Muslim aristocracy, on the other – the rich Hindu landowners. To secure peace and harmony, one of the priorities of the ruler was to create and keep a strong army. Perhaps for that reason, Rukh-ud-din Barbak, who ruled in 1459-1474, as the first Indian monarch in history decided to empower his army with unusually large number of slaves, brought for this purpose by the sea straight from Abyssinia. Their number most probably exceeded eight thousand.<sup>44</sup> Rukh-ud-din Barbak died in 1474, possibly not aware what consequences of his actions the state will have to take. The throne was succeeded by his son, Yusuf, who tried to deprive the Africans of at least some of their privileges and to limit their influence but, since at that time “there were about 20,000 Ethiopian riders of the sultanate in Bengal,”<sup>45</sup> his chance of obtaining this goal were not great. He created, however, as a kind of counterweight, a palace guard of five thousand Bengali *paiks* (‘footmen’).<sup>46</sup> After his death, in 1481, it soon became apparent that his son was not fit to rule, so his grand-uncle Jalal-ud-din Fatah Shah was enthroned. He was not popular among the African soldiers due to his attempts to discipline them. Unfortunately for him, these were the times when the “African slaves were particularly powerful”<sup>47</sup> which inevitably led to his assassination in 1486. He was killed by Sultan Shahzada, one of the palace eunuchs, who took the throne and ruled under the name of Ghiyas ud-din Barbak Shah.

The short and unstable reign of Barbak opens the period of the Habshi Dynasty in the history of Bengal. He ruled for approximately six months and was most probably tormented either by the guilty conscience or by the fear of losing his life (or perhaps one simply led to another). That made him paranoid to the point of easily giving orders to execute other Abyssinians under the slightest suspicion of treason. He also made sure that all the court administration included only his most trusted men, no matter whether they were fit for the post assigned to them. This kind of behaviour made him, of course, most unpopular among his subjects.

All of Barbak’s fears came true when Indil Khan, also an African slave, who was elevated to the rank of *amir al-umara* (‘commander-in-chief’) of the Jalal-ud-din Fatah

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S. de Silva Jayasuriya, R. Pankhurst (eds.), *The African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean*, Trenton, NJ 2003, p. 193; C. Boyce Davies (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the African Diaspora. Origins, Experiences, and Culture*, Vol. 1: A-C, Santa Barbara 2008, p. 566; J. Allan, T. Wolsley Haig, *The Cambridge Shorter History of India*, ed. H. H. Dodwell, Vol. 2 (*Indian Edition*), Cambridge 1935, p. 272; A. Wink, *Al-Hind. The Making of the Indo-Islamic World*, Vol. 3: *Indo-Islamic Society 14th-15th Centuries*, Leiden–Boston 2004, p. 139. Some sources state that first year of Barbak Shah’s rule, therefore also the beginning of the Habshi Dynasty, was 1487.

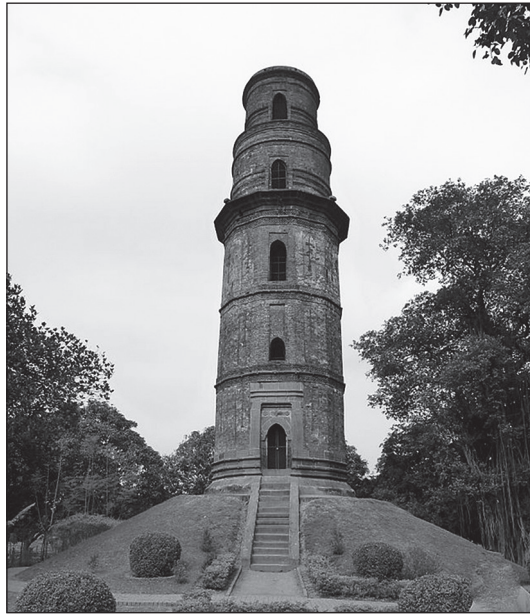
<sup>44</sup> J. Allan, T. Wolsley Haig, *The Cambridge Shorter History...*, p. 272.

<sup>45</sup> C. Boyce Davies (ed.), *Encyclopaedia...*, p. 566.

<sup>46</sup> A. Wink, *Al-Hind...*, p. 139.

<sup>47</sup> C. Boyce Davies (ed.), *Encyclopaedia...*, p. 566, also R. Pankhurst, ‘The Ethiopian Diaspora...’, p. 193.

Shah's army, decided to take revenge on the usurper for murdering the rightful ruler. Apparently, the only reason behind Indil Khan's decision was his loyalty to Fatah Shah. However, with the support of Fatah Shah's widow, he ascended the throne in 1487, taking the name of Saif ud-din Firuz Shah. Perceived as the righteous avenger, he instantly gained the support of the nobility and proved to be the greatest ruler of the Habshi Dynasty. *A kind man, he is said to have confounded his treasury officials by the largesse of his gifts to the poor.*<sup>48</sup> His reign lasted for less than two years, however, during this time *he restored order in the kingdom, and discipline in the army, but historians have justly observed that his elevation established an evil precedent, and that it became an accepted rule in Bengal that the slayer of a king's murderer was entitled to the throne.*<sup>49</sup> He also left a long lasting legacy – the Firuz Minar in Gaur (now in West Bengal), which can be considered a testimony of the short-lived but significant Ethiopian presence in Bengal.



**Illustration 2.** The 26-meter-tall Firuz Minar in Gaur with the internal staircase of 73 steps. (Photo: RC&AKF)

When Firuz died in 1489 (most probably by natural causes, which would also make him an exception among the Habshi Dynasty rulers), the underage son of Fatah Shah was proclaimed as the next monarch, who took the name of Nasir-ud-din Mahmud II, with an Abyssinian nobleman, Habash Khan, as his regent. However, Habash Khan was very soon killed and his regency taken over by Siddi Badr, *“the madman”, who had*

<sup>48</sup> R. Pankhurst, 'The Ethiopian Diaspora...', pp. 193-194.

<sup>49</sup> J. Allan, T. Wolseley Haig, *The Cambridge Shorter History...*, p. 272.

*the young king put to death [...] then seized the throne, under the name of Shams al-Din Muzaffar Shah, and instituted a reign of terror.*<sup>50</sup> The rule of Shams ud-din Muzaffar Shah began in 1490 and lasted for three years. He had an army of 30,000 of which 5,000 were Abyssinians.<sup>51</sup> Historians describe his reign as the period of tyranny, with many of the court officials executed, incredibly high taxes and a great deal of bloodshed. The negative sentiments against him reached a climax *when his minister, 'Ala-ud-din Husain, a Sayyid of Tamriz, retired from his service in disgust, the army placed him at its head and rose against the usurper.*<sup>52</sup> Siddi Badr's army, even though besieged in Gaur, defended itself and its ruler for about three months. However, not being able to resist the enemy, the soldiers under the command of the sultan tried to flee the city which resulted in the death of the last Habshi ruler of Bengal. Soon after, Sayyid Husain was raised to the throne as Alauddin Husain and thus started the Husain Shahi Dynasty of Bengal.

The new monarch made sure that the *Africans were successively expelled from the kingdom of Bengal, so they sought refuge first in North India (mainly Delhi) but later drifted south toward the Deccan and to Gujarat in the west. Many found employment as mercenaries.*<sup>53</sup> In the Deccan, the former Africans slaves – later called the “Abyssinian party” – dominated the sultanates of Bijapur and Ahmadnagar in the 15th and 16th centuries.

**3.3. The Deccan Sultanates.** Africans, commonly labelled with the term Habshis,<sup>54</sup> were arriving to the Deccan since the pre-Islamic times, mostly brought as slaves or mercenaries by the Arab traders. But it was only after mid-fourteenth century, when a revolted Tughlaqs' governor of the Deccan, Alauddin Bahman Shah (r. 1347-1358) established the Islamic Bahmanid Sultanate, that their influx increased significantly. That occurred mostly due to the rapid development of maritime trade in the Indian Ocean. Since the northern land routes into Central Asia remained under the control of the sultans of Delhi and were no more available for traders from the south, the ports along the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal began to play a primary role, as the main centres of trade exchange. Luxury goods, Persian horses, and slaves were brought into the Deccan by the Arab merchants in exchange for Indian clothes and spices. Later, from the 16th century, African slaves were also brought to India by the Europeans, especially the Portuguese, who established themselves at several entrepôts on the west coast of India, and fetched slaves from East Africa until the first half of the 18th century.

<sup>50</sup> R. Pankhurst, 'The Ethiopian Diaspora...', p. 194.

<sup>51</sup> P. Obeng, *Shaping Membership, Defining Nation. The Cultural Politics of African Indians in South Asia*, Lanham, MD 2007, p. 7.

<sup>52</sup> J. Allan, T. Wolseley Haig, *The Cambridge Shorter History...*, p. 273.

<sup>53</sup> C. Boyce Davies (ed.), *Encyclopaedia...*, p. 566.

<sup>54</sup> In the Deccan, not only Abyssinians were known as Habshis. The term was used for other Africans too, though most of those who were taken to India came from Africa's eastern flank, i.e. Abyssinia, Sudan, Somalia and the Swahili coast of East Africa.



The Habshis, known as being physically powerful and fiercely loyal, had the reputation of good fighters and mostly came to the Deccan to fight in local armies as so-called *jangju-s* ('mercenaries'), but they were also valued as concubines, domestic servants and farm labourers.<sup>55</sup> Some of them arrived voluntarily too,<sup>56</sup> including those who moved from other parts of India, e.g. Bengal. There were also Habshis who did not fight but were employed in many other realms of life<sup>57</sup>, like Yaqut Dabuli, a prominent Ethiopian architect of Sultan Muhammad Adil Shah (r. 1627-1656), who was responsible for elaborate colour decoration of the great mihrab in the Bijapur Jami Masjid.<sup>58</sup>

In the cosmopolitan atmosphere of the Bahmanid Empire, additionally catalysed by pervading syncretism of mystical Bhakti and Sufi movements, Habshis soon became an important part of the cultural and political landscape, rising often to the ranks of nobility at the courts of Deccani rulers. Their social and political role increased when they grew to be the object of rivalry between the two main forces clashing for control over the state, namely, those of non-Persian heritage, who spoke local languages and considered themselves Deccani, and Afaqis (newcomers from the west, known also as *pardeshi-s*, 'foreigners'), who considered themselves Persian and spoke Persian or Urdu. The competition for the support of the Habshis was finally won by the Deccanis. It was a natural coalition, partly due to the religious convergence (both groups were Sunnis while Afaqis were mostly Shiites), partly because the dark-skinned Africans were looked down upon by the fair complexioned newcomers from Central Asia and Persia.<sup>59</sup> From the times of Mujahid Shah (r. 1375-1378) the Habshis were employed in state service, mostly as bodyguards, and in the beginning of the 15th century they *assumed considerable importance, as they played important roles in determining who would be the successors to the kings*.<sup>60</sup> During the regency of Mahmud Gawan (fl. 1460-1481), a skilful Iranian guardian of the minor sultan Nizamuddin Ahmad III, and later the prime minister of sultan Muhammad Shah III Lashkari, the situation changed: *the African nobles were no longer in alliance with the Dakhnis, but had become a power to contend with in their own right, and the superior appointments were thus distributed fairly evenly between all three parties*.<sup>61</sup> Habshis were appointed as *sarlashkar-s* (governors) of two (out of eight)

<sup>55</sup> P.K. Mohanty, *Encyclopaedia of Scheduled Tribes in India*, Vol. 2, Delhi 2006, p. 81 ff.

<sup>56</sup> C. Boyce Davies (ed.), *Encyclopaedia...*, p. 107.

<sup>57</sup> They were, among other things, traders, riders, personal guards, musicians, court jesters, personal attendants, masters of the royal stables, sailors, hunting assistants, kennel keepers, palanquin bearers, herbalists and midwives. See: *ibid.*, p. 563.

<sup>58</sup> P. Obeng, 'Religion and Empire: Belief and Identity among African Indians of Karnataka, South India' in: J. C. Hawley (ed.), *India in Africa, Africa in India. Indian Ocean Cosmopolitanisms*, Bloomington 2008, p. 238.

<sup>59</sup> S.K. Chatterji, *India and Ethiopia From the Seventh Century B.C.*, Calcutta 1968, p. 63 (*The Asiatic Society Monograph Series*, 4).

<sup>60</sup> J.C. Powell-Price, *A History of India from the Earliest Times to 1939*, London 1958, p. 134.

<sup>61</sup> S. Sadiq Ali, *The African Dispersal in the Deccan. From Medieval to Modern Times*, New Delhi 1996, pp. 47-48.



provinces of Mahur and Gulbarga,<sup>62</sup> and were recruited in equal number with Deccanis and Afaqis into the royal guard.<sup>63</sup> Formally, however, most of them still belonged to the Deccani faction and supported its goals, including conspiracy that led to the false accusation and killing of Mahmud Gawan in 1481. Finally, the animosity between Deccanis and Afaqis, further aggravated by religious difference, weakened the Bahmani state to the point of disintegration, which started in 1490, when successive regions broke away and turned into five separate kingdoms of Ahmadnagar, Berar, Bidar, Bijapur, and Golconda, known as Deccan Sultanates. There is ample evidence that the Habshis were present and important in all of them,<sup>64</sup> but in two they played especially significant role, namely in the Sultanate of Ahmadnagar ruled by the Nizam Shahi dynasty and the Sultanate of Bijapur ruled by the Adil Shahis.

Yusuf Adil Shah (r. 1490-1511), the founder of the dynasty of Adil Shahis which ruled the Sultanate of Bijapur for nearly two centuries, and former Bahmani governor of the province of Bijapur, announced independence from the declining kingdom in 1490. Himself a newcomer from Central Asia (he was, most probably, a Georgian slave purchased by Mahmud Gawan), he supported the interests of Afaqis (and Shiites), and shortly before his death he issued a decree prohibiting both Deccanis and Habshis, and even their children, from holding office. This law was abolished only in 1537 by the fourth ruler of the sultanate, Ibrahim Adil Shah I, who divided state offices between Deccanis and Habshis, at the same time putting an end to Shiite domination.<sup>65</sup> Since then, the Habshis' role in the sultanate steadily increased. During the reign of Ibrahim Adil Shah II (r. 1580-1627), the sixth sultan of Bijapur, whose unfriendly attitude towards the Shiite Afaqis caused the political unrest in the kingdom, an African soldier named Siddi Raihan formed the Habshi party and practically took control of Bijapur policy, serving first as a chief advisor (and for a short time also as a regent) to Ibrahim Adil Shah II and later as a Prime Minister at the court of his son Muhammad Adil Shah (r. 1627-1656). In 1635 he was **given the honourable title** Ikhlas Khan, by which he is known to history. For about five decades he was in charge of the sultanate administration, its commander-in-chief and minister of finances. He was also a very able and vigorous general, and under his leadership Bijapur expanded further to the south into Hindu territories in Mysore and Eastern Karnataka.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>62</sup> One of those Habshi *sarlashkar-s* was Dastur Dinar, wielding the administrative charge of Gulbarga, Aland, Ganjoti and Warangal. Known as a man of great ability and talent, he gained huge popularity among his subjects. When Muhammad Shah III tried to limit his power, he revolted against the sultan, and having mobilized a big army of mainly African soldiers, he occupied most of the territories of Telangana. Defeated and taken prisoner, but later pardoned and reverted to his position, Dastur Dinar remained one of the most influential nobles of African origin till his death in 1509 or 1510. See: *ibid.*, pp. 50-54.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>64</sup> For example, a hill outside the capital city of Bidar, once an Ethiopian fort and now a cemetery with tombs of African nobles and soldiers, is to this day known as Habshi Kot. See: G. W. Irwin, *Africans Abroad. A Documentary History of the Black Diaspora in Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean during the Age of Slavery*, New York 1977, p. 149.

<sup>65</sup> R. Pankhurst, 'The Ethiopian Diaspora...', pp. 196-197.

<sup>66</sup> S. Sadiq Ali, *The African Dispersal in the Deccan...*, p. 112 ff.



**Illustration 3.** The portrait of Ikhlas Khan, probably Golconda or Hyderabad, c. 1650.  
British Library, Johnson Album 26, no. 19 (public domain).

In the Bijapur Sultanate, before its ultimate conquest by the Moghuls in 1686, there were many other outstanding generals and governors of African descent. Shanti Sadiq Ali enumerates the names of several of them: Kamil Khan, Kishwar Khan, Dilawar Khan, Hamid Khan, Daulat Khan (known as Khawas Khan), Mohammad Amin (known as Mustafa Khan), Masud Khan, Farhad Khan, Khairiyat Khan and Randaula Khan (known as Rustam-i Zaman).<sup>67</sup> They all made efforts to defend Bijapur from the threat of external powers (mainly Mughals and Marathas), tried to annex new territories to the sultanate by subduing neighbouring Hindu kingdoms and chiefdoms, and at the same time expanded their sphere of influence, shaping to a great extent the socio-political landscape of the region according to their own will. They not only achieved highest political or military positions, but also gained great financial wealth, supporting the economic development of the territories under their administration. That was, for example, the case of Randaula Khan, a Habshi general who ruled over the south-western corner of the Bijapur kingdom. His charge extended on the west coast from Ratnagiri town, going southwards round the Portuguese territory of Goa to Karwar and Mirjan, where he had his seat. The area under his control was famous for silk, pep-

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., pp. 111-130.

per and betel nut. By means of his agents Randaula Khan administered *the flourishing ports of Rajapur in the north and Karwar in the south, through which the trade of the rich inland places flowed to Europe*.<sup>68</sup> Rich Habshi aristocrats often were also builders and patrons of the art<sup>69</sup>, like Siddi Masud, the governor of Kurnool and regent of the last sultan of Bijapur, Sikandar Adil Shah (r. 1672-1686). Siddi Masud is credited with improving the famous Adoni fort, clearing the forest area in the vicinity of the town, establishing the townships of Imatiazgadh and Adilabad, and also constructing the excellent Jami Masjid in 1660. Moreover, he was an ardent art collector, and a patron of the Kurnool school of painting.<sup>70</sup>

Siddi Masud was one of the last great Habshi leaders in the sultanate of Bijapur. For many years he fought relentlessly against Mughal and Maratha forces, defending the territories of the weakening kingdom. In 1683, after retirement, he settled in his *jagir* (landed property) in Adoni, and ruled there independently until 1689, when he finally surrendered to Anup Singh, the Mughal general in the service of Aurangzeb.<sup>71</sup> As Pashington Obeng noticed, *with the surrender of Siddi Masud and his courtiers, including his family, an important period in the steady decline of the military and political power of the Habshis (Africans) in the Bijapuri kingdom began*.<sup>72</sup>

The sultanate of Ahmadnagar, adjacent to Bijapur on the north, was proclaimed independent from the Bahmani kingdom a few months earlier than its southern neighbour, in the same year 1490. Although the constant rivalry between the factions of Deccanis and Afaqis was going on here too, the Habshis in Ahmadnagar were more prominent than elsewhere and had substantial control of the kingdom from the very beginning of its existence. Furthermore, in Ahmadnagar a number of Habshis raised themselves to the status of rulers. A mother of the third sultan Ibrahim Nizam Shah (r. 1595-1596) was an Ethiopian queen of his father, Burhan Shah.<sup>73</sup> Ahang Khan, a chief of a small state feudatory to Ahmadnagar, was also an Abyssinian. When his realm was annexed by the Mughals in 1586, he joined the army of Ahmadnagar and for some time served under the legendary warrior queen, Chand Bibi. He then took part in conspiracy which led to her death, but continued to be an important figure in the sultanate and retired into obscurity only after Ahmadnagar was annexed to the Mughal empire in 1637.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>68</sup> J. Sarkar, *Shivaji and His Times*, London 1920, p. 260.

<sup>69</sup> Not only Habshi military administrators, but also their children with local or African women, as well as the children of enslaved Ethiopian or Sudanese women who were concubines of Arabian and Indian men, were founders and designers of some of the mosques, mausoleums or other works of art in Bijapur and other Deccan sultanates. See: R. Segal, *Islam's Black Slaves. The Other Black Diaspora*, New York 2001, pp. 50-51.

<sup>70</sup> See: S. Sadiq Ali, *The African Dispersal in the Deccan...*, p. 135; M. Zebrowski, *Deccani Painting*, Berkeley 1982.

<sup>71</sup> The conquest of the city of Bijapur by the Mughals and the final absorption of the sultanate into the Mughal empire, as well as the death of the last Adil Shahi ruler, took place three years earlier, in 1686.

<sup>72</sup> P. Obeng, *Shaping Membership...*, p. 16.

<sup>73</sup> S.K. Chatterji, *India and Ethiopia...*, p. 64.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

But undoubtedly, the most famous among prominent Habshi nobles from Ahmadnagar (and, probably, among all the Africans in India) was Malik Ambar. Not much is known about his early years, apart from that he was born in the Ethiopian province of Harar,<sup>75</sup> around 1550, and had been sold and resold several times by Arab slave traders in Hejaz, Mocha and Baghdad, among other places. In Baghdad, he was educated by his master, a merchant known as Mir Qasim, in administration and finance. Here also he became Muslim and had his original name – Shambhu – changed into Ambar (Arabic *anbar* 'aubergine').<sup>76</sup>

In the early 1570s, Ambar was purchased by Chengis Khan, the *peshva* (chief minister) of the sultan Hussein Nizam Shah of Ahmadnagar, himself a former mercenary and one of the mightiest Habshi nobles in the Deccan at that time. The young slave impressed his new master and other Habshis with his *knowledge of Arabic, his loyalty and his general intelligence*.<sup>77</sup> As his abilities and skills had been soon recognized, Chengis Khan employed Ambar as his personal assistant. Under the guidance of his master he was promoted to ever-higher positions of military and administrative authority.<sup>78</sup> However, after Chengis Khan's sudden death, the kingdom plunged into chaos and Ambar, freed by the widow of his former master, moved to the neighbouring sultanate of Bijapur, where he served as a military commander of a small contingent of troops and was given the honorary title Malik ('like a king').

Around 1595, dissatisfied with the insufficient funds offered to him by the sultan of Bijapur, he deserted and returned to Ahmadnagar, at that time torn by a war of dynastic succession and seriously threatened by the Mughals who were determined to conquer the Deccan. Accompanied by his corps of 150 loyal cavalymen, Malik Ambar joined the army organized by the Habshi prime minister Abhangar Khan. Very soon his troops increased significantly to 7,000 men, and when in 1600 Ahmadnagar's fort was finally seized by the emperor Akbar's army, Malik Ambar began a heroic and unyielding struggle, aimed at reconstituting the disintegrated Nizam Shahi's sultanate. To achieve this goal, in 1600, he installed a nephew of the defeated sultan Bahadur as a new Nizam Shah (Murtaza Nizam Shah II), and in 1602, he announced himself a regent of the puppet king (whom, meantime, he got married to his own daughter<sup>79</sup>) and a new *peshva* of Ahmadnagar. As a *de facto* ruler, he managed to prevent the Mughals from taking full control over the region, fighting them bravely and astutely over the years and forcing the frustrated Mughal emperor Jahangir (Akbar's son) and his generals to acknowledge Ambar's superiority in terms of military tactics.<sup>80</sup> Having his long-

<sup>75</sup> Or, as suggested by Richard Eaton, in the Kambata region of southern Ethiopia. Cf. R. M. Eaton, 'The Rise and Fall of Military Slavery in the Deccan, 1450-1650' in: I. Chatterjee, R.M. Eaton (eds.), *Slavery and South Asian History*, Bloomington 2006, p. 115.

<sup>76</sup> R. Shyam, *The Kingdom of Ahmadnagar*, Delhi 1966, p. 240.

<sup>77</sup> J.E. Harris, 'Malik Ambar: African Regent-Minister in India' in: R. Rashidi, I. Van Sertima (eds.), *African Presence in Early Asia*, New Brunswick-London 2007, p. 146.

<sup>78</sup> R. Shyam, *Life and Times of Malik Ambar*, Delhi 1968, p. 34.

<sup>79</sup> See: R. M. Eaton, 'The Rise and Fall of Military Slavery...', p. 125.

<sup>80</sup> On Jahangir's obsession with the invincible Malik Ambar see *ibid.*, pp. 127, 133 fn. 37.

-time rival on the path to absolute supremacy, a Deccani Mian Raju, captured and executed in 1607, Ambar solely dominated the state's affairs. In 1610 he managed to force out the Mughals from the Ahmadnagar fort and shifted his court from provincial city of Junnar, where it remained since 1600, to heavily fortified Daulatabad,<sup>81</sup> the former capital city of the Yadava dynasty and a Deccani capital of the Tughluqs. Also in 1610, he had sultan Murtaza II and his senior queen assassinated<sup>82</sup> and enthroned a five-year-old son of the murdered ruler as Burhan Nizam Shah III (r. 1610-1631), becoming his regent and the most powerful figure not only in Ahmadnagar but also in much of the Deccan.

By 1616, Malik Ambar organized and commanded an army of 60,000 cavalrymen consisting of men of various origin: Habshis, Arabs, Deccani Muslims, Hindus and Persians. He used artillery obtained from the British and maintained a naval alliance with the Siddis of Janjira<sup>83</sup> to cut off Mughal supply lines. He also looked among his neighbours for the allies who could assist his endeavours to protect Deccan from the Mughal and European (Portuguese) threat. Partly to his own family affinities with the local aristocracy and kinship ties with influential Habshis from Bijapur he managed to get support from the sultanates of Bijapur and Golconda.<sup>84</sup> Moreover, he mastered the guerrilla warfare and harassed the Mughal forces using light and highly effective Maratha cavalrymen, who were trained and remunerated by Ahmadnagar.

Apart from military and political successes, Malik Ambar stands out as a capable administrator and great builder. He developed a postal service, improving greatly the communication system in the kingdom. In 1612 he once again moved his capital, this time to a small village called Khadki<sup>85</sup>, and changed it into "an ideal capital" where *wide roads were laid, canals and drains were built, public gardens were laid out, and several mosques and public buildings were constructed*, the most famous being *the Kalachabutra ("black stadium," in which elephant games were played), the Kalamajid ("black mosque"), the Bhadkal Darwaza, and the Nakhuda Mhala (royal public buildings)*.<sup>86</sup> Several major

<sup>81</sup> Ambar greatly expanded and strengthened the fortifications of Daulatabad to protect the city from the Mughals. Indeed, when in 1621 Shah Jahan's forces tried to seize the capital, they did not succeed and suffered heavy losses. See: J. E. Harris, 'Malik Ambar...', p. 148.

<sup>82</sup> According to a relation by a contemporary Dutch traveller, Pieter van der Broecke, Ambar's move was caused by a quarrel between his own daughter, married to the sultan, and her fair-skinned Persian co-wife who had called the former a mere slave girl. However, more decisive was probably the fact, that Murtaza II more and more actively tried to influence the state affairs, which Ambar, as a peshva, considered his own and independent domain. See: R. M. Eaton, 'The Rise and Fall of Military Slavery...', pp. 125-126.

<sup>83</sup> See footnote 35.

<sup>84</sup> See: J. E. Harris, 'Malik Ambar...', pp. 148-149.

<sup>85</sup> Or Kirkee in former British sources. After Malik Ambar's death it was renamed first as Fatehnagar by his son and later, in 1653, as Aurangabad by the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb.

<sup>86</sup> J.E. Harris, 'Malik Ambar...', p. 150. It is worth to notice that the public buildings constructed by Malik Ambar as well as his tomb were made of black stone, possibly because in this way he wanted to accentuate his African heritage and regard for his own dark skin – which, in the opinion of many people, including his chief enemies, the Mughals, was a mark of degradation and wretchedness.



reforms introduced by Ambar included recognition of the right to private ownership of property next to the communal lands and the thorough reorganization of the state's feudal revenue system connected with the implementation of a tax policy that relied on accurate assessments of field cultivation and commodity values. Moreover, he proved to be a competent ruler of the multiethnic society, and one of his most precious qualities was the ability to win over the loyalty of people belonging to different ethnic groups. Ambar promoted his fellow Habshis, employing them mainly in the army and above all in his private guard, but at the same time, following the policy of religious tolerance, granted land both to Muslim and to Hindu residents and appointed his principal financial officials and tax collectors regardless of their faith.<sup>87</sup> Under his rule every part of the society had a stake in the kingdom: *Marathas were [...] prominent as clerks in the military and civil service. Arabs and Habshis were appointed to key military posts; they also, along with Persians, were the core of small business. Arabs and Persians monopolized the foreign trade, principally between the Deccan and the Persian Gulf. [...] trade was also developed with the Portuguese and the English.*<sup>88</sup>



**Illustration 4.** Portrait of Malik Ambar (detail), early 17th c., Ahmadnagar. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Arthur Mason Knapp Fund. (public domain)

<sup>87</sup> R. Shyam, *The Kingdom of Ahmadnagar*, p. 280.

<sup>88</sup> J.E. Harris, 'Malik Ambar...', p. 149.



Never conquered, Malik Ambar died in 1626, as a nearly eighty-year-old man. His son Fateh Khan succeeded him as the *peshva* but three years later he was dismissed from this office by sultan Burhan III and then imprisoned for disobedience. In 1636 the Mughals finally overpowered Ahmadnagar, killing the possible Nizam Shahi heirs to its throne and incorporating its territories to the empire. A great number of Ahmadnagari Habshis found employment in administrations and armies of the new powers which from the mid-seventeenth century took control over the Deccan: the Mughals, the British and the Nizams of Hyderabad. The memory of Malik Ambar, the great African hero of the Deccan is still alive not only among their descendants but also among other denizens of Southern India.

## CONCLUSION

Probably nowhere in the world did African slaves or ex-slaves manage to gain and maintain power for such a long time as they did in South Asia. Equally exceptional is the fact that the relatively small number of rulers of African descent, in India ruled over predominantly non-African populations. The examples selected for this article from the long history of African settlement in South Asia are a depiction of the way in which the status of Africans evolved in that part of the world, and how the attitude of society towards them gradually improved, along with the growth of their own social position.

The British rule in India in the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries resulted generally in a significant reduction of status and meaning of former local power elites, including the Siddi or Habshi magnates. But even in this period there were individuals who stood out from the fading African community in India. Among them were, for example, the Siddi nawabs of Janjira, who were officially recognized by the British Raj as rulers of separate princely states of Janjira and Jafarabad (existed until 1948, when both entered the Indian Union); Maharani Bamba Duleep Singh, a half Abyssinian married to Maharaja Duleep Singh, the last ruler of the Sikh empire (deposed by the British in 1848); or the Siddi rulers of another princely state of Sachin which existed in Gujarat from 1791 to 1948.

With the political changes on the Subcontinent after 1947, the situation of the African population also changed and now very little remains of the great past. The policy of subsequent governments of independent India did not bring much support to the Indian African communities scattered throughout the country. The specialist sources contain different data regarding the population of Siddis or Habshis in today's India, with the highest estimation coming to 55,000 (after the partition, the vast majority of Siddis found themselves on the territories belonging to Pakistan and today it is Pakistan that has the most people of African descent in South Asia). Most of them live in small, provincial communities, in villages and forests of Karnataka, Maharashtra, Gujarat, West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh. They are, predominantly, poor and uneducated, mostly Muslims, but also Christians and Hindus. The majority of the Siddi popula-

tion all over India still remains isolated and economically and socially neglected, even though in recent years they have been registered on the governmental list of Scheduled Tribes. Theoretically, this privileged status provides access to reserved quotas of government jobs, quotas in state schools, bursaries and subsidized housing. However, most Siddis continue to subsist as very poorly paid agricultural and casual labourers or, at times, also as domestic help.

Today many Siddis are not in any way aware of their origin, and most of them have not even heard of Africa. They have adapted to the local cultures, accepting their religions, languages and customs, therefore the Siddi communities differ in various parts of India. Having lost their original African names, languages and culture, they have only retained minor residues of African tradition. This heritage is traceable in their music, songs, stories and uniquely African musical instruments. In this way, over many centuries, from once being Africans in India they became an integral part of the Indian population – Indians, who are described as African Indians mainly in scholarly studies, and figure as such in statistical data.

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