

**The Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA)** is an autonomous academic, research centre under the Ministry of Culture, Government of India, dedicated to the study of culture and the experience of arts in their diversity and mutual interdependence. The studies at IGNCA encompass a wide range of subjects, including Archaeology, Anthropology, History, Philosophy, Language & Literature, Arts and Crafts of India,.

IGNCA also focusses on ancient cultural interactions between India and several countries around the world, especially those in the region in South and South East Asia. IGNCA collaborates with academic and cultural institutions in order to weave a network of research and documentation in the field of arts. The exhibition 'Africans in India - A Rediscovery' of photographs has come from the Schomburg Center for Studies in Black Culture, a unit of New York Public Library.

Coinciding with the exhibition the following events are being hosted by IGNCA

- Curatorial talk by Dr. Sylviane A. Diouf (Director of the Lapidus Center for the Historical Analysis of Transatlantic Slavery at the Schomburg Center) on Thursday, 9th October at 5.00 p.m. Auditorium, C.V. Mess, Janpath, New Delhi
- A one-day conference on the 15th of October, 2014 from 10.30 a.m. to 5.30 p.m., at the Conference Room, C.V. Mess, Janpath, New Delhi. Among the topics that will be addressed in the conference are the ancestral links of the Afro-Indian Siddis, Africans in Lucknow and the Decanni Sultanates, Africans in Indian paintings, African Sufi Saints among others.

The Exhibition will be open from 10 am to 6 p.m. (Monday Closed) till 4th November 2014 at Matighar, C V Mess, Janpath, New Delhi

Please visit '**Svasti**' - The IGNCA shop run by HHEC at C.V. Mess, Janpath

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RSVP: 011-23388155 (9:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.)



# Africans in India

## A REDISCOVERY

8<sup>th</sup> October - 4<sup>th</sup> November, 2014



**SCHOMBURG CENTER**  
FOR RESEARCH IN BLACK CULTURE  
The New York Public Library

Curated by Dr. Sylviane A. Diouf and  
Dr. Kenneth X. Robbins



Over the centuries, East Africans have greatly distinguished themselves in India as generals, commanders, admirals, prime ministers, and rulers. They have written a story unparalleled in the rest of the world, that of enslaved Africans attaining the pinnacle of military and political authority not only in a foreign country but also on another continent.

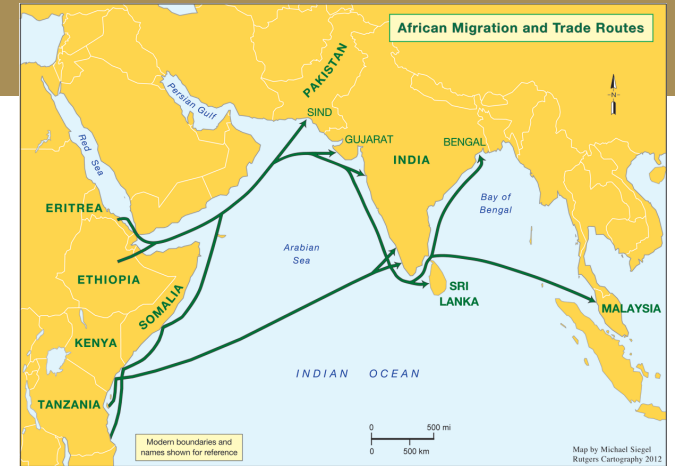
It was a feat few of them could have imagined when, as captives, they sailed across the Indian Ocean and its adjoining seas in overcrowded *dhows*, destined to unknown lands and uncertain futures. But from Bengal in the northeast to Gujarat in the west and to the Deccan in Central India, East Africans—known as *Sidis* and *Habshis*—vigorously asserted themselves in the country of their enslavement.

The success was theirs, but it is also a strong testimony to the open-mindedness of a society in which they were a small religious and ethnic minority, originally of low status. As foreigners and Muslims, Africans ruled over indigenous Hindu, Muslim, and Jewish populations.

As rulers, city planners, and architects, the Africans have left an impressive historical and architectural legacy that testify to their skills, and intellectual, cultural, military and political savvy. The imposing forts, mosques, mausoleums, and other edifices they built—some more than 500 years ago—still grace the Indian landscape.

From humble beginnings, some Africans carved out princely states complete with their own coats of arms, armies, mints, and stamps. They fiercely defended them from powerful enemies well into the 20th century when, with another 600 princely states, they were integrated into the Indian State.

Although they were a common sight, the Africans who were an integral part of the history and culture of the Indian subcontinent have not received, in the present, the recognition they deserve. This groundbreaking exhibition retraces the lives and achievements of some of the talented and prominent Sidis of yesterday.



### ELITE SLAVERY

The African men and women who were taken to India through the early slave trade were known as *Habshi* (Abyssinian) and *Sidi* (derived either from *sayyidi*, my lord in Arabic; or from *saydi*, meaning captive or prisoner of war). They came mostly from Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, and adjoining areas. Trained as soldiers they were highly prized for their military skills. It is among these men that the generals, commanders, and rulers emerged.

Indians had an abundance of local slaves to perform hard labor. As a consequence, the Africans, Turks, Persians, and Europeans they purchased were mostly employed in specialized jobs as domestics in wealthy households, in the royal courts, and in the armed forces. To be sure, most men and women enslaved in India spent their existence dependent and marginalized; their lives unheralded and forgotten. But for others, slavery was not an impediment to high office nor was color. They could rise through the ranks and become “elite slaves,” amassing wealth and power and even becoming rulers in their own right.

Due to Islamic laws and societal conventions, East Africans and their enslaved descendants in India tended to have much greater social mobility than West Africans and their offspring did in the Americas. One distinctive trait of slavery in India and in the Islamic world was that bondage and “race” were not linked. Instead, factors such as religion, ethnicity, and caste were often more influential than color.



FROM LEFT TO RIGHT

**Sidi Masud Khan/**  
*Ashmolean Museum*

**Janjira Nawab Sidi  
Mohammad Khan  
III and his mother/**  
*Fayzee Rahamin*

**Yasmin Mahal/ Royal  
Collection Trust /**  
*© HM Queen Elizabeth II*

**Ikhlas Khan/**  
*Ashmolean Museum*



Emancipation, based on Qur’anic grounds (Sura *Al-Nur* 24:33), was frequent. It was commonly done verbally and did not require any legal process. Enslaved women’s children by free men were free at birth, while the mothers became free upon their owners’ death.

Elite slavery was often a frontier phenomenon, more entrenched in areas that underwent instability due to struggles between factions and where hereditary authority was weak. There, rulers considered Africans reliable because they were outsiders with no filial connections to the indigenous populations and did not possess traditional authority. As a consequence they made them court officials, administrators, and army commanders. These elite slaves were frequently at the center of court disputes and sometimes seized power for themselves.

### GENERALS, MINISTERS, RULERS AND QUEENS

From the 1400s, numerou=s Africans held high positions in India including generals, admirals, and ministers, in Muslim and Hindu states.

The “Abyssinian Party” as it was called dominated the Bijapur Sultanate starting in 1580, and one of its most famous African governors was Ikhlas Khan. He was in charge of administration, commander-in-chief and minister of finances under two sultans.

Another powerful leader was Malik Ambar (1548-1626). Born Chapu in Kambata, southwestern Ethiopia, he was enslaved as a young man and converted to Islam. He arrived in India in the early 1570s and became a slave of Chengiz Khan (believed to have been an Ethiopian and a former

slave), the prime minister of the sultanate of Ahmadnagar. He was freed upon Chengiz Khan’s death in 1575. Malik Ambar ruled as regent and prime minister and left one of the most impressive legacies of any ruler in the Deccan.

Two African dynasties were established in western India. The first ruled the state of Janjira also known as Habsan (for Abyssinia). Part of the state consisted of an island that the Ethiopians transformed into a fortress in the early 1700s. Considered one of the best specimens of naval fort architecture, it was never conquered though attacked dozens of times. The second African dynasty ruled the Sachin State in Gujarat from 1791. Like Janjira, Sachin had its own cavalry and state band that included Africans, its coats of arms, currency, and stamped paper.

The African *nawabs* (princes) of Janjira and Sachin were Muslims and ruled over majority Hindu populations. In 1948, all princely states were incorporated into India and ceased to exist, but the Janjira and the Sachin dynasties still live on.

A few African women became queens in India. An Ethiopian and a former slave, Mehr Lekha Begum Sahiba was the third wife of Sayyid Mansur Ali Khan, the nawab of Bengal from 1838 to 1880. Yasmin Mahal was one of the wives of Wajid Ali Shah, the last king of Oudh in Uttar Pradesh (1847-56) in northern India. She has been represented in several paintings alone with the king or among his other wives. Bamba Muller (1848-1887), the daughter of an Ethiopian—who may have been enslaved—and a German banker, became Maharani Bamba Duleep Singh when she married the last ruler of the Sikh Empire in northern India.

### AFRICANS IN INDIAN ART

Besides appearing in written documents, East Africans were immortalized in the rich paintings of different eras, states, and styles that form a central and distinctive part of Indian culture. They were captured in vibrant and exquisite portraits as principal subjects or in the immediate vicinity of non-African rulers.

The images presented in this exhibition are evidence of the Sid-is’ power and political significance and India’s unique history.

*Africans in India* displays photographic reproductions of paintings from the following collections:

Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, United Kingdom

The British Library, London, United Kingdom

Catherine and Ralph Benkaim Collection

Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, Ireland

Francesca Galloway, London, United Kingdom

Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

The Kenneth and Joyce Robbins Collection

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles

Musée des Arts Asiatiques Guimet, Paris, France

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

The Royal Collection, Buckingham Palace, London, United Kingdom

San Diego Museum of Art

### African Rulers

Sharqi Sultans of Jaunpur (1394-1479?)

(The 1st or all the Sharqui sultans may have been Africans)

Habshi Sultans of Bengal (1486-1493)

Nawabs of Janjira (1618-1948)

Sidi Masud of Adoni (17th century)

Nawabs of Sachin (1791-1948)

### Deccani Sultanates With High-Ranking Africans

Bahmani Sultanate (1347-1518)

Ahmadnagar (1496-1636)

Bijapur (1490-1686)

Golconda (1512-1687)

### States With High-Ranking Africans

Khandesh (1382-1600)

Gujarat (1407-1572)

Kutch (1500-1948)

Bhavnagar (1660-1948)

Hyderabad (1724-1948)