Africans in India – Past and Present

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Recent interest in the fragmented cultures of African diasporas around the globe has directed attention to the people of African descent in South Asia also. Rarely had these communities been noticed before in spite of existing ethnographic and historical studies.[1] Indeed, the western coast of India is dotted with settlements of people of East African origins. The largest group of Afro-Indians lives in the Northwest of the subcontinent, in the district of Sindh (c. 30,000) – close to the Makran coast – in modern Pakistan. On the Indian side, smaller communities are settled in Gujarat (6–7,000), in Bombay (c. 400) and further South in the Indian states of Goa and Karnataka.[2] Wherever Afro-Indian communities are found they call themselves 'Sidi'. This designation has been subjected to a wide range of spellings, probably corresponding to local pronunciations, such as Siddhi, Sheedi or Siddi. Another name given to Africans often found in historical works is 'Habshi', a term derived from 'Habash', the Arabic name for 'Ethiopia' or 'Abessiniya'. There is, however, no simple correspondence between the names and the respective people. When I carried out fieldwork in the late eighties I found that the Sidi in Gujarat resented being called 'Habshi' because they felt that the term carries demeaning connotations. Those in Sindh (Pakistan), by contrast, preferred 'Habshi' as a general term for different social sections of Afro-Pakistanis.[3] These different attitudes seem to be connected to historical impacts of the terms. The term 'Habshi' is commemorative of a history of slavery and of the collapse of this system by the nineteenth century. In the nineteenth century, African slaves were transplanted into new social and political structures in India. Thus, Gujarat and Sindh can be seen as different social settings in different processes of historical transformations. The designation of the African communities depends on their position in the whole system. When this collapses, their position and thus their designation changes too.

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[1] Pankhurst (1961: 409–422); Burton-Page (1971); N. Basu (1982); Chakraborty & Nandi (1984); Trivedi (1961a, 1961b); Naik & Pandya (1981); H. Basu (1995).

[2] Palakshappa (1976).

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Most of the historical literature concerned with the African diaspora in India follows one of two assumptions: either Africans are said to have remained completely separate and isolated from the host societies or they are seen to undergo a process of assimilation which would ultimately erase their 'African-ness'.[4] While both positions are valid to some extent, I would propose that African histories in India are neither unilinear nor could a necessary continuity be proposed between today's African presence in India (and elsewhere in South Asia) and those famous Habshis one encounters in historical works but who have more or less vanished from the social scene in India. Indian history abounds with references to Africans who participated in "making history" by conquest or by military excellence and sometimes by ruling. In this regard the UNESCO definition of "African diaspora" can be applied which suggests that one focus of attention should be directed to the contributions which Africans had made to the histories of the diverse host societies.[5] Africans participated in Indian constellations of power, e.g. in the waxing and waning of ruling dynasties in the Indian subcontinent and the fluctuation and tensions between imperial dynasties and regional kingdoms striving for dominance and power. African soldiers gained power through the workings of Muslim systems of rule, military actions and by participating in palace politics. As will be seen below, the historical existence of Habshi aristocrats in India was closely tied 1. to various power constellations during the reign of Muslim imperial dynasties and 2. to Islamic notions of slavery. Due to the collapse of Muslim rule by the end of the 18th century, African slaves lost their positions in the military and aristocratic systems. Those who survived – as for example the former Nawab of Sachin, a small Princely State in South Gujarat – do not represent themselves by referring to an African past. On the other hand, there still exist Afro-Indian communities, for whom the memory of their African origins remains a meaningful way of self-representation. Memories of an African past are enacted in ritual performances[6] whose origins can be traced back to the middle of the nineteenth century, when the vanished Muslim system was replaced by interactions between British colonial rule and diverse local Hindu and Muslim systems of power. It might be suggested that in this situation of historical and structural change the Sidi also constituted an identity of their own.

In the first part of this paper I shall describe Islamic notions of slavery and their impact on the history of African slaves in precolonial India. I will then deal with the consequences of early British colonial rule for the Mus-

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[4]   Harris (1969: 4); Khalidi (1993: 16).

[5]   cf. Lovejoy (1998).

[6]   cf. H. Basu (2000).

lim system of slavery and the African slaves. In the second part I will introduce briefly the present community of Afro-Indians in Gujarat. In this way, the influence of historical continuities and discontinuities on contemporary ritual constructions of Afro-Indian, i.e. Sidi identity will be traced.

African Slaves in India and the Islamic System of Slavery

In the Persian-English Dictionary of Steingass the following definitions of 'Habashi' and 'Sidi' are given: "*Habashi* (A): of, or belonging to Abyssinia or Ethiopia; Abyssinian, Ethiopian; Negro, Black Slave." "*Saidi* (A): lordly; an appellation of Africans; a Negro."[7] It is not entirely clear, however, how the two contradictory semantic images of 'lordly' and 'negro' have evolved, since in the Muslim world 'negro' was associated with 'slave', the opposite of a lord. Richard Pankhurst noted that "Habshi" was used in India as a "generic term" for slaves coming from the Horn of Africa "or even from the whole of East Africa" (1961: 409). Echoing this view, Burton-Page wrote in the *Encyclopedia of Islam*:

> "Habshi – term used in India for those African communities whose ancestors came from the Horn of Africa, although some doubtless sprang from the neighbouring Muslim countries. The majority, at least in the earlier periods, may well have been Abyssinian, but certainly the name was applied indiscriminately to all Africans, and in the days of the Portuguese slave-trade with India many of such 'Habshis' were in fact of the Nilotic and Bantu races." (Burton-Page 1971: 14)[8]

While African slaves continued to be sold to India till the early twentieth century, their roles varied with different historical contexts. The status of 'slave' did not prevent them from accumulating wealth and power, and the most famous and often quoted instances of African presence in Indian history relate to Habshis in high government and military positions. This was the result of complex interactions between Islamic notions of slavery, the history of Muslim conquest and state building in South Asia and, finally, conditions prevailing in Indian society itself which did not rely on an elaborate system of slavery.

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7   Steingass (1957).

8   Abdulaziz Lodhi assumed that the two ethnonymes 'Habshi' and 'Sidi' "partly tell us that they were in the employ of Sayyids, the Muslim rulers of India, and partly that they came from Ethiopia" (1991: 83). Apart from the fact that 'Habshi' cannot be taken as directly corresponding to ethnic or geographical origin, the Muslim rulers of India were not Sayyid – which is primarily a religious category – but represented different ethnic backgrounds at different periods of time. Moreover, the Sidi were not necessarily in the service of Sayyids, not even Muslims, but served those who acted as masters and paid the price: Hindu or Muslim kings, chiefs and merchants, or Parsis.

In contrast to the European system of slavery prevalent in the Americas in which slave labour was mainly used in production and plantation work, an important dimension of the Islamic system – especially in the early centuries – consisted in the use of slaves as soldiers and military personnel.[9] It is here that one finds features which distinguished Islamic slavery from other forms of slavery. As has been shown by Pipes, rarely had such a highly specialised system of military slavery been developed: "For a full millennium, from the early ninth century until the early nineteenth century, Muslims regularly and deliberately employed slaves as soldiers. This occurred through nearly the whole of Islamdom, from Central Africa to Central Asia, from Spain to Bengal, and perhaps beyond. Few dynasties within this long time-span and broad area had no military slaves."[10] It is in this context that Habshis acquired state power in medieval Bengal or in the Deccan.[11]

The military dimension of Islamic slavery resulted in a continuous high demand for slaves. Africans were not the only ones to be enslaved, rather, slaves were captured wherever Muslims went on conquering raids and were sold from many marginal areas of the Islamic world. The critical distinction Islamic law drew between people who could be enslaved and those who could not was their being 'believers' or not. The main principle of Islamic notions of slavery rested on *kufr*, non-belief (Willis 1985: 2ff). Accordingly, only non-believers, i.e. non-Muslims could be captured and sold as slaves. In this sense, then, slavery appeared as a transitional state which marked the transformation from a "barbarian" to a "civilisational" social existence (ibid.). In Islamic scriptures, the slave is the equivalent of the wild, unruly beast that is tamed and humanised by its believing owner. Thus, when a slave was converted to Islam the success of the taming process was proved, which simultaneously enabled the owner to acquire religious merit in accordance with the Quran by liberating his former slave.[12] Theoretically, then, ethnic affiliation did not matter in Islamic law for determining unfree in contrast to free status.[13] As Levtzion pointed out, however, at least since the fifteenth century, the Islamic ideology of slavery was increasingly contradicted by the practice of slave-capturing in parts of Africa where Islamisation had already penetrated deeply into the population.[14] Like their Christian counter-

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9   For a distinction between "traditional" and "modern" systems of slavery, cf. Manning (1990). For details of Islamic slavery, see Brunschvig (1971); slaves were classified as domestic and military slaves.

10   Pipes (1981: 35).

11   cf. Burton-Page (1971); Khalidi (1993).

12   The Quran, *sura* xxiv, 33, makes the liberation of slaves a major merit.

13   cf. Brunschvig (1971).

14   Levtzion (1985: 194ff).

parts in later centuries, Muslim writers turned to the so-called "Hamitic hypothesis" in order to justify the continued enslavement of African believers. The "Hamitic hypothesis" takes up the biblical myth of Noah cursing his son Ham for having emasculated him.[15] The descendants of Ham should be of black skin and remain forever the servants of non-blacks. In Willis' words this meant that "the link between Ham and the darker humankind is fully forged – blackness becomes a simile for the servile condition"[16].

Still, in spite of these attempts to justify the capturing of believers as slaves in Africa, within the Islamic system of slavery in India, at least, African slaves apparently were not treated differently from other enslaved subjects. Moreover, the status of military slaves did not prevent them from gaining aristocratic positions within Muslim states. Daniel Pipes delineated the role of military slaves in the process of Muslim state building in newly conquered areas at the time of the caliphate. He then analysed the cycle through which slave-soldiers first conquered an area and built a government, with which the former conquering soldiers then became identical. In the last phase, the former slaves turned rulers who again needed slave-soldiers for maintaining their positions of power. Armies of slave-soldiers who were trained at a young age by Muslim soldiers provided the advantage of being subservient to and dependent upon the sovereign power; the existing ties of slavery could be transformed into patron-client relationships in order to ensure continued loyalty to the ruler even though the soldiers fought in distant places.[17] When a distant area was conquered, slave-soldiers would demand concessions and privileges from the sovereign power who would ultimately lose control over conquered possessions in far away lands. Eventually, such a state would declare its independence from the paramount power and at the same time use slave-soldiers in order to consolidate its power vis-à-vis the conquered nobility. This process is historically well documented for the establishment of the early Muslim governments of the Delhi sultanate which was founded by Turkish slave-soldiers.[18] The same cyclic process is observable in Indian history with its waxing and waning of Muslim empires alternating with intermediate phases of autonomous regional sultanates. It was during such intermittent times of uncertainty of succession that Habshi slave-soldiers rose to state power. The most well-known examples are from Bengal (Abyssinian rule from 1481–1487) and the Deccan.[19] However, Africans were not the only slaves involved in the process

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[15] cf. Sanders (1969); Ranke-Graves & Patai (1986: 150).

[16] Willis (1985: 8).

[17] Pipes (1981).

[18] cf. Kulke & Rothermund (1990: 162ff).

[19] cf. Khalidi (1993).

of Muslim state-building in India. For example, Sultan Firuz Tuqluqh pos-
sessed 180,000 slaves including many other foreigners as well as native
Indians.[20] At the time when Gujarat was a province of the Sultanate of Delhi
in the fourteenth century, it is recorded that the sultan demanded 400
"Abyssinian and Hindu slaves" as a tribute from the governor.[21]

The presence of Habshis or African slaves in India is documented since
the thirteenth century.[22] Indian history provides many instances of fighting
Habshi – not only by land but also by sea. In the context of Muslim state
building in India Habshi slaves repeatedly made a name for themselves as
military leaders (for example Malik Ambar in seventeenth century Deccan)
or sometimes as rulers. The actions of medieval Habshis of Hyderabad and
the Deccan as well as those of the famous Sidi of Janjira who controlled
parts of the Konkan coast from the small fortified town in the 17th and 18th
centuries are well documented.[23] The occasional assumption of state power
by African slave-soldiers was closely tied to the relationship between the
nobility and the army in medieval Muslim states.

In the Sultanate of Gujarat in the sixteenth century the army reflected
the same divisions of the nobility, which was partly a result of the rule that
nobles had to raise troops for the sultan. The nobility included the relatives
of the sultan, slaves, foreigners and natives who tended to build factions
that were at least partly based upon ethnic affiliation. In the 1550s there
were Turkish, Afghan, Habshi, Persian and Mughal groups of nobles distin-
guished by reference to the respective place of origin.[24] The Gujarat cavalry
consisted of 12,000 men who were divided into "eight racial groups, each
under its own leader"[25]. One of these "racial groups" consisted of troops of
African soldiers under Habshi leaders. During the reign of Sultan Bahadur
(1526–1537) a contingent of 5,000 Habshi soldiers was stationed in Ahma-
dabad; the fort of Daman was defended by a Habshi leader with 4,000
African soldiers against Portuguese attacks.[26] The most prominent Habshi
noble of that time was Shaykh Sa'id al-Habshi who patronised the building
of the famous 'Sidi Sa'id' mosque in Ahmadabad. Moreover, in order to
enlarge the troop and compensate losses, Habshi nobles also purchased new
incoming slaves.

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[20]   Mujeeb (1967: 209).

[21]   Burton-Page (1971: 15).

[22]   The most famous evidence of the early presence of Habshi slaves in India refers to the
       horsemaster of the Khilji Queen Radiyya, cf. Burton-Page (1971: 14).

[23]   cf. Pankhurst (1961: 409ff); Burton-Page (1971); Harris (1969); Khalidi (1993).

[24]   Pearson (1976: 67).

[25]   Pearson (1976: 151).

[26]   Burton-Page (1971: 16).

As not many rulers maintained strong fleets[27], on the Konkan coast Africans, under the title 'Sidi of Janjira', became a famous power to reckon with at sea. A connection between this Habshi fleet and the Mughal power was established in the second half of the seventeenth century. The fame of the Sidi fleet stemmed from their successful resistance to various attempts by greater powers to conquer their fort at Janjira upon which their military superiority at sea was based. While till the mid-seventeenth century the Sidi were allied with the Sultanate of Bijapur in the Deccan, acting as the latter's sea power, they later became allies of Moghul rulers in Delhi after they had conquered the former sultanate. Thus, under the rule of Aurangzeb, the Sidi of Janjira were joined with the Mughal marine and their commander was given the post of admiral of the Moghul fleet in Surat:

> "His duty was to hold the fleet which his Habshi clan had built up at Janjira, someway below Bombay, at the service of the imperial government and every year collect a salary from the customs of Surat. (...) the shipping of the Sidis was much in evidence at Surat and [their] agent (...) who lived at the port was among its most important citizens."[28]

The Sidi fleet, which was renowned for its strength in sea-battles, served the Mughals against the rising Mahratta power, and could not even be conquered by the British. However, while the Sidi were fighting against British war ships, the emperor Aurangzeb entered into a treaty with the British East India Company, making concessions that eventually turned the Sidi fleet into allies of the British. When the British in the course of time failed to pay their dues from the Surat customs, the Sidi resorted to piracy and began to attack merchant ships along the coasts of Konkan and Gujarat. Das Gupta characterised the Sidi in the middle of the eighteenth century rather unflatteringly: "This African clan was at the time literally being pushed into the sea (...). There was no central leadership in the clan, not much discipline, but only a blind instinct for survival and power enough to make things unpleasant for the Gujarati merchant who no longer had a protector."[29] Tensions between the British and the Sidi continued until 1759 when the British took over the admiral's post from them. As a compensation the Sidi received the town of Jaffrabad on the coast of Saurashtra as a *jagir* (right to revenue). During colonial rule three former Sidi *jagirs* were given the status of a "Princely State": Janjira on the Konkan coast, Sachin near Surat and Jaffrabad on the coast of Saurashtra.[30]

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[27] Muslim sultans were not so much interested in power at sea than in power over land and people, cf. Pearson (1976).

[28] Das Gupta (1979: 168)

[29] Das Gupta (1979: 260).

[30] For the creation of Princely States in Gujarat by the British, see Jeffrey (1978).

While aristocratic Habshi more or less lost their positions during colo-
nial rule, the slave-trade from East Africa to India still brought small num-
bers of African slaves to India until the end of the nineteenth / beginning of
the twentieth century. These slaves were mainly employed as domestic ser-
vants and bodyguards.

The Slave-trade

Pre-colonial Gujarat under Muslim domination was, at least in its coastal
urban centres, rather cosmopolitan. The lively interaction between people
from diverse social and cultural backgrounds involved in overseas trade not
only entailed the violence of slavery but also resulted in a great heteroge-
neity of local populations all along the countries bordering the Indian
Ocean. Arab traders settled in India, Gujarati merchants settled in East
Africa. After their arrival in India, many Sidi were employed by traders as
domestic servants and thus remained in the heterogeneous urban milieu of
Gujarat. This milieu consisted of Hindus and Muslims, of Turks, Jains,
Parsis and, finally, of numerous other local castes involved in small-scale,
inland, or grain trade.[31]

Since the thirteenth century and after the rise of Muslim power, Guja-
rat's large and small ports – Surat, Bharuch, Cambay in the east, Mundra
and Mandvi in the west (Kacch) – were increasingly engaged in overseas
trading relationships with similar ports along the countries bordering the
shores of the Indian Ocean. As Richard Pankhurst noted, slaves were
amongst the most important "raw materials" from East Africa which Arab
traders exchanged for the cotton of Gujarat.[32] From the fourteenth century
onwards, Arab and Portuguese sources make repeated mention of the slave-
trade carried on by traders in Kilwa and the selling of black slaves to India
and other places in Asia.[33] When Ibn Batuta visited Kilwa in the fourteenth
century, he noted frequent slave raids undertaken by the sultan who also
presented slaves as gifts to religious institutions.[34] Across the ocean, Guja-
ratis "virtually monopolised overseas trade in east Africa, collecting gold

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[31]   Pearson (1976: 26).

[32]   For a detailed discussion of the slave trade from the Horn of Africa, see Pankhurst (1961:
       372ff); Beachey (1976); Das Gupta points to the cordial relationships, in the centuries be-
       fore the Portuguese assumed supremacy over Indian Ocean trading networks, between
       Arab and Indian traders, which "emphasised the cooperation between Indians and Arabs
       in the western Indian Ocean, a peaceful sharing of profit" (Das Gupta 1979: 408).

[33]   Beachey (1976: 7).

[34]   Beachey (1976: 6).

and ivory and slaves in exchange for their cloths (...)"[35]. The merchant town of Cambay was then the major port of the Sultanate of Delhi and one of the major ports – as was Mundra in Kacch some centuries later – through which African slaves reached Indian soil. In the fourteenth century, a regular market (*nakka*) for the selling of slaves was held in Cambay.

Although the Indian Ocean slave-trade never assumed the same dimensions as its Atlantic counterpart, slaves were sold under Portuguese and, later, British supremacy until the late nineteenth/ early twentieth century. Yet, as Beachey notes, the Portuguese did not particularly favour the trade in slaves to India although they also made use of slave labour.[36] In the mid-sixteenth century, after the Portuguese had conquered Goa, they maintained a regiment at Diu, a port on the shore of the peninsula of Saurashtra, consisting of "600 Africans as soldiers"[37]. In the eighteenth century, Muscat became a flourishing centre of the slave-trade, providing slaves to Arab societies along the coast of the Persian Gulf.[38] From Muscat and, later, Zanzibar an estimated number of ten thousand slaves were annually dispersed to the Middle Eastern world.[39] A small number of these slaves reached western India as well, through a port either in Sindh, Kacch or in South Gujarat. When the British began to explore Sindh they found that "in Balutchistan, no family of any consideration was without male and female slaves, and the greater number of Sidis, or negroes, came from Muscat"[40].

In the nineteenth century the British campaign against the Arab dominated slave-trade met with resistance. Gujarati merchants settled on the Swahili coast proved to be as adverse to the abolishment of slavery as Arab traders. Almost 6,000 slaves were in possession of Indians in East Africa.[41] In the late 1860s the slave-trade was formally abolished by the British, although in Saurashtra und Kacch the selling of slaves continued till 1936.[42] The British attempted to enforce their policy by controlling Arab and Gujarati slave ships (*dhows*) for the transport of slaves. Within three years

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[35]   Pearson (1976: 12).

[36]   The Italian traveller Careri mentioned African slaves kept by the Portuguese in Goa in the 16th century, cf. Sen (1949). This "peaceful sharing of profit" also extended to the slave-trade. From the eighth century onwards Arab traders settled along the western coast of India, some centuries later Gujarati merchants established permanent trading posts in the Arab city states along the Swahili coast.

[37]   Beachey (1976: 7).

[38]   Beachey (1976: 48).

[39]   Beachey (1976: 38).

[40]   India Office Pamphlet, quoted in Beachey (1976: 50).

[41]   Beachey (1976: 59).

[42]   Beachey (1976: 56).

(1866–1869), British patrol boats captured "129 slave vessels and 380 slaves were freed"[43]. In order to deal with freed slaves taken from captured slave *dhows*, an "African Asylum" was first established by Christian missionaries some hundred miles from Bombay. Later it was taken over by the Bombay government. Between the 1860s and 70s about 200 African slaves were received in the Missionary Society.[44]

The shifting of centres of slave-markets along the Hadramaut and Swahili coasts of East Africa in the long history of trade between India and Africa is also reflective of a shift of the regions from which slaves were captured. Thus, in the early phase of the slave-trade slaves from Ethiopia were in high demand in the Muslim world. According to Mordechai Abir, slaves classified as "Shangalla" or "Sidi" included Oromo and others who did not leave Ethiopia, whereas those termed 'Habshi' –"red Ethiopians" – fetched high prices outside the country.[45] In later times, slaves were increasingly drawn from the southern and interior parts along the East African coast. When Richard Burton encountered Africans in Sindh in the first part of the nineteenth century, some of them still remembered the names of their tribes.[46] On the basis of the material collected by Burton, Freeman-Grenville suggested that the names corresponded to nineteen tribes in Tanzania and Mozambique from which the slaves in Sindh probably descended.[47] In general, however, large groups of slaves with a common cultural background were rarely brought to India. Rather, individuals from all over East Africa were gathered in Zanzibar and then dispersed to different places in the Middle East and India. Thus, the relatively small number of African slaves reaching India till the end of the nineteenth / the early twentieth century were mostly uprooted individuals with few social, cultural or linguistic ties between each other. In Saurashtra (a region in Gujarat) the import of slaves was declared illegal as late as 1936. Till then, Africans arrived in Gujarat individually or in very small groups. Here, they were employed at local royal courts or by rich merchants like other domestic servants of low status.

This brief glance at the historical context of African slaves in India shows that those Habshi who were part of the Muslim nobility did not constitute a separate ethnic or social unit that survived the disintegration of the Muslim systems of power and slavery. Rather, noble Habshi (or Sidi) merged with the Muslim elite of former rulers. At the lower level of society,

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[43]   Beachey (1976: 74).

[44]   Beachey (1976: 85f).

[45]   Abir (1985: 128).

[46]   Burton (1973).

[47]   Freeman-Grenville (1971).

by contrast, African slaves transplanted to Gujarat formed a community that defined itself by reference to an African origin and a common religious cult. Contemporary Sidi do not forge any genealogical links with the aristocratic Habshi or Sidi of the past. Rather, the cult of black ancestor-saints provides the conceptual frame for the present "Sidi *jamāt*" which includes 6 – 7,000 members in Gujarat. Like other Muslim communities, the Sidi value endogamous marriage as a means for maintaining their identity, which is in this case tied to an African past commemorated in rituals dedicated to African ancestor-saints.

Bava Gor – Inventor of a Craft and Military Leader

The religious cult of contemporary Sidi in Gujarat is focussed upon a cate-gory of male and female ancestor-saints who are said to have led the Sidi from Africa to Gujarat. While these ancestor-saints are described as being black like the Sidi, they are conceptualised at the same time as Sufi saints. Like other Sufi saints in Gujarat, Sidi ancestor-saints are venerated in shrines (*dargah*) built around tombs that represent the living spirit of a saint. In Gujarat, where Sidi households are dispersed in small numbers all over the region, internal connections of what the Sidi call *jamāt* (caste; association) are created through ritual ties between their shrines. Amongst these, a shrine called after the saint Bava Gor is accorded a special place at the top of the assembly of Sidi ancestor-saints. The saint called Bava Gor is classified as the eldest brother and spiritual head of all the Sidi saints. One of the largest Sidi shrines in terms of the number of believers is the *dargah* of Bava Gor in South Gujarat. This shrine houses the head of Sidi saints conceptualised as "eldest brother". Next to his tomb are those of his younger brother, Bava Habash, and of a sister, Mai Mishra. This sibling trias pro-vides the core of the wider network of Sidi saints who are all linked through the idiom of kinship, especially through ritual ties of siblings. These shrines are organised by ritual specialists in the role of Muslim Sidi fakirs. The presence of the Sidi in nineteenth century Gujarat is mainly documented in the context of the local history of the shrine of Bava Gor. From Karachi in Sindh to Bombay south of Gujarat descendants of African slaves refer to the saint Bava Gor as the leader whom a thousand Sidi soldiers with their families followed from Africa to Pakistan and India.[48]

The shrine of Bava Gor is situated in South Gujarat in a forest area which since at least the sixteenth century was known for its carnelian mines. In the nineteenth century, this area was part of the Princely State of Rajpipla ruled

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[48]   cf. H. Basu (2000).

by Gohil Rajputs. British government officials discovered the carnelian mines while travelling. In 1819, Lieutenant Copland described Bava Gor as the "tutelar saint of the country (...) to whom adoration is paid more as a deity than as a saint" and "under whose protection are the carnelian mines, (...) to whom the miners recommend themselves before descending into the pit"[49]. A few years later another colonial traveller, Lieutenant Fulljames, mentioned the presence of Sidi at this shrine for the first time: "... on the summit of (a hill) there is a peer's tomb. The only people residing there are a few Sidees or negroes (...)"[50]

In local traditions today, the saint Bava Gor is a key symbol for two different social and historical contexts: 1. for the carnelian mines and the craft of bead-making; and 2. for the immigration of African Sidi to Gujarat. In both contexts, however, Bava Gor is defined as an 'Abyssinian', 'Habshi' or 'Sidi'. The legends surrounding Bava Gor in connection with the carnelian mines point to an alternative way by which Africans might have reached India in the past: not as slaves but as traders. This is suggested by a legend current amongst bead-workers in the town of Cambay which is still a centre for the craft of bead-cutting and for export of the finished articles to other places in India and to Africa.[51] According to the bead-cutters of Cambay, Bava Gor came as a trader to Gujarat where he turned to religion and decided to lead an ascetic life as an itinerant fakir. During his wanderings he reached the hills of the carnelian mines where he sat down for meditation. While Bava Gor practised austerities over the fire he was illuminated by the effects of heat upon the stones.[52] He realised the potential of the stones and thus invented the craft of bead cutting. Bava Gor then taught the craft to the people of a nearby village and began to develop the marketing of the agates to the town of Cambay. In Cambay, his brother called Bava Sabun, who was also a trader, took over the finished beads and travelled to Africa and Arabia to sell them.[53]

In present times, the characterisation of the saint Bava Gor as inventor of bead-making is transmitted primarily amongst people involved in mining

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[49] Copland (1819: 294–295).

[50] Fulljames (1838).

[51] Cambay was not only an important port within the network of the slave trade but it also linked the hinterland of Gujarat with places overseas. An important local strand consisted in the mining of agate beads in Ratanpur and the craft of beadmaking in Cambay. The first European reference to beads exported from Cambay is from the 16th century traveller Ludivica di Varthema (Francis 1982: 30). During the reign of the Mughal emperor Akbar, an agate called *babaghori* was used as a measurement for coins (Francis 1982: 31).

[52] Trivedi (1961a: 24).

[53] cf. Trivedi (1961a: 55).

and bead-making. The Sidi living in the village close to the shrine are only marginally engaged in the transportation of the stones while mining is done by members of various Bhil tribes who constitute the majority of the population in this area. Still, the Sidi of the village are venerated as mediators to the saint by those involved in the agate business in Cambay. Every year, the owners of the Cambay bead factories take their workers on a pilgrimage to the shrine of Bava Gor where they sponsor a charitable meal for the Sidi.

Sidi notions, on the other hand, highlight different aspects of the saint. In their own discourse he is, firstly, depicted as a military leader from Ethiopia who was stationed in Mecca before he was sent on a fighting mission to Gujarat. His army consisted of other "Sidi", i.e. Africans. On a second level, Bava Gor is firmly embedded in Sufi discourse which is indicated by a change of his personal name. While his original name was 'Sidi Mubarak Nobi', the saint received his name 'Bava Gor' after initiation into the brotherhood of a famous Sufi master, Ahmad Kabir Rifa'i.[54] On a third level the saint Bava Gor is a brother amongst other Sidi brothers and sisters; sibling ties are conceived of in two ways: a) as "true" (biological) siblings (*saga*); b) as "ritual" brothers and sisters related by ties to a common ritual or spiritual master (*piri-muridi*). The category of "true" brothers and sisters is represented by Bava Gor, along with his younger brother, Bava Habash and, finally, the sister, Mai Mishra. Thus, the saint Bava Gor has become a polysemic symbol referring to at least three levels of meaning: 1. As Bava Gor is depicted as a military leader who commanded an ethnically composed army of Sidi from Africa, the saint invokes the memory of historical and aristocratic Habshi as described in part 1 of this paper. 2. As a Sufi master Bava Gor stands for an important social tie that connects the Sidi collectively with the wider society in Gujarat. 3. He also invokes a social universe constructed by ties of kinship between the Sidi as a group of African-Gujaratis.

Looking at the constructions of the sainthood of Bava Gor of which most Sidi in Gujarat are aware, a split between individually remembered family histories and the collective memories of an African origin becomes apparent. While I carried out fieldwork I met many Sidi who remembered an older family member, for example a grandfather or a mother's mother, who had been captured as children somewhere in Africa and then transported to India. The word *ghulam* (slave) is often used when people talk about the history of their ancestors. In this context, the shrine of Bava Gor is remembered as a place of shelter for run-away slaves and domestic servants. Forefathers, about whose unfamiliar uses of language one may still

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[54]   cf. H. Basu (1995).

muse, are often credited with having run away from their masters. At the shrine of Bava Gor individual newcomers from Africa were received as members of the Sidi *jamāt*. Through initiation into a Sidi fakir-brotherhood devoted to their patron saint Bava Gor and/or through marriage, individual African slaves were integrated into the local Sidi community. The actual experiences of slavery are, however, erased from the collective representations of the saints. They are said to be ancestors of the Sidi because they have come from Africa. All the various Sidi saints who dot the landscape in Gujarat and Sindh are said to have been soldiers and retainers in the army of Bava Gor. In addition, the relationship between Bava Gor and the other saints is characterised by brother-sibling ties. If they are not categorised as "true" siblings, they are related by ties of ritual siblingship provided by initiation into the brotherhood of Bava Gor (*piri-muridi*). Kinship between ancestor-saints and living Sidi becomes manifest in bodily attributes, especially black skin and curly hair. Against prevailing notions in Gujarat, which would see in black skin a mark of low status, black skin and curly hair are interpreted by the Sidi themselves not only as positive signs of their identity, but as sacred signs of what they perceive as their special powers. In the context of recent Sidi history, the shrine of Bava Gor appears as a place of hidden resistance, giving shelter to those who refused to succumb to being enslaved. As will be seen in the next section, what appears on one level as resistance manifests itself on another as similar to what Herskovits would have called "retentions" of African cultural patterns.[55] The shrine of Bava Gor provided a ritual arena for the enactment of specific Sidi rituals which are in many respects reminiscent of ritual forms described for East and South African contexts (especially *ngoma*).[56] Although the Sidi share neither a common tribal, nor a common regional or language background, enslaved Africans in Gujarat reconstructed certain ritual forms, especially performances of possession, under the roof of Sufism.[57] The significance that ritual organisation assumes in Sidi constructions of identity will be dealt with in the following section. Although contemporary Sidi do not see themselves related genealogically to those Habshi and Sidi who historically held political power, they still remember them symbolically in the category of ancestors and saints who command a different type of power. Political power has conceptually been transformed into spiritual power. The Sidi of today do not possess political power but they have received a share of saintly supernatural power conceptualised as *karamat* (spiritual power in the Sufi context) from their ancestor-saints. Notions of spiritual power defy claims to

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[55] Herskovits (1941).

[56] Janzen (1992).

[57] Basu (2001).

human authority and the rule of present politicians by pointing to a different realm: spiritual power may influence nature while temporal power is confined by political constraints and interests. Sidi fakirs are believed to possess spiritual (liminal) power, which can, against the background of what has been analyzed above, be seen as a substitute of former political power.

The Sidi Today

In post-independent Gujarat, the Sidi (c. 6 – 7,000) share the same material conditions as characterise the situation of millions of urban poor in modern India. Their social position is generally considered as low. The spatial and social location of the Sidi within the context of the so-called "host-society" is at the same time expressive of the way in which strangers were integrated into the existing hierarchy. In contrast to those African slaves who belonged to the powerful aristocracy of former Muslim rulers, the small Sidi population today finds itself in quite the opposite position: poor, powerless, uneducated.

Every Sidi neighbourhood, from Kacch and Saurashtra to Surat in South Gujarat, is locally part of a complex social universe of Sunni Muslims differentiated by categories of ethnicity, kinship and caste (hierarchy).[58] In this context, the Sidi are organised in what is called a *jamāt* (lit. "association"). The term *jamāt* includes for the Sidi: 1. Common kinship bonds traced through vertical ties of parentage as well as lateral ties of siblingship. All kin relationships originate ultimately from African ancestors. 2. It refers to a ritual organisation of fakirs who act as specialists for the worship of a category of black Muslim saints. These two implications of the term show, that Sidi constructions of identity are deeply influenced by local notions of caste (*gnyāti*). The combined forces of norms of endogamous marriage and of hierarchical values underlying the distinction between professional fakirs and lay (Sidi) adepts of the cult lead in practice to the formation of a creolised version of a caste. This becomes obvious by the local understanding of the term *jamāt* which in this context refers to a combination or fusion of "real" and "ritual" kinship relationships. The term *jamāt* thus refers simultaneously to the Sidi "caste" as well as to a brotherhood of fakirs. Initiation into the Sidi fakir-brotherhood, which calls itself after the name of Bava Gor, is embedded in the special relationship between a spiritual seeker in the position of the child (*balka*) and a spiritual Sidi "master-fakir" in the position of parent and teacher (*murshid*). Initiation provided the means for

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58 For the discussion of Muslim caste, cf. Fanselow (1996); Vatuk (1996).

integrating strangers into the Sidi fold. This occurred, as older Sidi still viv-
idly remembered, when an African – whether formerly enslaved or "freed"
from a slaveship – found his or her way to the *dargah* of Bava Gor where
he/she met other Sidi. Individual Africans were integrated into local Sidi
groups through the creation of ritual kinship bonds between them. The
stages of initiation mark the developing bond of mutual protection and
support between a person learning the ritual craft of a fakir and his teacher-
parent. Ultimately, a formerly unrelated, single person is provided with a
web of ritual kinship relationships that are later transformed through mar-
riage into "real" kinship relationships. The most highly valued form in the
Sidi *jamāt* is the marriage between cross-cousins, real or classificatory, i.e.
a mother's brother's daughter and a father's sister's son. While there is a
strong tendency to strengthen local relationships by repeated intermarriages
between the same families of an area, a significant criterion for being classi-
fied as a Sidi consists, moreover, in physical attributes, especially curly hair
(see above). The merging of ritual and real kinship is important for the
internal organisation of the Sidi *jamāt*; similarly, ritual and profane services
are combined in their "caste": fakirs carry out ritual services for the non-
Sidi clientele of their shrines, while lay Sidi perform ordinary domestic
services for them.

The majority of the Sidi, however, are settled in an urban environment
in one of the numerous towns of Gujarat. Like Hindu service-castes, Sidi
households form a widespread and horizontally connected network of kin-
ship and shrines. In most of the traditional towns of Gujarat the Sidi are
represented by at least two or three households. Moreover, all Sidi settle-
ments are marked by a shrine for black ancestor saints. Usually a Sidi shrine
consists of a small structure built around one or several tombs representing
the "first Sidi settlers" at this place and therefore regarded as the ancestors
of the present local Sidi *jamāt*. In many places the land and the shrines were
originally donated by a local king or chief in exchange for domestic, body-
guard or military services. The existence of these *dargahs* suggests that the
Sidi, once purchased and added to the court of a local king, were then pa-
tronised as other servants and dependants of the court.

This also holds true for the Sidi population in the town of Jamnagar on
the coast of Saurashtra who represent the numerically largest community
(more than 160 households) in the district. Throughout the colonial period
Jamnagar remained semi-independent as a Rajput Princely State. Jamnagar
was the seat of a kingdom belonging to the powerful Rajput-clan of the
Jādejā who ruled over large parts of Kacch and Saurashtra from the six-
teenth to the twentieth century. For a noblemen or king, to be able to acquire
and maintain a large group of black slaves had once been a sign of prestige.
The kings and chiefs of the Jādejā employed Sidi men at their courts as

bodyguards and guards for the separate female quarters. Sidi women performed female domestic services. Till today, the Sidi live in the traditional servants- and craftsmen quarters where those who worked for the court and who were directly patronised by the royal household were given rights to settle. These rights also included grants for a shrine which is here referred to as a *chilla* (memorial shrine) for Bava Gor and his brother (Bava Habash) and sister (Mai Mishra).

To give another example, in the city of Surat, the largest Sidi neighbourhood consists of ca. 35 Sidi households. Their houses are built in close vicinity to each other on a plot of land for which the Sidi *jamāt* possesses special rights. The land is attached to a shrine for the Sidi saint Bava Mukhta. This Sidi neighbourhood was once situated on the periphery of the town of Surat, behind the market and not far from the river. At present, the Sidi settlement is becoming increasingly submerged in the mushrooming sprawl of the city; many new migrants from other places in Maharashtra, Gujarat and Orissa have erected houses on municipal land here. A few other Sidi households are found scattered in a slum where the houses consist of huts made of wooden planks and cloths and are situated next to a Muslim cemetery and a municipal dumping ground. Another 10 Sidi households live in the twin-town and old harbour of Rander across the Tapi river. Here too they possess special land use rights that are attached to a shrine of Sidi saints.

While differences in the housing situation of Sidi people indicate small differences in economic standing between them, they also highlight differences of control and influence within the Sidi *jamāt*. In Surat and in Rander, those who can prove hereditary ritual ties to fakirs, who looked after the shrine before them, presently control the affairs of the *dargah* as well as the distribution of access to the land and houses attached to it. In the social world of the Sidi, the profession of fakirs and specialists of shrine worship is attributed a double meaning: it contains a special relationship with the sacred and it also provides an economically important source of livelihood. While most Sidi women in Surat and Rander provide for a considerable part of the household budget by regular work as maid-servants in the houses of well-to-do Bohras, Sayyid, Parsis and other richer people, Sidi men perform a range of short-time jobs, but rarely are they found in regular employment of any sort. Some drive a rickshaw, sell pan and betel and perform a myriad of other so-called "odd jobs", within an urban environment. Often, however, a Sidi household depends on the income earned by women alone. In such a situation where men frequently lack income and employment, the ritual role of the fakir – who sings and prays for the moral good of others in exchange for alms – provides an alternative source of income. While the collection of alms and gifts may provide an important additional source of income for the household, the role of fakir also gives

prestige and religious authority to a man – assuming that he can convince the Sidi and his followers of his special ritual powers (*karamat*). In Sidi discourse, the concept of fakir is tied to highly valued notions of personal independence and autonomy. Many Sidi are of the opinion that regular employment means enslavement (*ghulami*). By contrast, the life of an itinerant fakir is said to offer personal freedom which is what many Sidi men and women would define as being of utmost importance. Finally, Sidi fakirs differentiate themselves into those who possess rights of control over a Sidi shrine and those who do not.

Fakirs possessing hereditary rights for the performance of ritual services and control over a shrine are called *mujavar*. A *mujavar* of tombs classified as those of black ancestor-saints has inherited his rights either through ties acquired by ritual initiation and kinship (*piri-muridi*) or by "real" kinship ties. Along with his wife and other family members, a *mujavar* manages shrine affairs, organises ritual events and looks after the plot of land in terms of renting out housing space to other Sidi. In both Surat and Rander, Sidi neighbourhoods are clustered around a shrine of black Sidi saints who are called "retainers of Bava Gor's army". In Surat, the tomb of Sidi Mukhta lies close to the river Tapi. Further historical research could perhaps point to a connection between a burial place for members of the Sidi of Janjira (while they held the admiral's post in Surat) and the present settlement of the Sidi at this spot. Possibly historical Sidi (Habshi) were collectively remembered and venerated by later African slaves as their leaders and ancestors. Since more than a hundred years, at least, Sidi fakirs have been the legitimate owners of the shrine and the attached plot of land. Most of the Sidi houses in Surat are built on this land. A similar situation exists in Rander. Here, too, Sidi houses cluster around the tomb of the female saint Āi Mai. The spatial location of the shrine close to the sea suggests again some association with the seafaring Sidi of the past. Moreover, in contemporary Gujarat the shrines and the land represent important material and symbolic assets of the Sidi *jamāt*. A shrine is a material manifestation of the existence of the Sidi: it is a sign 1. of their local rootedness (objectified in 'tombs') in Gujarat; 2. of the shelter extended to Sidi families by providing them with a place to build their houses on; and 3. of an arena in which Sidi rituals can be performed according to their own rules.

Sidi fakirs provide special kinds of ritual services. People who suffer from various kinds of mental ailments – usually conceptualised as evil spirit possession in contrast to "auspicious saint possession" – visit local Sidi shrines and seek cures and ritual services which fakirs provide. Moreover, the Sidi cult is part of the wider local religious universe of Muslims. I have dealt elsewhere with the ways in which Sidi saints are connected to other

and more prestigious Sufi saints.[59] In this context, the cult of Bava Gor provides an arena for the inversion of secular relationships maintained by the Sidi with their employers. Many of the cult followers are or had been in the past employers of the Sidi (*sheth*). They often belong to other Muslim castes such as Bohra or Memmon, or are even Parsis.[60] Thus, often the same people who provide the Sidi with ordinary employment are also the ones who seek their ritual services in times of personal crisis. It is then that the roles are reversed and the Sidi assume ritual authority over those who are their superiors in other contexts.[61] Initiated fakirs claim to possess ritual powers that extend to control over spirits, evil forces, bad luck, illness and other inauspicious energies. This type of power is needed by others in times of crisis, personal calamities and afflictions. In the role of religious fakirs the Sidi mediate, revitalise and transform this kind of power.

Final Remarks

The institution of slavery in Eastern Africa and its embeddedness within a) the context of trading relationships across the Indian Ocean and b) historical processes of Muslim rule in India is responsible for the presence of Africans in India through long periods of her history. Along with the historical shifts of the centres of the slave-trade the areas from which slaves were drawn in Africa also changed. While in the 14th/15th centuries Ethiopian slaves domi-nated the slave-trade, in later centuries the recruitment areas were increas-ingly shifted further South. The last wave of slave immigrants probably stemmed mostly from areas of present Tanzania and Mozambique. There is, thus, no continuous genealogical link discernible between the existence of Habshi in different historical contexts in India and the present Sidi *jamāt* in Gujarat. On the other hand, a symbolic link between the history of Habshi in India and the present Sidi is created through representations constituting the collective memory of former slaves turned into a "fakir-caste". In this context, Bava Gor (and the other Sidi saints) appears as a condensed sym-bol of historical aristocratic Habshi. Significantly, the actual experiences of slavery are erased from the mythological narratives telling of the immigra-tion of Sidi to India. As a military leader, Bava Gor is depicted as a protec-tor of African slaves in the past and of the Sidi in the present. Looking at the cult of Bava Gor, the agency of the Sidi in creating a social universe of

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[59]   H. Basu (1996).

[60]   Till the early 20th century Gujarat was the main base for Parsis. During British colonial rule most of them shifted to Bombay.

[61]   cf. H. Basu (1998).

action within the host society of Gujarat comes to the fore. The idiom and the workings of the cult show many local variations but on the whole, a common idiom has been evolved in which the Sidi communicate in terms of "our own people" as people with an African past. At the same time, the ritual connection established between the Sidi and Bava Gor and other saints provides for the roles they assume in relation to a wider field of popular Sufism and Muslim regional culture. Thus, the Sidi subculture seems to have evolved in response to the prevailing conditions in Gujarat which circumscribed and channelled Sidi agency in terms of religion.

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