



**African Migrants as cultural brokers in South Asia**  
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**Abstract**

*African migrants found themselves in Asia, largely due to the slave trade. This paper explores cultural flows between Africa and Asia, highlighting the role of music. The lyrics of the Afro-Asian songs are a database exposing African linguistic links with Asia. The musical talents of the Afro-Asians need to be nurtured. Their music is internationally marketable but needs a market-maker.*

**Introduction**

The bicentennial of the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade has obscured other slave routes. African slaves reached not only the Caribbean but also China and Japan, spilling over into the Pacific Ocean. The process of migration eastwards began long before the Atlantic slave trade. While the latter lasted mainly from about 1440 to 1870, the movement across the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean spanned over several millennia (de Silva Jayasuriya 2006a).

This general ignorance regarding the more ancient migration is partly explained by difficulties in identifying Africans in Asia (de Silva Jayasuriya 2006b). Generally Africans were marginalized. They have therefore lacked a voice but made their presence felt through a series of distinct cultural expressions. Africans migrated into circumstances and societies that varied. This paper cannot explore all the African spaces in South Asia but a few examples will demonstrate the role of migrants as cultural brokers between the two continents of Africa and Asia.

Oral traditions fill gaps in literature, and it is important to record them before valuable information is lost. Oral histories of migrants' African roots are found in their languages, religious beliefs and practices, musical expressions and dance forms, which rekindle memories and myths about the ancestral African homeland.

The term Diaspora is contested and open to academic debate. The reality is that descendants of Africans are born and live in Asian countries which have become their homes today. In most cases they do not have another home. Their physiognomic features are African. Chanting, controlled breathing and rhythmic bodily movements leading to a trance and spirit possessions were common practice in East African coastal towns and even on the dhows on which the slaves were taken to be sold. Musical traditions are one indicator of the African presence in Asia. A study of these traditions and the lyrics can forge links between Africa and Asia.

There has been voluntary relocation to Asia, although forced movements through slave trade, was the principal mechanism for migration. The contribution of Africans to the host societies has been quite conspicuous in some instances. In Mughal India, freed African slaves occupied prominent positions. Malik Ambar who became the Regent Minister of Ahmednagar is undoubtedly the best known freed slave in Indian history. I have met some of the descendants of the African elites in India (Robbins & McLeod 2006). Yet cultural contributions of other Afro-Asians have not been recognized adequately. In what follows, I will consider a few examples.

**Bodu Beru and Baburu Lava: The Maldives**

In Islamic countries where migrants have converted and are well integrated, it is difficult to find African communities. In the Maldives, situated west of Sri Lanka, however, African descendants have been

isolated in specific islands, thus offering an opportunity to explore important aspects of their contribution to contemporary Maldivian culture. African slaves were brought on *dhow*s to the Maldives until about mid-19th century. They married the indigenous Maldivians and worked mostly as *raveris* or coconut plantation keepers. In 1834, two British naval lieutenants visiting Male reported that "From the information we were able to collect - it appears that Muscat vessels do not often visit this place: when they do, they generally bring a cargo of slaves. Five years ago one came and sold about twenty-five lads, at an average price of about 80 rupees each" (Forbes & Ali 1980:19).

In the Maldives, I met the descendants of an African slave, Sangoaru. A Maldivian Sultan brought back five slaves from Mecca after participating in the Haj: Sangoaru, Laalu, Marjan, Masud and Muizz. Today Sangoaru's descendants are well integrated to the Maldivian socio-political structure. One of Sangoaru's grand-daughters married an Atoll Chief, an important official. Their children are professionals in various sectors and contribute to the economy and welfare of the Maldives.

Naseema Mohammed (2006:40) remarks that the freed African slaves introduced the sound of the African drums to the Maldives. *Bodu Beru* ('big drum') is believed to have originated in East Africa. The drums are two and a half feet long and made out of breadfruit wood or coconut wood with a goatskin membrane on each end. *Bodu Beru* is played by the descendants of Sangoaru mostly living in Feridu, an island in Ari Atoll. It is played on other islands in the same Atoll as also on the Felidhoo Island in the Vaavu Atoll. Traditionally, this is an all male performance and the troupe includes three drummers, a lead singer and a chorus of ten to fifteen men. The authentic *Bodu Beru* was accompanied by *Baburu Lava* ('Negro Song') and *Baburu Nisun* ('Negro Dance'). Most Maldivians do not understand the meaning of these authentic songs. I intend to follow this up during my next field trip to the Maldives. The *Baburu Lava* themes include love, religion, enjoyment, courage or praise of the Sultan. The songs gradually increase in tempo and a few members of the group begin to dance. Today *Bodu Beru* is the most popular form of music in the Maldives, enjoyed by males and females, young and old alike. Understandably, it has become commercialized and is a tourist attraction (de Silva Jayasuriya 2008a).

### **Goma and Laywa: India and Pakistan**

Africans have been called by various names in South Asia. As their migration to India is an old phenomenon, the terms describing them have also changed over time and space. The word Africa is a 20th century term. Previously the blacks were perceived to have come from Sudan, Habasha, Zandj or Nuba. People of African descent in South Asia have mostly been referred to as *Habshi*, *Kaffir* and *Sidi*. All these words have Arabic etyma.

The best known were the *Habasha* (Ethiopians), since they were geographically closer to Arabia and associated with Prophet Muhammad. Bilal, the first Muezzin was the son of an Ethiopian slave. *Kaffir* is from the Arabic word *qafir* meaning 'non-believer' and was originally used by Muslims to refer to the 'non-muslims'. The etymon of the word *Sidi* lies in Arabic *Seyidi/Sayeedi/Sayedi* meaning 'lord or master'. Today the largest Afro-Indian communities are spread over several States of India but mainly in Gujarat, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. Smaller communities are found in Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh (de Silva Jayasuriya 2007a, 2008b). Afro-Gujaratis have been performing in Europe, America and Africa since October 2002. They play sacred music and dance, singing to their ancestral Saint, *Bava Gor*, who is believed to have been an Abyssinian. They perform *dhamal* which they call *goma*, a word whose etymon is found in a Swahili word *ngoma* meaning 'drum' and also 'dance'.

In terms of instruments, the most significant African preservation is the *malunga*, a braced musical bow. It is found in many African communities within Africa and among the diasporas; in Brazil the *malunga* is also known as *berimbau*. Afro-Indian servants performed *ngoma* dances with drums, rattles and shells on birthdays and weddings in the noble courts (Basu 1993). I saw the Afro-Gujaratis wearing animal skins and headgears of peacock or other bird feathers, with painted bodies, performing a sacred traditional dance to the rhythm of the *dhamal* (small drum), *madido* (big drum), *mugarman* (footed-drum), *mai mishra* (coconut rattle), *nafir* (conch trumpet), *malunga* (musical bow) and other musical instruments. What began on a religious note ended as a communal dance with the largely non-African audience joining the artists on the stage. Off the stage, events such as *urs* (the death of a Muslim Saint), celebrated over several days, provide an occasion for music, song and dance. Music also seems to be the main cultural retention among people of African descent also

called *Chaush* or Sidi in Andhra Pradesh, India. In 1724, the Asafiya dynasty (Nizams) of Hyderabad maintained a royal guard of African slave soldiers who entertained their masters with their native song and dance. The descendants of the last Nizam's African Cavalry Guards, living in Hyderabad today, call themselves *Chaush*, a term originating from the Ottoman military nomenclature. The fathers and grandfathers of the *Chaush* came to Hyderabad and formed the ex-Nizam's bodyguards. Their drum bands are hired, on special occasions such as weddings. Their songs are sung in a Bantu language in Tanzania during spirit possession rituals undertaken for healing purposes. When a team of American historians and anthropologists visited Andhra Pradesh some years ago, a *Chaush* in his fifties sang and danced a song learnt from his grandfather, although he did not understand the words. The lyrics were in a Bantu language, Shambaa, spoken in north eastern Tanzania and the song was still commonly sung at the beginning of the healing rituals (Alpers 2003). The Swahili lyrics of songs also demonstrate the remains of the African culture. Ababu Minda (2005) notes that the *Chaush* in Hyderabad are invited by the Christian Afro-Indians to play their traditional music on social occasions. They are called *Daff* Parties. The *Daff* is a round single-headed frame drum belonging to Islamic culture. It is used in folk music, art music, dance music and Sufi rituals. In Africa, the *Daff* is also played by the Swahili and Swahili/Nguja people in Dar-es-Salaam and Tabora, Tanzania.

To accompany their folk songs, Africans in Karnataka play the *gumat*, a drum also popular among Goan musicians in India. The popular African folk songs - Balo, Leva, Bandugia - are replete with emotions for the community, pride and religious fervor. According to Gayathri Kassebaum and Peter Clause (2000), the Afro-Indians who live in northern Karnataka and the border areas of Shimoga have their own social structure and musical genre. They are descendants of slaves brought to western India and are Hindus, Muslims or Christians. Social dancing (*aligum kunita*) of the Muslim Africans in Karnataka is accompanied by the "Ali, ali, ali" chant – a way to commemorate Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Mohammed. The dance is performed by any number of people but usually two of the dancers are dressed in the appropriate costume - shorts, headgear made of flowers, a belt of bells. They also carry a leather belt. The bells provide the only accompaniment to the chant. The dancers often stop and hit themselves with the belt before recommencing, such self-inflicted pain believed to heighten the religious experience.

In Pakistan, Sabir Badalkhan (2006) comments that Baloches of African origin have retained their musical heritage because it has been an important tool for liberating themselves from the daily hardships of discrimination and marginalized life and a mechanism for expressing rage and suffering. The musical tradition of Afro-Baloches was closely related to maritime activities. The Makran Baloch maritime contacts with the eastern and north-eastern African coasts lasted until the first half of the 20th century.

Many African Baloches had been engaged in seafaring. A Baloch seaman in his seventies, claimed to have learnt songs with Swahili lyrics when travelling in Zanzibar and other African ports. Another elderly Baloch sailor had recalled how sailors from all parts of the Indian Ocean had joined the drumming and dancing sessions when they were stationed in an African coastal town.

Badalkhan notes similarities between the *lewa* performed in Oman and the *laywa* in the Makran. Dieter Christensen describes the *lewa* in Oman (2002: 678-9): "*Lewa* groups, consisting of men who are descendants of slaves, perform for profit. [...] several drums, including African-type drums called *musundu*; conch trumpets (*jim*), and metal trays of canisters used to beat the time line. [...] Altogether twenty to forty people make up the group. [...] Dancers and singers revolve while circling around the instrumentalists. The song texts, in poorly understood Swahili and Arabic, abound with references to East Africa and seafaring. *Lewa* carries strong African connotations that are neither Arab nor Muslim." According to Badalkhan, the only difference between the traditions in Oman and Makran is that those of the former lead to a trance while the latter are simply festive and have no other objective. He also describes another genre of song called *Amba*, essentially work songs. The instruments used are the same for both the *Amba* and the *Laywa* traditions.

Both these are musical expressions that have flourished in Balochistan due to the seafaring culture of Makran, and the maritime networks of the Indian Ocean (de Silva Jayasuriya 2007b).

***Manha, Kaffrinha, Baila: Sri Lanka***

Although there is historical evidence that Ethiopians were trading with Sri Lankans in the 5th century, the Afro-Sri Lankans today trace their roots back to the colonial period when the Portuguese, Dutch and British brought African slaves to the Island (de Silva Jayasuriya 2003). I have taken into account the oral traditions of the Afro-Sri Lankans, retrieving their memories and bringing to light important clues about their roots (de Silva Jayasuriya 2006c). Negritude is expressed through a combination of music and song known as *Manhas* and the spontaneous non-choreographed dancing of the Afro-Sri Lankans. There are only a limited number of *Manhas* as the community does not compose new songs. Some of the lyrics have Portuguese etyma whilst others have borrowed from languages that they have come across during their transportation to, and also in, Sri Lanka. A song that the Afro-Sri Lankans in a village called Sirambiyadiya (North-Western province) sang to me, refers to beautiful Arab women around them (see below).

*Arabi chaya bulore*

*Arabi chaya*

*Ista upan lagadi pancha*

*Nagara se manore*

The *Manhas* are limited to the Afro-Sri Lankans, but their dancing resembles *Kaffrinha*. A form of Afro-Portuguese music, song and dance called *Kaffrinha* reminds us that Africans were part of European exploration and commerce. There are 19th century recordings of these songs which were appropriated by the Island's anglicized indigenous elite in the early 20th century. Moreover, *Kaffrinha* has had an enduring effect on *Baila*, the most popular genre of music in postcolonial Sri Lanka which transcends ethnic, age and gender barriers (de Silva Jayasuriya 2008c).

### Concluding remarks

African migrants were cultural brokers introducing their music to Asia. The African music flows into the host countries in South Asia have, in some cases, penetrated mainstream and count among the most popular genres of music today, perhaps due to their irresistible rhythms. These musical traditions have to be analyzed taking into account all pointers to African roots. The lyrics, musical traditions and dance forms may indicate their African origins. This analysis would also throw light on African linguistic flows into Asia. Clearly, more ethno-musicological and linguistic research needs to be undertaken in the Maldives, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Further fieldwork and research should reveal hitherto unrecognized African musical traditions in other SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Corporation) countries.

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