CHAPTER TEN

MIGRANTS AND MERCENARIES:
SRI LANKA'S HIDDEN AFRICANS

SHIHAN DE SILVA JAYSURIYA*

Abstract

This case history explores the raison d'être for African migration across the Indian Ocean highlighting the military contributions of Africans in Sri Lanka, who served both the European colonial powers and the Sri Lankan kings. Historically, the spatial distribution of Afro-Sri Lankans has not been concentrated in a single Province. Being part of the British army, they were moved to guard fortresses. Their concentration in the North-Western Province today stems from their participation in British military activities.

Introduction

There is no adequate history of the African presence in Sri Lanka. Whilst the picture of the past is fragmented, nonetheless, there are a number of questions that can be raised. This paper combines historical accounts and interviews together with population census statistics in order to reveal the African presence in Sri Lanka. It draws attention to the role played by African mercenary soldiers during the colonial era, explaining the concentration of Afro-Sri Lankans in the North-Western Province today.

Although we may never be able to construct a complete picture of African migration to Sri Lanka, we are nevertheless aware that it is longstanding and has deep roots. Abyssinians were trading in Mannar, on the north-west coast of Sri Lanka, in the 5th century, when Sri Lanka was an important emporium in the Indian Ocean. In the 14th century,
the Moroccan traveller, Ibn Batuta, noted that 500 Abyssinians served in the garrison of the ruler of Colombo, Jalasti (Gibb 1929).

In Portugal, Africans were called *negros* and *pretos* (blacks). When the Portuguese came across non-Muslim East Africans during their expansion in the Indian Ocean, they borrowed the Arabic term *cafre* to refer to them. Non-Muslims were called *qafr* by the Arabs, regardless of race or ethnicity. It simply means ‘non-believer’. This term did not have any negative connotations attached to it. The Dutch and the British borrowed the Portuguese word, adapting it to their phonological systems and recording it with their own orthographies—*Kaffers* and *Kaffirs* respectively. This term was, in turn, borrowed by the two indigenous languages of Sri Lanka, Sinhala and Tamil as *Kāpiri* and *Kāpili*. The Census of Ceylon 1911 (Denham 1912: 243) states that the Sinhalese and Tamils use the terms *Kāpiri* and *Kāpili* for all “Negroes” or East Africans. Today they have become ethnonyms for all people of African descent in the Island. It also states that *Kaffirs* were recruited from the neighbourhood of Mozambique in the East Coast of Africa and were employed by the three colonisers of Sri Lanka. The terms and ethnonyms used for Africans in Sri Lanka and in other parts of Asia, varied across time and space (de Silva Jayasuriya 2006).

_Africans and Europeans_

Eastwards African migration is an old phenomenon but it has received little scholarly attention. Portuguese foray into the waters of the Indian Ocean, charting a maritime trade route to India, led to the establishment of trading posts and fortresses. Their base in India enabled them to break into trading opportunities in South Asia and Southeast Asia.

The Portuguese transported Africans from Mozambique on the _Carreira da India_ (the ships that sailed between Lisbon and India) to Goa, and even further afield to Sri Lanka, Macau, Hirado and even Mexico. This emphasizes the role of Mozambique as a central location for collecting slaves from different parts of the southern and eastern coast of Africa. The voyage to India around the Cape of Good Hope had resulted in many casualties, losing the Portuguese valuable manpower, even before they reached Africa’s east coast.

In the case of Sri Lanka, we know there was no shortage of local manpower on the Island itself. This implies that Africans occupied a special niche in the labour market. Portuguese contact with Sri Lanka began when a commercial expedition from Goa to the neighbour-