Invisible Africans: Hidden Communities in Asia

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Studies on Africans in Asia have been limited to a handful of scattered articles published in academic journals. This special volume draws together papers from Indonesia to Palestine, including India and Sri Lanka. It aims to build a more comprehensive picture of a widely dispersed African population from the world’s largest continent. The pioneering work – African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean (published by Africa World Press in 2003) – co-edited by myself and Richard Pankhurst, Professor of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University, was an attempt to bring together scholarship in the field.

There is a growing interest in the historical, cultural and linguistic linkages between Africa and Asia. Migration of Africans in Asia was both voluntary and enforced. Assimilation was widespread. Where there was segregation, it gave rise to small minorities, who have helped to create more pluralistic societies. This partially explains their absence from academic studies.

Migration eastwards across the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean has gone on for longer than the transatlantic movement of Africans. Yet, people of African descent in Asia have generally remained unnoticed. “Belanda Hitam: the Indo-African communities in Java” by Ineke Van Kessel, an Africanist (African Studies Centre, Leiden, Netherlands) illustrates that West Africans also migrated to Asia. Her paper concerns Ghanaian soldiers who served the Dutch during the 19th and 20th centuries. These soldiers were called Belanda Hitam (or Black Dutchmen) by the Indonesians. The term raises many questions about these African migrants. Van Kessel’s research is based on interviews with descendants of the Ghanaian soldiers and Indonesian women, who are now in the Netherlands. Offspring from Ghanaian and Indonesian unions were in the garrison towns of Java, mainly in Batavia, Semarang, Salatiga, Solo and Purworejo; Van Kessel concentrates on Purworejo.
Descendants of African migrants to Sri Lanka associate their arrival in the Island with the Portuguese, Dutch and British colonial waves. While their martial abilities were sought after when the colonizers had to invade new territories, and subsequent defence of the acquired lands, Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya, a Linguist-Ethnomusicologist (King's College London) argues that once the British were in control and there was less demand for able soldiers, the fate of Africans began to change. In “A Forgotten Minority: the Afro-Sri Lankans” de Silva Jayasuriya draws attention to cultural retentions and transformations, examining the process of assimilation in post-independent Sri Lanka. She draws attention to the barely recognized music and dance talents of the Afro-Sri Lankans which need to be nurtured and marketed.

The literature has mostly referred to Africans in Asia as Habshi, Kaffir and Sidi. Moreover, several ethnonyms which are used regionally also complicate the nomenclature. This special issue contains three papers on Afro-Indians from the States of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Maharashtra where the histories of migration and the socio-political conditions vary.

Ababu Minda, an Anthropologist, in his paper entitled “Dynamics of Ethnic Identity Among the Siddis of Hyderabad” (Max-Planck Institute, Germany) concerns Africans who came to serve as militia for the Nizam of Hyderabad. The Siddis of Hyderabad, like the other Siddi communities, are adding to modern demands and trends. He argues that the Siddis are moving in divergent directions of assimilation. Many Moslem Siddis are assimilating into the Yemeni Arab community of Hyderabad. Christian Siddis, on the other hand, are identifying themselves with their Indian co-religionists. Minda argues that the Siddis are undergoing a process of identity change due to inter-marriage and adoption of either Indian or Arab identities.

Pashington Obeng, an Anthropologist (Wellesley College & Harvard University) examines how Afro-Indians (Abyssinians, Habshis, Siddis) have played significant political and military roles in the South Indian State of Karnataka. His paper entitled “Service to God, Service to Master/Client: African Indian Military Contribution in Karnataka” provides the historical background to military activities of Afro-Indians, discussing how the Africans deployed the unstable political climate in the Deccan, the ethnicization of military culture, religious filiation, and personality, to assert influence over communities that settled in areas bounded by present-day Karnataka.

Beheroze Shroff, a Sociologist (University of California, Irvine) discusses issues of identity within the context of social and economic circumstances of the Sidi community in Mumbai (formerly called Bombay). Her paper entitled “Sidis in Mumbai: Negotiating identities between Mumbai and Gujarat” is of particular interest as she discusses two communities which belong to different