



African  
Elites  
in  
India  
Habshi Amarat

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# Introduction

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Historians of West Asia and North Africa are familiar with examples of individual Africans who rose from slavery to positions of power and authority. Such notable Africans include Ubaidallah ibn Abi Bakr, who in 698 led an Arab invasion of what is now Afghanistan; and Abu'l-Misk Kafur, the ruler of Egypt from 966 to 968. Nowhere, however, did African slaves or ex-slaves hold power for as long as they did in the Indian subcontinent. Nor, for that matter, is there any other place in the world where small numbers of Sub-Saharan Africans ruled over mainly non-African populations. The history of African elites in India extends from the time of the fourteenth-century Arab traveller, Ibn Battuta, who reported that an African named Badr was governor of Alapur, north of Delhi, up to 1948 when the African monarchs of Janjira and Sachin consented to merge their kingdoms into independent India (figs. 1, 2,

3). From the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries, paintings often depict African nobles, administrators, and palace slaves in India (figs. 4, 5, 6, 9, 10, 11), and some of the most famous architectural monuments of India are associated with Africans (figs. 7, 8). The most celebrated of all the Africans in India was Malik Ambar, a thorn in the side of the seventeenth-century Mughal emperor Jahangir for over twenty years. So strongly did Jahangir hate his adversary that he had a painting made of his never-achieved fantasy of shooting an arrow through Ambar's head (figs. 12 and 41).

Indeed, Sub-Saharan Africans have a long-standing and distinguished presence in India, where they are most commonly known as Habshis or Sidis. Habshi is the Arabic for an Abyssinian or Ethiopian, and Sidi is apparently derived from the Arabic *sayyidi*, "my lord."<sup>1</sup> In

*Opposite page*

*Above*

2 The great island fort of the nawabs of Janjira was never taken by the Marathas despite many attacks. | Photograph by Girish Menon.

*Below*

3 Ahmad Ganj Palace, Murud. The new palace of the nawabs of Janjira. | Photograph by Sylvie Lee and Nuzhat Sultan.



17 Sidi Damal dance as depicted in an 1887 Company style painting by Lal Mohamad Juma. Bharatiya Sanskriti Darshan Museum, Bhuj. | Photograph courtesy of K.S. Dilipsinhji, grandson of Maharao Shri Khengarji III of Kutch.

To this day, there are Sidis in Gujarat who are musicians. Their songs and dances, many of which are in honour of Muslim *pirs* or holy men, retain African elements, most visibly in their instruments. A Kutchi painting of 1887 depicts a dance called the Sidi Damal (fig. 17). Recently, the Sidi Goma, a troupe of African Indian musicians and dancers, toured the United States and India, performing a tribute to Bava Gor.<sup>14</sup>

Other African slaves were made eunuchs, and served in the inner apartments of royal palaces. In a famous painting in the *Padshahnama* now at Windsor Castle illustrated by the great artist Balchand, the Mughal emperor Jahangir receives his son Prince Khurram; the attendant courtiers include the African eunuchs Firoz Khan and Khidmat Khan (figs. 18, 19).<sup>15</sup> A painting of Jafar Khan, who held high office under the emperors



*Above*  
18 The African eunuchs Firoz Khan and Khidmat Khan are shown attending the emperor Jahangir as he receives his son Prince Khurram. | Mughal painting by Balchand from a *Padshahnama* manuscript, ca 1635. The Royal Collection, Windsor Castle © 2004 Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

*Below*  
19 Detail of figure 18, showing Firoz Khan and Khidmat Khan.