

African topographies in India: (in)visible heritages, African prints and contemporary art across the Indian Ocean

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The Indian Ocean is recognized as a space of circulations and interactions. If Asian communities are well known for having settled in East and Southern African coasts for centuries, African circulations are equally significant for the cultural landscapes across the Indian Ocean. This essay discusses an ongoing research that aims to understand the contemporary presence of Africa in India interrelating three main locations: the (in)visible presence of plural Afro-Indian communities, the production of African print textiles by Indian companies and contemporary art projects that critically engage with African migrants in Indian metropolis. Intending to associate fields of research that are apparently disconnected, this research establishes dialogues between legacies of the past with contemporary Afro-Asian connections.

In a contemporary context, objects and things became central to the new discourses about Asia and Africa, and production, consumption and even the afterlife can elucidate the “relation between commodities and subjects” across continents.¹ This has left aside intersections between the heritages of the past and the possible cultural crossings of the present. Renewed flows of circulations trigger localized social and spatial interactions with ‘African’ spaces in Asian cities at different scales, from neighborhoods to buildings, such as the famous Chunking Mansions in Hong Kong or the African spaces in the Chinese city of Guangzhou or the Indian city of New Delhi. Correspondingly, the practices of circulation have significantly changed, connecting distinct locations without progressive cross-cultural processes and re-enacting imaginaries of the ‘other’.

Recommending disciplinary crossings, I propose enquiring about the possibilities of widening critical engagements with histories of Afro-Indian fluxes and the ways in which past heritages have been simultaneously informing the present and erased from contemporary discourses. While the recent African migrant communities in Guangzhou, Hong Kong or New Delhi have been understood as connected to economic trends of Asian presence in Africa, it also translates the permanence of circulations across the continents and the formation of Afro-Asian communities. At the same time, the contemporary production of African prints in India, which has been overshadowed by the economic relevance of Chinese production centers, translates the survival of old maritime networks of trade and kinship along extremely dynamic contexts of Asian and African independences. Finally, art projects that engage with a contemporary presence of African migrants in India are crucial to uncover racial discourses and imaginations that co-exist with heritages of the Bandung spirit of Afro-Asian solidarities.

Triggering conversations across geographies and times, African presences in India become visible through three interconnected conceptual frames: Carto/graphies [mnemonic traces, geographies and their uses and meanings], Archiv/ing [material traces, representations of past and future heritages], and Icono/graphies [visual traces, artistic expressions].

Carto/graphies - mnemonic traces

This conceptual frame investigates spatial memories in the Indian Ocean through a critical deconstruction of colonial and postcolonial maps. Engaging with notions as cartography, location, territory or scale, it acts as surveying alternative maps across two layers: spatial templates and social geographies.

Historical port cities, which were fundamental nodal locations intersecting maritime networks with coastal landscapes and hinterland politics, and diverse geographical and cultural identities counterbalance contemporary maps. Temporarily dislocating postcolonial nation-state boundaries around the Indian Ocean serves as an exercise of questioning alternate geographical logics and designations: does using the old Arabic expression ‘Sea of Zanj’ to the Western Indian Ocean change our perception regarding the place of Africa and Middle East in maritime networks? Are coastal landscapes and the monsoon system more illuminating than land based maps to read connections across the oceans?

These interrogations also translate ideas of plurality that render visible how African origin populations have settled and built cultural environments in extremely diverse ways and through contrasting historical situations. While in the Western Indian Ocean archipelagos we assist processes of creolization, in South Asia and the Persian Gulf Afro-Asians have been assimilated to local social structures under the terms of Habshi and Siddi, in Iran, Pakistan and India, or Kaffir, in the case of Sri Lanka.

In this wider map, India is a particularly fertile location to recognize the diversity of African presences and complicate concepts of slavery and bounded labor in the Indian Ocean. In the Konkan, Deccan and Gujarat regions African military troops were highly regarded, some of them gaining prominence as rulers and builders. Simultaneously, African origin communities settling on the subcontinent’s coastal regions became deeply connected with Sufi movements or with the natural landscape. This diversity of social contexts requires interconnected researches and approaches.

Using cartographic templates allows the overcoming of geographical and chronological limits to inquiry how past circulations of Africans across the Indian Ocean relate with the 1951 Bandung conference and Afro-Asian solidarity movements, contemporary migration circuits to cities as Guangzhou, Hong Kong and New Delhi and with concepts around the Global South. In this way, space, geography and their cartographic representations act as mnemonic archives of pluralized histories of exchanges that need to be registered in relation and interconnectivity.

Archiv/ing - material traces

Material and visual heritages are powerful repositories of history and culture. One of the possible searches for African presences in India, and broadly in South Asia, is to interconnect scattered traces of different scales and contexts, as well as the lexicons and representations of past heritages, in order to think what, and how, can be perceived as future legacies. One of the advantages of this conceptual frame is to circulate among diverse materialities: small scale shrines for spirits of deceased African slaves in Kochi, the *Kappiri Muthapan*, the impressive Janjira Fort, on the coast of Maharashtra, Sufi dargahs and devotion rituals performed by Siddi communities, representative buildings as the Siddi Saiyyed Mosque in Ahmedabad, urban aesthetic languages of port cities as Surat, Diu or Kochi or materialities as mobile as cotton textiles.

As contemporary inheritances of centuries of trade that sustained Western India’s textile production, ‘African prints’ are being produced in Ahmedabad, Surat or Bombay exclusively for African consumption. The long history of Indian textiles in Africa, commonly disconnected from this contemporary production through an excessive focus on the late colonial period, is alive in India, one of its oldest production centers, as well as in the more recent production centers in China, mainly Guangzhou province, where African migrants build communities and businesses. Titled as Mozambique Fabric or Capulana, Dashiki, Kanga, Kente Print or simply African Wax, these African textiles made in Asia prove that cotton cloths are not material traces of past histories but the medium where future heritages are literally drawn. The African continent, as a center of decision and consumption, has an active role in Asian economies while Afro-Asian circulations translate the contemporary mutations of centuries old networks of aesthetics in material and visual cultures.

African prints made in India constitute an archive that will discuss with other material testimonies, as decorative arts across the Indian Ocean and architectures and urbanities of port cities that embody

disparate “elsewhere”² that constitute the Indian Ocean landscapes as archives of Afro-Asian circulations.

Icono/graphies - visual traces

Integrating broader landscapes of artistic flows connecting Asia and Africa, several art projects in India become sites of enquiry of submerged histories and the actual complex realities of African migrants in the country. The interdisciplinary research project *Coriolis Effect*, by the New Delhi based arts collective Khoj, the photographic series *African Portraits* by Mahesh Shantaram or the installation *Dwelling Kappiri Spirits* by Gabriel Lester for the Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2016 are among recent practices that deal with the presence of Africans in India across time. While these works direct us to reflect on the representation of an African blackness, they also act as a mirror reflecting the Indian society. To confront these, and others, contemporary representations³ with past depictions of Asians of African origin, archives of imagery, representations and social locations,⁴ means to connect historical processes and their remnants with the contemporary circumstances and to build new cartographies of Africa in India while knitting apparent disjunctures between the past and the present. This conceptual template also incentivizes a critical reconsidering of past iconographies and the search for silenced and obliterated visualities in a diversity of mediums such as songs, craft traditions or cultural landscapes.

Possible mappings

Instead of focusing on one particular field, connecting diverse layers where links between the African continent and India have been made visible or left unseen allows us to understand relations and frictions amid materialities, visual cultures, and discourses.

In a broader perspective, these inquiries dialogue with larger geographies of Afro-Asian relations and critically tie disparate locations of memory that inhabit the Asian space in order to think what future heritages can be imagined departing from the contemporary realities. Searching for African presences in India equally means to uncover additional archives, modes of registering heritages and traces that, sometimes literally, are weaved throughout locations, material structures, sounds or personal lives. Patterns and colors, words and images are powerful and rich sites of research, and following the cyclic monsoon winds might lead to Afro-Asian worlds that have been sedimented in the estuaries of historical narratives and changing coastal landscapes.

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Notes

- 1 Jones, M. 2017. ‘Junk Aesthetics from South Africa, Brazil and India: Re-Evaluating the Object’, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 43(5): 997–1010, p.997.
- 2 Meier, P. 2016. *Swahili Port cities. The Architecture of Elsewhere*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- 3 For photography books on Afro-Asians see Ehsaei, M. 2017. *Afro-Iran*. Heidelberg: Kehrer Verlag; and Sheth, K. 2013. *A Certain Grace. The Siddi: Indians of African Descent*. New Delhi: Photoink. For documentaries on Afro-Iranian communities see the documentaries by Behnaz Mirzai (<http://www.afroiranianlives.com>) and Dingomaro, documentary by Kamran Heidari from 2017 (<http://kamranheidari.com/ali-aqa>). On Indian Siddi, see *From Africa to India. Sidi Music in the Indian Ocean Diaspora*, film from 2007 by Amy and Nazir Jairazbhoy (<https://tinyurl.com/FAT1-vid>). On Kaffirs in Sri Lanka, see *Kaffir Culture*, short documentary from 2009 by Kannan Arunasalam (<https://vimeo.com/7234191>).
- 4 As, for example, the online exhibition on the African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean World, organized by the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture and New York Public Library; <https://tinyurl.com/adiow-NYL>



Kangas in the Chavda store, Stone Town, Zanzibar. Chavda kangas are among the most famous in Zanzibar and are produced in Bombay, India. Photo by the author, 2018.