The African Diaspora of the Indian Sub-continent

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Recently, I walked into a record store here in Bangalore, South India and went to check out the Hip-Hop/ Reggae section. My eyes immediately drifted down to the title of one album called "A Vanload of Pakistanis" which I quickly grabbed. On the front cover of the album, which came out in 1993, were four Indo-Africans engaged in their best impression of American Hip-Hop artists circa 1987.

The common discussion around the African Diaspora focuses on the slave-derived populations of the Americas, but little is known about Africans who went the other way, moving from the African continent to the Asian subcontinent, and not in chains, as slaves, but purposely and freely. Learning about this population offers a more realistic portrayal of Africans as more than free labor to be exploited. It demonstrates clearly the extent to which Africans engaged the world and effectively shatters any lingering myths about pre-colonial African civilizations.

More than 250,000 descendents of Africans still live amongst the Indian people. They are a vast and diverse population spread throughout India with separate histories and unique roles within the Indian strata. Although Africans have been crossing the Indian Ocean to Asia for over a millenium, most of those who make up the Indo-African population came in the past five hundred years. Most were mercenaries or prisoners of war for the Muslim rulers.

1 Many, many years later, I discovered that the album I saw was actually by a fairly obscure group out of Atlanta called Van Full of Pakistanis who released an album called "Y'all So Stupid" in 1993 that some now claim is a lost classic.
2 The term Indo-Africans refers to Indians of African origins and was coined by Professor Abdulaziz Lodhi of Uppsala University, Sweden. I am grateful to him for his help in writing in this article. Pakistan was split off India [pictured] in 1947 during the partition of the Indian sub-continent that created both current states. Therefore, in relation to the Indo-African population, the history provided below would encompass both the communities in India and in Pakistan.
for whom they represented a high status symbol. Africans also came as midwives and herbalists, and as musicians, sailors and merchants. Only a very few were brought over as slaves as India's caste society provided ample cheap labor for the ruling elite. Today's Indo-Africans trace their ancestry primarily from the East African coast from Sudan to Mozambique, but some came from as far off as South Africa and even Nigeria. Little research has been done on this unique population, but slowly a literature is growing.

Many of the Indo-Africans who arrived from eastern Africa came as sailors and traders engaged in the vibrant Indian ocean trade and stayed on in India, usually around the main ports, from Kerala in the south to Gujarat in the north. The monsoon winds that blew across the Indian ocean powered an extensive trade system that shipped spices from Kerala through northeast Africa and on to Rome and other parts of the European continent since before the time of Christ. Ivory, gold and other valuables from Zimbabwe and the Congo found their way to the East African coast to areas such as Kilwa, Mombassa and Zanzibar from where they were further shipped across the Indian Ocean and on to India, Southeast Asia, China and even Japan.

Perhaps the most interesting example of Indo-Africans in Indian history was the establishment of the Habshi State in eastern India during the 19th century. As the story goes, the ruler of the state was killed in a palace coup d'etat led by an Indo-African general serving in the king's army, who went on to proclaim himself king. He was subsequently killed by another high-ranking Indo-African general who remained loyal to the original ruling family and placed the young son of the murdered king upon the throne.

Another group of Indo-Africans, known as the Shemali, originated in Kano, Nigeria, and came to India via Sudan and Mecca following their Hajj pilgrimage. Under the leadership of a wealthy merchant known as Baba Ghor, the Shemali became prosperous through the mining and trade of the precious stone Agate. This group of Indo-Africans retains quite a few African customs, and Baba Ghor and the story of their arrival in India is proudly remembered.
It is hard to speak of the Indo-Africans as a singular group as they came from vastly different parts of Africa and through many periods of history. Nonetheless, most of the groups have largely been assimilated into Indian society. The majority of Indo-Africans are Muslims, but other similarities are hard to find. Different communities speak different languages and culturally most consider themselves Indian save for a few African cultural remnants. Some Indo-Africans, descended from powerful soldiers, administrators, and even rulers, are indistinguishable from the general population, for their ancestors were considered higher class and married freely amongst the elite Indian population. This group of Indo-Africans are sometimes known as the Royal Sidis, and they consider other Indo-Africans and lower class Indians as being beneath them. They only marry amongst themselves or with upper class/caste native Muslims.

Scholars generally consider the Indo-Africans de facto Indians as they mostly speak Indian languages, although some groups do retain many African words. This process of assimilation was interrupted with the advent of British rule in India in the 19th century. The British segregated the Indo-Africans from the local population, thus impoverishing them. Currently, except for the Royal Sidis and their descendents who are largely integrated into the Muslim upper class, the Indo-African population remains largely rural farmers or unskilled workers, although some have also become professionals such as doctors, lawyers, teachers and businessmen. Under the extensive Indian affirmative action programs, most Indo-Africans are classified as scheduled tribes, which entitles them to reservations in university seats and other government support.

Culturally, the Indo-Africans have been accepted into the vast spectrum that is India as have many immigrant group ranging from the Jews who fled Israel two hundred years after Christ to the Zoroastrians who fled Iran in the advent of Islamic imperialism. Like these other groups, the Indo-Africans have full claim to being Indian, even if they maintain some of their ancestral traditions. In 1997 I met a group of American researchers who had just arrived in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, from Karnataka in South India. They had recently interviewed a rural settlement of Indo-Africans. In
studying and recording the group's music, they had recognized a common melody and similar themes in the music to that which was sung by a certain ethnic group in Tanzania. Nonetheless, this group of Indo-Africans spoke only Kannada (an Indian language) and their idea of home was only India, although a few of the older members of the group knew the outlines of tales that spoke of ancestors who had come from another land.

Only a small number of Indo-Africans have tried to immigrate back to Africa, mostly during the British rule of Zanzibar. Those who did return have largely been assimilated into the cultural mix that characterizes the island. For example, early in the 20th century, a woman named Langi Nur-bai arrived in Zanzibar from India where she had been a drummer and singer. Interestingly, while in Zanzibar she became a respected member of the Indian Muslim community and was a highly demanded performer for their weddings and other such occasions.

In Pakistan, which also has a small Indo-African population, Indo-Africans are substantially more visible as performers and athletes. The community is almost completely centered in the coastal city of Karachi. Compared to India, where the general population has little knowledge of the existence of the Indo-Africans, the Pakistani Indo-African population has achieved national status as athletes, especially as boxers, a field in which Indo-Africans have represented Pakistan in international competition.

Which brings me back to the "Vanload of Pakistanis" hip-hop album. It is hard to know what to make it: On the one hand it is possible to claim that by choosing Hip-Hop as their form of expression these Indo-Africans were trying to claim their space in the international black community. On the other hand, by calling themselves Pakistani in the title, they seemed to be claiming Pakistan as their own. Perhaps this syncretism is itself the best hope for the Indo-African communities. India has always welcomed immigrants from around the world, giving them acceptance and taking from them certain cultural attributes that further enlarge the Indian mosaic. Afro-Indians, given the freedom to assimilate without the pressure to lose ancestral traditions, may be among the luckiest communities of the Diaspora.
However we view Afro-Indians, their mere existence has much to tell us about Africa's place in the world community beyond just the dark days of slavery. Their history speaks to the African ability to voluntarily integrate into a land other than that which they originated. Ultimately, that may be the most important aspect to remember about this community. The African Diaspora in the Americas was an involuntary one, but the Indo-Africans came willingly to India, and regardless of their ups and downs in Indian history, they have chosen to stay.