Who Were the Africans in Eastern Asia? : The Christian European Period 1500-1900 AD

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Abstract

Seaways, especially monsoonal ones, allow movement on two directions. However Eurocentric approaches have tended to create hierarchies of cultures which have biased movements in particular directions to the historical exclusion of some narratives. This is a fresh look at a cultural connection from a perspective that has evaded investigation and seeks to balance the research on Chinese interactions with Africans in Africa. Africans have been trading with Asia for hundreds of years, yet their history and presence in East Asia has been barely suggested or investigated. The role of African crewmen is an important part of this narrative and one that brings a new dimension (if not challenges) to ethnographic studies of maritime cultural landscapes and seascapes.

Key words: Africa, China, interactions, exchange, ethnography

Introduction

In this paper an African is defined as a person whose ancestors were born in Africa, Therefore discourse not limited to people who are perceived or perceive themselves as Black or indeed Black African.

Eastern Asia is defined as the territory roughly east of a line 92^0 East of the Meridian to 146^0 East, that is inclusive of Japan, North and South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, China and both mainland and maritime Southeast Asia.

The paper proposes to answer four fundamental yet simple questions:

1) Who were the Africans that came to Eastern Asia (Origins)?

2) How did they get to Eastern Asia (Routes)?

3) What were they known as in Eastern Asia and why (Exonyms)?

4) What was the nature of their lives in Southeast Asia (Socio-economic and Political Agency)?

After intense research on the lengthy topic of Africans in Eastern Asia, much of it from African perspectives, taking in important research evidenced by Timothy Powers (2010 and 2012), Li Anshan (2015), George Hatke (2013), Jacques Gernet (1999), William Clarence-Smith (2006), de Verre Allen (1993), John Sutton (1990), Marina Tolmacheva (1993), Louise Levathes and Shihan de Silva Jayasuraya (2008a and 2008b) a possible chronological framework consisting of four periods based on the above criteria was produced:

1) The Hindu-Buddhist Asian period 300BC-700 AD.
2) The Islamic Asian period 700-1500 AD
3) The Christian European period 1500-1900 AD
4) The Modern Period 1900-2000 AD.

It is impossible to cover such an immense timeframe within this paper; however, a concise bibliography is included for reference and future research. This paper will concentrate on the evidence provided for period 3, which has been termed 'The Christian European period 1500-1900 AD' for the simple reason that the majority of the evidence for this period is from European sources. The paper examines this and other available evidence before reaching the conclusion.

The Evidence

Prior to the sixteenth century, Africans that were not Christians or Muslims were regarded as infidels or *Qaffiri* (كافر, singular) by the Arabs and Persians in Africa and in India (Pankhurst, 2003) and were allowed by the tenants of Islam to be enslaved. Generally, Christians in the Horn of Africa were mainly from the Amhara, Tagaru (or Tigrayna) people, and Muslims were from the coastal Tigre, Tagaru, Afar and Somali peoples. The major

pagan peoples at this time were mainly Oromoo and Sidama. All of these were Cushitic speakers. The coastal peoples were in-part the descendants of the Axumites – an important African maritime people.

Research has already established that the main flow of Africans in the Islamic Asian period 700-1500 AD (including the Tang, Yuan and Early Ming Dynasties) was ultimately from the Horn of Africa and along the Maritime Silk Route to Eastern Asia (Pankhurst, 2003 and Powers, 2010). This trend continued into the sixteenth century when the majority of Africans arriving in India, including pre-Portuguese Goa came through the port of Zeila which was the main exporter enslaved pagan Oromoo and free Abyssinians destined for India where they were called *Habshis* (Pankhurst, 2003) and this is confirmed by Linschoten (2005) 'there are many Arabians and Abexiins in India' and he notes that 'there are many of them [Abexiins] in India that are captives and slaves'.

From the sixteenth century European records provide evidence of African presence in East Asia, starting in succession with the Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, English and the finally the French.

Portuguese experiences in the Iberian Peninsula and in the Maghreb, had led them to describe all Muslims as *Mouros* or Moors. They understood that the process of Arabisation meant that Arabs were not a race, but a people. Arriving in East Africa in 1498 the Portuguese regarded the Muslim people that they encountered on the coast (i.e. Arab, Persian, Somali and Swahili) all as Moors – a term that they extended with their travels right across the Indian Ocean to the spice-producing Sultanates of the Malukas and Southern Philippines. Mistrust and trading necessities meant that they were reluctant to enslave these Moors. In fact, vastly

outnumbered and economically reliant on these Muslims produced a ‘keep your enemies close’ approach.

After the Portuguese established themselves in Southeast Africa (modern day Mozambique) enslaved Africans increasingly came from through Mozambique Island which they held from 1507, but this trade was still far below the Arab-Persian trade from the Horn of Africa. The Portuguese were quick to adopt the Arabic term as *Kaffirs* or *Cafres* for the enslaved pagan Africans as a trading commodity, a labour force, militia, and a prospective Catholic convert (de Silva Jayaruraya, 2008a).

There were in Goa ‘Many Persians, Arabians and *Abexijns*, some [of them] Christians and some [of them] Moors’. Linschoten (2005) notes the tattoos that identify the Christians and makes it clear that ‘these Abexiins… such as are free doe serve in al India for sailors and seafaring men with such merchants as sailed from Goa to China, Japon, Bengala, Mallaca, Ormus and all the Oriental coast.’ Linschoten explains that after arriving in India the Portuguese sailors are ‘ashamed to live in that order and think it is a great discredit unto them’. Interestingly he also explains that the *Abexiins* are hired on low wages and travel with their wives under a Portuguese Captain but possibly an Arab boatswain who oversees the *Abexiins*.

Charles Boxer (1997), historian of the Portuguese Empire noted that ‘Portuguese shipping in the inter-port trade of Asia was increasingly operated from the days of Albuquerque onwards, by Asian seamen working under a very few white or Eurasian officers. Even the great carracks of 1,000-2,000 tons which plied between Goa, Macao and Nagasaki might be entirely crewed by Asians and negro slaves’. However

Boxer is incorrect. The reputation of the Christian and Muslim Abyssinians as good sailors was widespread, though the enslaved *Abexiin* were actually animist (i.e. *kaffir*) Oromoo tribesmen, who had a strong military tradition and were often good horsemen. In several areas of the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific, piracy was endemic and Africans were rare enough for their presence to cause fear. It was therefore wise for the Portuguese to man their ships with *Abexiin* crew and for the Jesuits to have *kaffir* retainers and body guards. This explains the Africans arriving in Macau from the 1550's on Portuguese ships and those depicted on the Japanese *Nanban Byobu* (southern Barbarian folding screens) in Japan.

In Siam (Thailand) King Chairacha entered relations with the Portuguese and allowed a trading and religious presence at Ayutthaya. In 1538 as an assurance against Burmese invasion and eager for Portuguese military technology he requested that the Portuguese actually retain a military presence which resulted in 130 Portuguese men being based in the established Portuguese settlement. Bearing in mind the paucity of Portuguese men in Asia, it could well be that many of these "Portuguese" were in fact Africans. There were definitely Japanese and Chinese Christians, and other Luso-Asians at the settlement which lasted until 1767 when the Burmese destroyed Ayutthaya.

During the early years in Goa the Jesuits employed slaves, and the Church Provincial Council of 1567 laid down precise rules for the keeping of slaves (Borges, 1994). Though in reality this was not the case in Eastern Asia. Perhaps the best known African of this period in East Asia was the one called Yasuke, who was an African retainer of the Japanese warlord Oda Nobunaga (1534-1582). Yasuke appears to have arrived in Japan in 1579 as part of the entourage of the Jesuit Visitor Alessandro

Valignano. It was Nobunaga who gave the African the name Yasuke (Lockley, 2017). Both free and bonded helpers were members of the domestic staff of the Jesuits in the Japan Province, the majority of the former were Japanese, while the enslaved ones were Africans, Indians, Malays, Koreans or Japanese (Borges, 1994). Another African is mentioned in Japanese sources as a gunner in the service of Arima Harunobu in 1584.

The unification of the Portuguese and Spanish crowns between 1580 and 1640 resulted in the wars with the Dutch and ultimately the downfall of the Portuguese Eastern Empire. The same wars resulted in an acute shortage of soldiers throughout the seventeenth century. But the Portuguese considered *sepoys* (Indian soldiers) as physically unfit and preferred the more robust African soldiers (Sequeira-Antony, 2004). By the early seventeenth century, slaves were the largest non-Goan group living in the city of Goa, most of these were Africans who had come through Mozambique Island and other parts of Eastern Africa, and the rest were Asians. They served as caretakers, guards, servants, concubines and artisans. From Goa slaves were shipped to other Portuguese settlements and even to Lisbon (Borges, 1994). The first recorded African to enter the territory of modern South Korea was a personal servant attached to the Portuguese trader João Mendes, who was on a Japanese vessel blown off course by a typhoon while travelling between Phnom Penh and Nagasaki. They drifted on to the island of Tong Yong in 1604. It appears that João Mendes was on a diplomatic mission for Shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543-1616) to the Khymer Kingdom (Kim, 2008). There was a Portuguese merchant and a Jesuit presence at Hoi An in Vietnam, but no substantial research has been done on the community to confirm an African presence.

Friar Domingo Navarette recorded the presence of African soldiers in Guangzhou in 1618 and confirmed that they were runaways from Macau (de Silva Jayaruraya, 2008a). In 1622 enslaved Africans defended the Portuguese base at Macau which the Dutch attacked with a force of 13 ships and 1300 men. The Portuguese numbered only 150 – two thirds of which were residents, mostly *mestiços*. Additionally there were Jesuit artillerist and decisively up to 100 armed African slaves. There are also observations in 1637 of the few Portuguese *cavalleros* (horsemen) being accompanied by Africans servants dressed in expensive red damask bearing lances on which were placed the crests of the Portuguese families. It appears that there were two Africans in Macau who acted as interpreters between the Portuguese and the Chinese. One of these, Antonio was a 'Capher Eathiopian Abissen'. The other is described as a 'Chincheo runaway from the Portugal's at Macau'. He was therefore an enslaved African who had escaped from Macau possibly to the Chenghai District of Eastern Guangdong Province. Both men appear to have learnt Cantonese and therefore to have been in Southern China for some time (Pankhurst, 2003).

By the time Portugal gained her independence from Spain in 1640 as many as 5000 Africans lived in Macau and there were even special masses for their wives. They were employed mainly as enslaved personal servants to the men, as labourers and guards or soldiers. Enslaved Chinese females were preferred as household maids, cooks, wet-nurses and personal servants to the 'Portuguese' wives who were often *mestiços* (de Silva Jayaruraya, 2008a). By the early Qing Dynasty (1644-1912) Africans were definitely present in small numbers in Guangdong province as well as at Macau (de Silva Jayaruraya, 2008a). In 1651 the Governor of Macau requested 'Negro' soldiers rather than Mestiços from India (de

Silva Jayaruraya, 2008b). Friar Domingo Navarette again recorded the presence of African soldiers in Guangzhou in 1686 (de Silva Jayaruraya, 2008a). According to Brother José de Jesus, in 1745 there were in Macau:

> 'twelve thousand men who at the same time dwelt there […] between Portuguese, half-castes, Nhons [Japanese], Malays, Canarins [Goans], Timorese, Mozambicans [Mixed heritage from Mozambique Island], Malabars, Moors [Muslims], Kaffirs [Non-Muslim Africans], and other nations……' (Puga, 2013).

No information is available on the African presence in Spanish Formosa (1626-1642). The people of the Philippine islands had their own form of slavery before the arrival of the Spanish. In Tagalog these were called *alipin*. Africans must have arrived on the Spanish vessels across the Pacific from Acapulco as sailors, servants and slaves. The Spanish in the Philippines initially had their local Asian slaves, but in 1586 Philip II of Spain proposed to slowly eliminate enslavement of his Spanish Indies subjects by requesting all children to be born free and banning new slave purchases. The laws proved very successful but started a trend of purchasing foreigners (including Indians, Chinese and Malays, Koreans and Japanese) who were not subject to the king's laws. The Portuguese seized the trading opportunity and brought enslaved Africans from the Indian Ocean for sale to the Spanish in the Philippines, these were known as *esclavavos negros* (negro slaves). By 1621 Africans constituted about a third of the Intramuros population at Manila. A Little work has been done on the African presence in the Spanish Indies in the Marianas which suggests an African presence from at least 1602. With the termination of Portuguese interaction, Africans disappear after 1640 and for the entire Tokugawa period. However, it would be interesting to know of any

evidence of Africans resident at Hirado or Deshima, or in Taiwan attached to the Dutch presence in the East Indies.

While the European trade in Africans from the Horn of Africa decreased the late eighteenth century saw Africans sold at Mozambique Island arriving at Macau through the Portuguese colonies of Diu, Damman and Goa. One of the traders was a Portuguese called Joaquim do Rosario Monteiro (Machado, 2003).

There is no information on Africans in the Maluku Islands. Considering their troubled history and the use of Africans as soldiers in Sri Lanka by the Dutch since the mid-seventeenth century one would expect some African presence in the region. Between 1831 and 1842 the Dutch attempted to recruit no fewer than 2,200 Africans for service in their colonial army, primarily in the Dutch East Indies. In the end they only contracted 44 men from Elmina Castle (Ghana). But another push for men recruited from Kumasi, mainly from non-Ashanti peoples in the North of present-day Ghana produced 2,200 men serving 15-year contracts. While a second attempt among the Ashanti produced 235 men. A consequence was that this militia was composed of men from different ethnic groups that spoke different languages. Mistrust among them was a challenge to the Dutch. To ensure against a mutiny the Dutch distributed them into separate companies and battalion. It appears that African liaisons with the Javanese and Sumatrans resulted in many of them being more fluent in Malay then Dutch. This gave them an advantage when organising themselves and making demands for equal pay or better living standards. By December 1841 there were 1,318 Africans in the Koninklijk Nederlandsch-Indisch Leger (Royal Netherlands-Indies Army). Recruitment had been vastly reduced at Africa, but in 1850 The Dutch

decided to resume African military recruitment in Elmina and 800 were recruited between 1860 and 1872, mainly from the Ashanti. In the Indies they were known by the term *Londo Ireng* in Javanese or *Belinda Hitam* (Black Dutch) in Malay. This recruitment ended in 1872 when Britain took over the Dutch possessions in the Gold Coast (i.e. Ghana), but many of these Africans stayed in Indonesia (mainly in Java) and married Malay women. They also had their own area of Purworejo called Kampung Afrikan. Here the community retained its distinct Afro-Indonesian culture. Soldiers who lived in other areas and were simply assimilated into Indonesian societies (van Kessel, 2008).

Around 1879 the Portuguese Governor of Timor had a battalion which included 200 Africans who the Timorese called *Falikas*. The 1881 census of Singapore includes Africans though their numbers were small (de Silva Jayaruraya, 2008a).

Conclusion

Initially most of the Africans who came to Eastern Asia on board Portuguese ships where from the present day Ethiopia and Eritrea, including the Tigre and Tagaru crewmen and pagan Oromoo or Sidama. Then increasingly from the seventeenth century onwards Africans came from among the Makua, Yao/Nyanja, and Maravi, of Mozambique, Malawi and Zimbabwe though the island of Mozambique from the seventeenth centuries.

Africans arriving with the Dutch in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries initially came from West Africa, among the Akan and Dagbane language groups in modern day Ghana, Burkina Faso. There may have been a few Malagasy boarded at Cape Town.

Three distinct routes to East Asia for enslaved Africans can be discerned; the first and oldest route is from Zeila to Oman or Hormuz and on to the Gujarat on Arab Persian or Gujarati vessels. After purchase in Gujarat the route was through Goa to Macau and then to any Portuguese or Spanish port. From around 1600 the route was entirely on Portuguese vessels from Mozambique Island to Macau via Goa. The nineteenth century Dutch route was from Elmina in Ghana to Cape Town and directly to Batavia on Dutch vessels.

This period stands in stark contrast to previous ones for Africans and other people of colour arriving in Eastern Asia. Formally Africans had arrived as envoys, merchants, soldiers and slaves into a realm that was composed roughly of the same elements of stratified society that existed in Eastern Asia.

But the arrival of Africans with the Europeans was different. Africans of this period (1500-1900) arrived on European ships as sailors under European captains, or often in the entourage of the European merchants, and Jesuit missionaries. The Chinese used the term *Gui-nu* (Ghost-slave) for Africans, or in Cantonese *Gui-lo* (ghost man). In Japanese Africans were called *Kurobo* (Lockley, 2017) or *Kuronbo* in the Nagasaki dialect (Screech, 2017). So the Africans often arrived in a position subservient to Europeans who themselves were perceived, at least by the Chinese and Japanese, as Southern barbarians (*Nanbanjin* in Japanese) and therefore below the status of the Chinese and Japanese. This is perhaps most evident in the seventeenth century use of the Cantonese term *Gui-Nu* (ghost-slave) for Africans in Guanghzhou, but also in the Japanese term *Kuronbo* (black novice monk). Both of these terms place the Africans as

subservient to the Europeans. The range of this servitude from novice or page to slave reflected the reality.

African features and physique were clearly admired for strength (Lockley, 2017), however the subservient status that Africans held almost everywhere in Eastern Asia (in contrast to South Asia) fed into indigenous concepts of colour based on working status, caste, or in the case of the Burmese, Thais, Filipinos and Taiwanese on the perception of subjugated peoples such as the Mons, Khymers, enslaved Ternate Islanders, Taiwanese Aboriginals or Philippine Aboriginals (Blussé, 2009) who they thought of as Blacks. With the exception of Korea, Japan and much of China, Asians themselves would be colonised by Europeans adding to the stigma of dark colour, and its association with race, enhanced by the Atlantic Slave Trade and Euro-American concepts of racism.

Nevertheless, the adoption of Catholicism brought the Africans some support from the Catholic Church that effectively managed the civic life of both Portuguese and Spanish Asia. Friar Domingo Navarrete mentioned the wives of the “negroes” in Macau at mass, and in 1637 Peter Mundy mentions that these wives were Chinese slaves. So legitimate intermarriage between Africans and Chinese took place in Macao (de Silva Jayasuraya, 2008) and the resulting Afro-Chinese were absorbed in the Macanese community. Little work has been done on the African presence in the Philippines or in the Marianas, but presumably the same Catholic system was at work.

It seems that during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the largest concentration of Africans in Eastern Asia was at Portuguese Macau. Of course Macau was governed from Goa which was the terminus of all

Asian trade to and from Europe via Mozambique Island, and the African presence in both cities continues to the present day. But foci shifted to the Dutch city of Batavia in the nineteenth century. Africans arriving with the Dutch were concentrated in the Batavia area, where they served the Royal Dutch Indies Army. They married Indonesian and Luso-Indonesian women and settled mainly in Java. In 1965 when Indonesia gained independence the *Belinda Hitam* were offered Dutch citizenship and immigrated to the Netherlands. Little work has been done on the African presence prior to the twentieth century in French Indo-China (Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam).

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Biography

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