

THE DECCAN'S AFRICAN CONNECTION

The British Library has just bought a priceless portrait of Ikhlas Khan, the Abyssinian minister in the Bijapur sultanate

RESHMI DASGUPTA

Clad in flowing Deccani robes, his head covered in a tight golden turban and astride a rearing grey charger, Ikhlas Khan is an intriguing visage on the website of the British Library. The miniature, watercolour on paper portrait, circa 1670-80, was recently purchased by the British Library from the Richard Johnson collection bought by the East India Company for its library in 1807. Though it has suffered some damage, it is a rare artefact of a little known but infinitely interesting era in Indian history.

When the Tughlaqs, Lodhis and finally the Mughals conquered areas of India north of the Vindhyas convoluted wars were raging among the Deccan sultanates. But the intrigues and colourful characters that pepper the histories of Bidar, Berar, Bijapur, Golconda, Ahmednagar haven't become part of pan-Indian lore like the Mughals.

That is why the face of the 15th-century Abyssinian noble is so captivating. Khan's distinctly African features look nothing like Kamal Amrohi's cartoonish Dharmendra-with-boot-polish cinematic portrayal of another Abyssinian, Jalaluddin Yaqut, who was linked to Delhi's only woman sultan Raziya in the 13th century. Maybe Idris Elba, at a pinch. But the ease with which Ikhlas Khan wears the vestments of high Deccani officials in the miniature speaks volumes about his power.

But so few know even a little about him, especially in India. Hearteningly, light is finally being shone on a group that gets very dim play in our subcontinental history: the warrior Africans. Malik Ambar is probably the only Abyssinian from medieval history who is recognised today. But before him, apart from those shipped to India as slaves and eunuchs by Arab traders, many Ethiopians, Somali and Mozambicans (all dubbed 'Siddis' today) allied with fractious rulers to carve out places for themselves.

Apart from Ikhlas Khan and Malik

Ambar, there was Dastur Dinar, Saifuddin Firuz Shah of Bengal, the hereditary nawabs of Janjira and Sachin and many more. One 'Siddi' Bastian even took part in the uprising of 1857. Hearteningly, India's silence on its African connection (apart from some scholarly books on the subject) was finally broken by Ketaki Sheth's book of photographs titled *A Certain Grace: The Sidi-Indians of African Descent*, released in Mumbai last month.

Photographs also form the base of another exhibition, currently on at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in the New York Public Library, titled *Africans in India: From Slaves*



LONE STAR: Malik Ambar is the best known Abyssinian warrior from Indian medieval history

Aurangabad is the staging point for the Ajanta-Ellora caves, Sai Baba's shrine at Shirdi, Bibi-ka-Maqbara, the Lonar Crater, and even Aurangzeb's tomb — but not Malik Ambar's mausoleum even though he founded that city, which was originally called Kharkhi.

An Archaeological Survey of India site states that Ambar's mausoleum is non-ticketed, although there's a charge of Rs 5000 for those who want to film onsite. But despite his pivotal role in India's history, ASI's own checklist of 'tourist facilities' has a 'No' listed against everything except 'approach road' and 'pathways'. So, no parking, toilets, drinking water, dustbins, signages, souvenir shops or facilities for differently abled are

to be highlighted, for a better idea of the complexion of the India of those times. After all, unlike the Caribbean and the Americas (and despite India's age-old obsession with fairness), the 'Habshis' who came to medieval India soon shot to prominence and power.

For instance, like Yaqut and Raziya Sultan, Ikhlas Khan's name was also linked to a queen, Chand Bibi, a princess of Ahmednagar who became regent of Bijapur when her husband died without an heir. Malik Raihan (later titled Ikhlas Khan) played a decisive role in the intestine battles that finally led to Chand Bibi's rise as well as fall. Khan and other 'Habshi' generals were active participants in skirmishes for at least three centuries, till the Mughals put their stamp on most parts of the peninsular India.

As the best known of the Abyssinian slave/soldiers/statesmen who made India their *karma bhoomi* (place where you do your karma (good or bad deeds)), Malik Ambar's life is the stuff of (cross-over) movies. After all, he numbered Afghans, Turks, Persians and Central Asians, Portuguese and Britons as friends and enemies, and had 10,000 loyal African troops whom he used to great effect in several Deccan wars. Such was his dominance and wily perseverance that a frustrated Emperor Jehangir apparently actually resorted to racist invective to vent his anger.

To that educated Ethiopian also goes the credit of crafting the shoot-and-scoot guerrilla warfare that the Marathas (whom he mentored) later perfected. Yet today his tomb lies largely forgotten.

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provided. Is it surprising then that he is forgotten by now?

And it is the same story at Ikhlas Khan's tomb at Budaun in Uttar Pradesh. There would be few there (or anywhere) who would know about this Abyssinian noble. This when, in a city like Delhi, even comparatively minor piles of medieval masonry have at least a blue ASI sign, fencing and lights. It is some consolation that the architectural legacy of another African import — Ahmedabad's exquisite Sidi Saiyid mosque with the 'Tree of Life' *jaali* window — is well preserved. But how many know its African connection?

When will an Indian institution wake up to this unusual phase of history and bring it to the notice of the people? ■

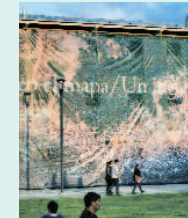


to Generals and Rulers, on till July 6. Contemporary photos of monuments built by and for Africans in India give some indication of their prominent role in those times as do the traditional paintings of African rulers and officials, sourced from private collections and museums in India, England and the US.

The British Library's collection and San Diego Museum of Art's collection of Deccani miniatures are also priceless reminders of this phase of India's history. But legacies of today's African-Indians and their pioneering medieval forebears need



NOBLE VISAGE: Paintings of Malik Raihan alias Ikhlas Khan show him (above) in vestments that speak highly of his power, and (centre) sitting astride a rearing grey charger in full Deccani gear

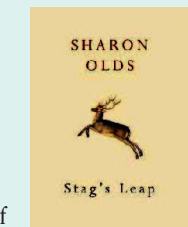


■ Neruda Tribute

The body of the great Chilean poet Pablo Neruda was exhumed last week in order to see if the poet died a natural death or was poisoned by Pinochet's men. The Chinese dissident artist **Ai Weiwei** has made a huge 900-square-meter painting dedicated to the poet. It was unveiled recently in Valparaíso, where Neruda lived. Entitled *A Pablo (To Pablo)*, the painting explores a touchy political issue. It shows dark-toned images of the Senkaku Islands, a small East China Sea archipelago, which are at the center of a bitter territorial dispute between China and Japan. Chinese marine surveillance vessels regularly patrol what Beijing says are its waters around the islands, prompting accusations of territorial incursions by Tokyo. The painting carries a verse from the poem *Cabo de Chile* by the artist's father, Ai Qing, who dedicated the poem to his friend Neruda.

■ Divorce Poetry

The Pulitzer Prize for poetry has gone to **Sharon Olds** for her book of poems, *Stag's Leap*, that explores the anguished months leading to the end of a long marriage. An excerpt from the title poem: *When anyone escapes, my heart leaps up. Even when it's I who am escaped from, I am half on the side of the leaver. It's so quiet, and empty, when he's left. I feel like a landscape, a ground without a figure.* ■



Soup in the studio

Jar your own jam, listen to a Bhupen Khakhar story and taste some cardamom water at this show where food and art meet

AMARDEEP BANERJEE
TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Designers Agat Sharma and Ambika Joshi are busy preparing for their show, an installation that allows viewers to package marmalade. The audience is handed a measure of the fruit preserve, asked to choose from a range of 20 different jars, and finally pick a name for their jam from a hundred different ones.

The objective, says Sharma, is to allow viewers to experience the process of packaging. "There is no larger purpose to this," he says. "We want the audience to come back a little disappointed. There is no message we want to give through this." Sharma and Joshi's installation, called *Food Ontologies*, is part of a multi-disciplinary art exhibition centered round the theme of food being held at the studios of Khoj — International Artists Association, a Delhi-based group dedicated to promoting alternative arts.

The objective of the exhibition is to examine the significance and relevance of food in a socio-cultural context via the medium of art. "Food, besides being a subject of endless passionate discussion within our personal and most intimate lives, has

historically been a significant indicator of our cultural, ecological and social realms," says the exhibition's curator, Asmita Rangari. "Being an intrinsic expression of our cultural identity, food has often been employed as a measure of our standing in society, defining and determining social norms and thereby used as a means for discrimination and oppression."

Catherine McMahon, an artist from New York, will read out a short story by the late contemporary Indian artist, Bhupen Khakhar, called *Maganbhai's Glue*. A charming and comical account of a man trying his hand at different professions like glue-making and catering and failing in all of them, the story also reflects McMahon's experience while planning for this exhibition. "Maganbhai tries his hand at setting up an Indian food joint in the US, which is where the food bit comes in. But the story also reflects my experience here. Like Maganbhai, I stumbled from one idea to another before finally deciding to put up a reading installation," says McMahon, who has a master's degree in history and criticism of art and architecture from MIT.

Netherlands-based Lipika Bansal is writing her PhD thesis on women's



SIMPLE LIVING: Andre Wakko and Mia Morikawa's machine filters water through marble chips, charcoal and sand and then through goji berries and cardamom to infuse it with a distinctive taste; (right) Austrian artist Rainer Prohaska's installation can make French vegetable soup

empowerment at the Delft University of Technology. Her display is about changing food consumption patterns of local communities in the light of modernisation. She has worked with a group of schoolgirls from Khirki village, taking them on field visits, asking them to document household food consumption patterns, or telling them to share their experiences while visiting large convenience stores like Reliance Fresh which have come up around the area. "While on the one hand, consumption patterns are changing, on the other, the ancient knowledge pertaining to food is disappearing," says Bansal, who wants to highlight this dichotomy through her exhibition.

Germany's Andre Wakko and Japan's Mia Morikawa have planned a water-designing process. They filter water using

traditional methods like passing it through marble chips, charcoal, sand and duckweed, and then through goji berries and cardamom to infuse it with a distinctive taste. There are several outlets to allow audiences to taste the water at different stages. "We are applying the principles of ancient ayurveda," says Morikawa, a fashion designer based in India for three years now.

The artist who is most adept at this, though, is the Austrian, Rainer Prohaska. He has designed more than 20 food installations and cooks a French vegetable soup this time. Stoves will be installed in the courtyard, with eight PVC pipes connecting the workstation to foot-bridges above. The audience will chop the vegetables and drop them into the pipes, which will convey them to the cooking station. There are eight different vegetables — potato, carrot, celery, onion, garlic, tomato, green chilli and red pepper — and salt. "It will just be the taste of the vegetables," says Prohaska. "There will be no herbs or spices."

Prohaska's most recent installation was in Toronto last year, where he made two different kinds of breadspread — a Turkish one with finely grained walnut, and an Austrian one, where the main ingredients were cream cheese, onion, garlic and paprika. He explains why he is fascinated by food as a medium: "When you watch a medium like TV, you can see and hear it," he says. "But with food, you can see, smell, taste and touch it. It excites more sense organs." ■

'In Context: public.art.ecology: Food Edition II' be on at Khoj Studios, S-17 Khirkee Extension, New Delhi till April 23, 11 am to 7 pm

