MAI MISRA'S *KHICARI*: REMEMBRANCE AND RITUAL RE-PRESENTATION IN THE SIDI (AFRICAN-INDIAN) SUFI TRADITION OF WESTERN INDIA

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Mai Misra’s *Khicari* is a private, women-only ritual performed in Sidi communities throughout the state of Gujarat and in the city of Mumbai in Maharashtra.¹ This study draws from participant observation research conducted in the city of Ahmedabad in 2017 in order to present Mai Misra’s *Khicari* as a focal point for analyzing spirit mediumship and its historiographic potential in the Sidi Sufi tradition. A preliminary glance at the *khicari* ceremony suggests rich similarities with eastern African traditions of spirit possession such as *ngoma ya masheitani* or *zar* in contemporary Zanzibar and Sudan respectively, a point which anthropologist Helene Basu has explored elsewhere in her pioneering studies of the Sidi Sufi tradition.² Instead of developing this comparative analysis further, this paper draws a single thread from the study of *zar* spirits in order to understand the *khicari* ceremony as a site for communion between the spirits of northeast African Sufi saints and African-Indians of largely southeast African origin who preserve these saints’ legacy. Consonant with Basu’s analysis of symbolic continuity in the Sidi Sufi tradition, which we will explore below, the *khicari* ceremony thus serves as a symbolic point of juncture between what the current scholarly consensus views as two disjointed chapters of the historical narrative of the African diaspora in India.

In combining two Sufi devotional acts, remembrance [*dhikr*] and its consequence, ecstasy [*hal*], the latter in this case denoting spirit possession or the “presence” [*haziri*] of the saint, the *khicari* ceremony facilitates the ritual remembrance and re-presentation—that is, the making present once again—of the Sidi ancestor-saints.³ In this way, the *khicari* ceremony offers a stage for the contemporary reenactment of the historical role of the African Sufi saints of 14th century Gujarat. Aside from the human body, a material medium involved in one particular type of *khicari* ritual underscores the historiographic potential of spirit mediumship in the Sidi Sufi tradition, problematizing the notions of symbolic continuity and historical discontinuity as they are used to characterize the relationship

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¹ I have chosen to exclude diacritical marks and indications of nasalized vowel sounds from transliterated text in this paper.
between Sidi ancestor-saints and descendant-devotees.

This paper ultimately views spirit mediumship in the Sidi Sufi tradition as the means by which the possessor—namely, African Sufi saints who may have been possessed as slaves in their lifetimes—repossesses the historical narrative. For, beyond what is remembered of them in oral histories or written records, it is through spirit mediumship in the Sidi Sufi devotional tradition that these subaltern spirits speak.4

Profile of the Saints

In order to understand the khicari ritual as a site for communion between two historically disjointed legs of the African diaspora in India, we must first outline the profiles of the three primary saints of the “Sidi Rifa’i Silsila [Lineage]” in order to bring the first wave of the African diaspora to India into greater relief.5 The Sidi Rifa’i Silsila is otherwise called the “Lineage of the Order of Bava Gor,” the latter being the title of Sidi Mubarak Nobi, a Nubian remembered variously as a soldier, trader, manumitted slave, and Sufi saint of the Rifa’i Sufi order, who reportedly died in Gujarat as a centenarian in the year 785 AH/1383 CE.6 The genealogy [shajra] of the Rifa’i order housed at the Sufi hospice [khanaqah] and residence of the order’s pir, Kamaluddin Bava, in Baroda, Gujarat traces the “Lineage [silsila] of the Order [tariqa] of Bava Gor.” The document indicates that Bava Gor had received the spiritual authority [khilafat] to initiate disciples into the Rifa’i order, which he passed on to his brother Bava Habash, though not to his sister, Mai Misra. Pir Kamaluddin Bava explains that, as a woman, Mai Misra was unable to receive or pass on the khilafat.7 Nevertheless, she is included in the genealogy because of her status as Bava Gor’s sister and disciple [murid], and because of her great fame as a saint [auliya]. Bava Gor, his brother Bava Habash and his sister Mai Misra thus represent the three primary ancestor-saints of the Sidi Sufi tradition, while the members of Bava Gor’s male entourage and Mai Misra’s seven female friends [saheliya] comprise the remainder of the family of Sidi ancestor-saints.

The death-anniversary celebrations ['urs] of the Sidi ancestor-saints in Ahmedabad also honor Sidi Bashir, the Habshi or Abyssinian slave after whom the famous attraction Sidi Bashir’s mosque is named. The shrine of the Sidi ancestor-saints in Ahmedabad includes memorials to two other Habshi noblemen of the sultanate period in Ahmedabad, Sidi Sahab and Sidi Sultan, as well as to two Habshi figures of Hyderabad, Sidi Sarur and Ma Sadiya. In this way, it becomes

5 Babubhai Sidi, the late shrine-keeper (mujāwar) of theGabban Shah Bava shrine in Kurla, Mumbai, refers to the tradition as the “Sidi Rifa’i Silsila” in his interview with documentary filmmaker Beheroze Shroff. See Voices of the Sidis: Two Documentaries (Irvine, California: 2005).
6 A sign at the entrance to the memorial shrine of the Sidi ancestor-saints in Dongri, Mumbai marks the site as belonging to “The Lineage of the Order of Bava Gor.” This date is drawn from a photocopy of a one-page biography sourced from Khālíf-e Sheikhl Islam by Sayid Nuruddin Ashrafi Curzon. This photocopy is held at the Rifa’i headquarters in Baroda, Gujarat; the complete text is not available at this site. Photograph shared by PhD Candidate Sofia Pequignot of Université Toulouse II Jean Jaurés.
7 The pir’s explanation was shared with me by Sofia Pequignot, personal communication.
clear that the Sidi ancestor-saints are remembered as historical figures who ruled and served in premodern India, often in the capacity of elite courtly or military slaves in the Gujarat and Deccan sultanates.

The historical narrative of Bava Gor, Bava Habash and Mai Misra shed additional light on the history of the Habshi amarat, or the political authority of Indian Muslim military slaves hailing from what is today southern Egypt, the Sudan, Ethiopia, and Somalia. Their names alone encode details about this history: the titles “Habash” and “Misra” refer to Ethiopia and Egypt, indicating that Bava Habash or “Father Ethiopia” and Mai Misra, “Mother Egypt,” arrived in India from these locations. Similarly, historian Edward Alpers observes, “Mubarak is a characteristic Islamic slave name and the suffix Nobi indicates that he was from the Sudan…” In this way, the three primary Sidi ancestor-saints further color what is presently known about northeast African elites in pre-modern India: in addition to serving as soldiers, rulers, concubines, eunuchs and courtiers, including poets and musicians, many were also distinguished Sufis.

**The Khicari Ritual**

From oral histories of the Sidi ancestor-saints, we learn that Mai Misra was an accomplished Rifa’i Sufi, able to perform miracles and defeat a demoness when she was at least seven years old. According to one narrative, her prayers alone were powerful enough to subdue demons. Indeed, another recounts that, in Mai Misra’s days, a woman seeking answers to her prayers would consult the saint, asking her to pray on her behalf. The woman would make a vow [mannat], promising to make an offering to the saint should her prayers be answered. When the woman received what she had prayed for, she would then present Mai Misra with a dish of khicari, lentils and rice cooked together. Mai Misra would have a taste, then send her seven companions to enjoy the rest of the meal, who would then eat together in a closed room. This tradition survives today as Mai Misra’s Khicari ritual.

Today’s khicari ceremony marks the fulfillment of a mannat made by a woman who beseeches Mai Misra from beyond the grave to intercede with God on her behalf. In return, the supplicant promises to sponsor a khicari ceremony when her prayers are answered. A Sidi female ritual specialist at Mai Misra’s shrine mediates this process of communion between the saint and the supplicant; the specialist then presides over the khicari ceremony. Before the ritual begins, its sponsor ties a colorful thread around the right wrist of each participant seated in the room. The same court in Ahmadnagar. For more on the former, see Robbins and McLeod, *African Elites*, 37. Basu details this in “A Gendered Indian Ocean Site,” where she also presents the first ethnographic narrative of a khicari ritual. The following accounts derive from my field research.

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11 Consider Malik Khushnud, the Deccani court poet of Golconda, and Sidi Sa’d, the lyricist of Malik Ambar’s
kind of thread is also found on the stone latticework surrounding Bava Gor’s shrine in Ahmedabad, tied there by various supplicants to represent their mannats. This thread therefore symbolizes the ritual bond that the sponsor’s mannat creates between the Sidi ancestor-saint and the participants of the khicari ceremony. The Sidi ritual specialist then initiates the ceremony by reciting prayers in Arabic, followed by prayers in Hindi-Urdu. Although the leader’s prayers temporally mark the fulfillment of the supplicant’s mannat, this initiatory act of the khicari ritual mirrors Mai Misra’s praying for the supplicant, the intercessory act that commences the mannat as well as the supplicant’s spiritual indebtedness. In this way, the Sidi ritual specialist leading the ceremony essentially mirrors Mai Misra, as seven Sidi women who ritually consume the tray of khicari emulate Mai Misra’s seven companions. And, just as Mai Misra’s seven companions would eat in private, the contemporary khicari ceremony is known as pardewali, indicating a ritual which takes place entirely while seated. The performance then proceeds with shorter, faster songs generally belonging to the subgenre of khadi or standing dhammal, although the ritual as I observed it in Ahmedabad takes place entirely while seated.14 The lyrics of most of these jikar celebrate Mai Misra, invoking her presence with such coaxing as “Jhulta ao Mari... Khelo ne Mama?” (Come swinging, Mother... Play, won’t you Mama?)

The Sufi practice of dhikr, especially when set to music in contexts of ritual audition [sama’], may culminate in ecstatic states of trance [hal]. Accordingly, soon after singing several jikar, women begin to enter trance [hal]. Mai Misra swiftly embodies one woman, in an experience which one spirit medium describes simply: “Mai Misra ni haziri ave che. (Mai Misra’s presence [haziri] comes.)”16 In a Shakkarwali Khicari or Sugared Khicari ritual I observed, a category of khicari ceremony that is...
sponsored by a Sidi woman, one of Mai Misra’s seven saheliya, Itarewali Ma, also embodied a participant. At this point, the dhammal performance stopped so that participants could hear the saints speak. Although all women’s heads had been covered during the ritual, the faces of the two women in hal were veiled once the saints arrived. This was so that onlookers would not conflate the identity of the possessed woman with that of the saint after the ritual; it was also intended to honor the saints, as women of high status traditionally observed the rules of purdah. Mai Misra and Itarewali Ma held question-and-answer [sawal-jawab] sessions with the women, speaking individually with whomever engaged them. Mai Misra placed her hands over each woman’s head, praying for her or softly offering counsel. Itarewali Ma was more expressive, wailing out her counsel, including admonitions, for all the women to hear, whom she addressed as her own saheliya, or companions. The environment bristled with a sense of intimate familiarity and intense catharsis; many of the women gathered began to weep.

While Itarewali Ma counseled the women on one side of the room, Mai Misra interacted with the others. She asked for a lemon, wrapped it in cloth, and offered it to one woman as a means of binding negative spirits, presumably in the home. Before Mai Misra departed, she was fed ashes from the incense, as well as a few sips of black coffee from a cup that had been set aside, next to a separate cup of milk and a tray filled with fruit. The ritual specialist shared that Mai Misra was treated to these items just as one offers refreshments to a guest. The coffee was her particular “cup” [pyala]; every Sidi ancestor-saint has his or her own distinct pyala, or distinctive drink. Shortly thereafter, Mai Misra departed, concluding the woman’s trance-possession state and the ritual.

With this, the participants then distributed fruit from the tray next to Mai Misra’s pyala, which was also passed around so that everyone could imbibe the remnants of the coffee which she had sipped. The fruit and coffee were tabarruk, food blessed by the presence of the saint. Although the Shakkarwali Khicari ritual as a rule involves Sidi women participants only, the fruit could be distributed outside of the community, though only for consumption by other women. Participants were offered their own cups of hot coffee, and remained sitting, eating the fruit and chatting long after the ritual’s close.

**Comparison with Zar**

Significant parallels emerge between the khicari ritual and ceremonial spirit possession in East African contexts, such as zar in contemporary Ethiopia and Sudan, in which predominantly women participate. The events of the khicari ritual parallel those of a contemporary Sudanese zar ceremony called a karama, “a thanksgiving event or offering on occasions of good fortune” which involves consumption of a large pot of porridge, fumigation with frankincense, and drumming and singing which sparks possession by various kinds of spirits. The events of both the khicari ceremony and the Sudanese karama ritual pause whenever the call-to-prayer [azan] sounds. Furthermore, in the context of Sudanese zar, “the idiom of possession is distinctly that of guest and host,” in that the possessed woman must learn to accommodate

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19 Kenyon, *Spirits and Slaves in Central Sudan*, 76.
the zar spirit as her lifelong guest. This idiom of hospitality towards one’s spirit-guest emerges in the part of the ritual that involves feeding Mai Misra her pyala of coffee and a pinch of ashes from the incense. Holy ash, flower petals adorning the saints’ tombs, and the saints’ pyala are sacred substances that devotees ingest in specific ritual contexts outside of the khicari ceremony. Like the threads tied around the shrine latticework and the wrists of participants of the khicari ceremony, these material media symbolize and solidify ritual relationships between saints and devotees. The Pyala Pilana (“cup-feeding”) ceremony, to which we will now turn, offers another instance of this, illustrating the way in which symbolic linkages forged during ritual override the historical discontinuity between Sidi ancestor-saints and descendant-devotees.

**Historical Discontinuity, Symbolic Continuity, and the Pyala Pilana Ceremony**

Rather than explore the rich terrain of parallels between the khicari ceremony and eastern African rituals of spirit mediumship in ngoma or zar traditions, at present it suffices to draw one thread from the study of zar spirits to illuminate the khicari ritual as a window to the historiographic potential of spirit mediumship in the Sidi Sufi tradition. This thread is the fact that zar spirits, like ngoma spirits in Zanzibar, generally represent various ethnic groups that have passed through the region historically; they do not necessarily possess people of their own ethnic origin. The zar performance, then, is an exercise in negotiating degrees of foreignness and familiarity between spirits and those they embody. Applying this principle to the spirits invoked in the khicari ritual, we may begin to explore the notion of historical discontinuity between the African Sufi saints and their African Indian shrine-keepers, ritual practitioners, and devotees.

Considering “the diverse routes and historical circumstances Africans coming from different backgrounds took or were forced to take at different times in history,” Helene Basu posits that “[t]here can thus be no historical continuity expected between those Sidi living in present-day Gujarat and those who acted in former times.” As relatively few African women were brought into India during the pre-modern period, it is understood that the Habshi elite generally intermarried with local populations; this, along with an end to the demand for Habshi military slaves with the collapse of Deccani sultanates such as Ahmadnagar and Bijapur in the 17th century, resulted in the Habshis’ disappearance as a distinct class in the Deccan by the 18th century. Instead, the historical record suggests that contemporary Sidi communities largely descend from Bantu peoples of southeast Africa, whose dispersal into Portuguese India began in the 16th century and, “after peaking in the seventeenth century… continued well into

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20 Ibid., 78.
21 Basu, “A Gendered Indian Ocean Site,” 238-239, 244.
the nineteenth century.²⁴ By the mid-18th century, Gujarati merchants had begun to export African captives from Mozambique to Portuguese territories on the western Indian coast, a fact which is attested by Sidi surnames such as Makwa or Myava, which refer to the Makua and Yao ethno-linguistic groups of southeastern Africa, especially Mozambique.²⁵ Scholars therefore understand contemporary Sidi communities as descending from the latter wave of African dispersals in India, rather than from the former.

While relating that the Sidi ancestor-saints are construed as Dada or Dadi-Ma, Grandfathers and Grandmothers of the Sidi community, Basu suggests that “few people assume ’real descent’” from them.²⁶ Rather, this genealogical relationship is understood in terms of ritual or symbolic kinship.²⁷ Thus, in the 19th century, the shrine of Bava Gor became a safe haven for fugitive, freed and enslaved Africans in Gujarat, who established a community of ritual practitioners [faqirs] by forging spiritual lineages of descent from the saints.²⁸ By way of such rituals as the Pyala Pilana ceremony, the initiation rite of the Sidi Rifa’i Silsila, the Sidi Sufi tradition establishes symbolic continuity between African Sufi saints as historical figures who lived in 14th century India, and an Indian community descending from Africans who arrived in the subcontinent more recently in Indian history.²⁹

The Pyala Pilana rite is performed subsequent to the initiation of new Rifa’i Sufi murids and mirrors it. During the Rifa’i ceremony, initiates drink from the same cup as the Rifa’i pir, touching their lips to the same place on the cup from which the pir had drunk. By this act, the pir transmits some of his charisma [barakat] to the initiate, establishing a spiritual bond with the latter.³⁰ Following this, a new murid of the Rifa’i order may choose to be inducted into the Sidi Rifa’i Silsila via the Pyala Pilana ceremony. The initiate then selects a Sidi murshid to administer [pilana, “to cause someone to drink”] the pyala of a particular African Sufi ancestor-saint. The murshid first drinks from the cup of the ancestor-saint with which he himself became linked during his initiation, then administers this cup to his initiate, who may be male or female. The initiate thus becomes a “pakka pyala” [“complete cup”], with the ability to


²⁶ Basu, “Slave, Soldier, Trader, Faqir,” 244.

²⁷ Ibid., 243.


enter into a state of possession simply upon remembering the ancestor-saint.

Similarly, participants of certain spirit mediumship rituals in the Sidi Sufi tradition usually drink some rendering of the cup of the ancestor-saints as niyaz or tabarruk, an item of food or drink that has been offered to the saints and is therefore blessed by them. The most striking instance of this, according to my field research experience, takes place during the Shakkarwali Khicari, as described above. The act of ingesting Mai Misra’s *pyala* of black coffee, which had been blessed by her presence as she drank from it during possession, mirrors the *Pyala Pilana* ceremony, which in turn recreates the act of drinking after the Rifa‘i *pir* in order to become his *murid*. This reflects Basu’s hypothesis of symbolic continuity of spiritual lineage between the ancestor-saints and their contemporary “descendants,” who hail from different waves of the African diaspora to India.

However, this closing act of the *Shakkarwali Khicari* also problematizes the lack of historicity presupposed by the notion of symbolic continuity. Offering the embodied Mai Misra her cup, then offering this cup to all participants may in fact preserve the ritual by which African Rifa‘i saints initiated their own *murids* in the 14th century. In this way, Mai Misra could have informally initiated her seven companions or other women as unofficial disciples, a point kept out of the written historical record, since Mai Misra, though a powerful saint in her own right, could not receive or give the *khilafat* as a woman. The *Shakkarwali Khicari* may therefore illuminate an obscure facet of the intertwined histories of the Rifa‘i Sufi order and the African diaspora in India, underscoring the historiographic potential of ritual acts which denote symbolic continuity.

Furthermore, the invocation of the Sidi ancestor-saints’ embodied presence via possession symbolizes historical continuity by facilitating the re-enactment of these African Sufi saints’ historical roles as teachers and spiritual guides in 14th-century Gujarat. The spirit-mediumship rituals by which these saints are re-presented (or made present once again) symbolically or actually, depending on perspective, allow them to resume such historical roles through ritual communication, such as *sawal-jawab*, during which they counsel devotees and pray for them. Viewed symbolically, such rituals are a form of devotion which allow devotees to re-perform the saints’ historical roles in tribute to them.

**Conclusion**

By facilitating African Sufi saints’ embodiment of Sidi ritual practitioners and devotees, the *khicari* ritual therefore serves not only as a symbolic point of union between the two supposedly disjointed waves of African dispersals in India, but provides historical continuity between them. Through its engagement of the Sufi modes of remembrance [*dhikr*] and ecstasy [*hal*], the latter construed in terms of the presence [*haziri*] of a possessing saint during mediumship, the contemporary *khicari* ceremony serves as a stage for the ritual remembrance and re-presentation of the African Sufi saint Mai Misra and any of her seven female companions. On this stage, the reenactment of their historical roles in the landscape of 14th century Gujarat occurs on two levels. First, the Sidi ritual practitioner who manages the supplicant’s *mannat* and presides over the ceremony performs Mai Misra’s historical role, as the seven Sidi women who ritually consume the *khicari* engage in the act historically performed by Mai Misra’s seven
companions. Secondly, spirit mediumship allows the saints to embody these ritual actors, through whom they re-perform their historical roles as living Sufi saints, and, as women, unofficial guides and teachers in the tariqa.

The Shakkarwali Khicari may provide a window into Mai Misra’s informal initiations of female disciples during her lifetime in 14th century Gujarat, illuminating a spiritual lineage absent from the written textual record, but active during the khicari ceremony. For, the participants’ consumption of the contents of the cup from which [the woman possessed by] Mai Misra has drunk recreates a pyala pilana ceremony on site, signifying the act of “taking tariqa” in the Sidi Rifa’i silsila from Mai Misra herself. In this way, the material medium of Mai Misra’s cup forges a symbolic linkage with Mai Misra that may in fact bear significant historiographic potential. The historical and contemporary agents simultaneously understood to be at work in the khicari ritual thus invite us to problematize the accepted historical narrative concerning Mai Misra’s role as a Sufi saint in 14th century Gujarat, as well as the notions of symbolic continuity and historical discontinuity between the two.

What of the scholarly consensus concerning the historical divide between the waves of the African diaspora in India, which the Sidi ancestor-saints and the contemporary Sidi community represent? One jikar acknowledges this historical disjuncture and the positioning of Bava Gor and his shrine as a center of gravity to which Africans, enslaved and free, throughout Gujarat were drawn to form community. The jikar exclaims:

\[ \text{Dom Gori Badshah Makua le le} \\
\text{Take Gori Badshah’s help,} \\
\text{Makua} \\
\text{Ashara Allah ka Makua le le} \\
\text{Makua} \\
\text{Take Allah’s help, Makua. Take it, Makua}^{31} \]

This jikar addresses a Makua man or woman, enticing him or her to receive the help available from God, by way of the African Sufi saint Bava Gor. Its composer knew enough about the Africans in the region to know one of the ethnicities attested among them; perhaps its singer, too, was a Makua. Perhaps the composer was a lead ritual musician [nangasi] at the shrine of Bava Gor, the keeper of the entire, largely oral corpus of jikar. Reportedly, the nangasi-ship is a hereditary role that Sidis alone have occupied since the time of Bava Gor, marking the historical continuity of at least this ritual lineage. Yet, given the historical divide between ancestor-saints and descendant-devotees, how could Sidis have exclusively perpetuated this lineage since the time of Bava Gor?

The overlap between the decline of the Deccan Sultanates and the disappearance of their Habshi elite as a distinct class from the 17th-18th centuries, and the more numerous influx of Bantu peoples from the 17th century onward suggests that historic continuity in lineage may have been possible via intermarriage.\(^{32}\) The city of Ahmedabad

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\(^{31}\) I accessed Amy Catlin-Jairazbhoy’s and Nazir Ali Jairazbhoy’s recording of this jikar at the Archives and Research Center for Ethnomusicology (ARCE) of the American Institute of Indian Studies. This translation is my own.

\(^{32}\) It is possible that East Africans from the hinterlands of the Swahili coast also acted alongside those from
provides a key location for assessing this: its Sidi inhabitants claim to have lived in a compound on the grounds of Bava Gor’s shrine for six or seven centuries, and to have followed for generations the same routes during ‘urs processions to Old City sites which reflect the history of the Habshi elite of Ahmedabad’s Sultanate period.

Future research will address the degree of disjuncture between the waves of the African diaspora to India, as represented by the Sidi ancestor-saints and the contemporary Sidi community. At present, it suffices to observe the historiographic potential of the khicari ceremony, which lies in its provision of a meeting space at which the spirits of African women saints of 14th century Gujarat provide guidance and counsel to the African-Indian women ritual practitioners and devotees who keep their shrines and traditions. Sawal-jawab sessions provide a forum for historical personalities, about whom oral texts are remembered and academic texts are published, to seize the opportunity to speak. Most times, they speak about the sawalis, their interlocutors, but on rare occasions, they speak about themselves.33 It is thus during spirit mediumship in the Sidi Sufi devotional tradition that we may stop to hear subaltern spirits speak.

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northeast Africa in northern and western India as early as the 15th century. The Portuguese expulsion of enslaved Africans to India from Mozambique was already active in the 16th and 17th centuries. See Machado, Ocean of Trade, 215, 248.


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