

Malik Ambar: The Legacy of an Ethiopian Ruler in India

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Ali, O.H. (2011, August 20). Malik Ambar: The legacy of an Ethiopian ruler in India. *The Reporter*. Retrieved from <http://www.thereporterethiopia.com/Living-and-The-Arts/malik-ambar-the-legacy-of-an-ethiopian-ruler-in-india.html>

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Article:

Among the tens of thousands of men, women, and children captured in Africa and sold into slavery in the Middle East and India was an Ethiopian of fierce determination: Malik Ambar. Born Chapu in 1548 in Harar, where the Ethiopian highlands meet the desert stretching to the Red Sea, Ambar (as he was later called) was stripped of his family, his name, and forever taken from his homeland. Nevertheless, half a century later, and halfway around the world, he had transformed himself into a king-maker in India's Deccan, leading the most powerful military force against Mughal rule.

Traveling first by caravan, and then by dhow, the young Ambar was taken across the Red Sea to the port of Mocha in southern Arabia (Yemen). He was re-sold and sent to Baghdad, where he was educated before finally being sent to India to serve Chengiz Khan, the Regent Minister of the Sultan of Nizam Shai in Ahmadnagar. For twenty years, the Ethiopian, now a Muslim, loyally served Khan, an Ethiopian like himself who converted to Islam, but unlike Ambar, was no longer enslaved. Over this period Ambar assumed increasing amounts of responsibility in the Nizam's court, where he observed and learned about diplomacy and military strategy and organization-experiences he carried into the next long period of his life as a free man.

Upon his master's death, Ambar was manumitted, launching one of the most formidable careers in the political history of the Deccan. Initially working as a mercenary in the region, by 1595, he commanded a cavalry force of 150 men, and began amassing a rebel army, which quickly grew into the thousands. By 1600 the African, now a full-fledged mercenary general, emerged as the leading figure in the resistance movement against the spread of northern imperial rule in the Deccan. Defeating in battle the armies of not one, but two Mughal emperors-Akbar and Jahangir-for more than a quarter of a century Ambar's armies were the envy and pride of those fighting attempted Mughal occupation in the southern part of India.

By 1620, Ambar was at the head of an army of fifty-thousand men-forty thousand Marathas (Hindu warriors) and ten thousand Habshi (fellow Africans).by then he had already installed two young princes to the Nizam's throne in succession, each time making himself regent Minister, and, unlike his former master, functioning as de facto ruler. Ambar's military genius was unsurpassed. The unusual alliances Ambar forged along India's western coast with the African-

descended sailors-turned rulers of Janjira island, his innovative techniques in guerilla warfare, and his use of British artillery, not only kept the Mughals from pressing into the southern half of India during his lifetime, but endlessly frustrated the empire's rulers, who variously referred to their indomitable foe as the "rebel of black fortune."

In time, Ambar founded a model city, Khadki (the future site of Aurangabad), where he built several palaces, developed an irrigation system, patronized Hindu and Muslim craftsmen and artists (including the great portrait artist Hashim), and married his daughter and son into the families of Indian nobility—thus integrating Africans into elite south Asian society. When Ambar died in 1626, he was known across the Deccan as one of the greatest leaders of the day. His life and legend inspired later rebels against Mughal rule, most notably the Maratha king Shivaji, the grandson of Maloji, who had long served as Ambar's right-hand man half a century earlier. The extraordinary life of Ambar — an Ethiopian slave turned ruler in India — forms part of the broader story of forced and free migration among Africans who journeyed to India long before the advent of the much better known transatlantic forced migration of Africans to the Americas. The Migration of Africans across the Indian Ocean world, which began as early as the second century B.C., was greatly enhanced with the rise and spread of Islam after the seventh century, which provided opportunities for upward social mobility for the enslaved and people of African descent, generally. It was in the ever-expanding Muslim world that Ambar could rise from slave to ruler; a phenomenon seldom seen in other parts of the world. Islam allowed for such transformations of status for more than just Ambar, as witnessed by his own master Khan, a Muslim and former slave himself, Africans served as soldiers, as well as sailors, and worked as merchants across the Indian Ocean, and formed part of the societies both on the coasts and the interiors.

The Ethiopian's contributions to the making of the African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean world are only just beginning to be more widely known, even as pioneering scholars from Jogindra Chowdhuri and Radhey Shyem to Richard Pankhurst and Richard Eaton have been helping to illuminate aspects of the Ethiopian Diaspora for decades. Malik Ambar — along with Bilal ibn Rabah (Islam's first muezzin) and Bava Ghor (a merchant and Sufi mystic) — serves as an exemplar of contributions by Ethiopians to the societies, economies, and cultures of the Arabian Peninsula, southern Iraq and Iran, the Indian subcontinent, and beyond.

Ed's Note: Omar H. Ali, Ph.D., is Associate Professor of African American and Diaspora Studies at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro. He wrote the narrative for the exhibit "The African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean World" for the Schomburg Centre for research in black culture in New York. The online exhibit may be viewed at <http://exhibitions.nypl.org/africansindianocean/index2.php>.