Africa (2025), **95**, 258–277
doi:10.1017/S0001972025101216

IAI AFRICA

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Transits of objects and people: traces of histories that connect the Africana Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds

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Abstract

This article aims to expand the epistemological limits of the Indian Ocean by examining distinct examples that link the African and Indian worlds through objects, media and unconventional trajectories of exchange. While the histories of trade, migration and the circulation of objects between India and Africa, and along the western Indian Ocean rim, have been studied extensively, this article focuses on minor transnational circulations that compel us to reimagine African–Indian exchanges. In other words, I trace the transits of objects to emphasize non-linear mobilities, other networks, and rhizomatic imaginations of Africa and India that connect distant places and practices. First, I look at the arrival of African saints in western India during pre-modern times and their intertwined histories with precolonial empires and the Indian Ocean slave trade. Trade items and ritual objects associated with these saints connect them to terrains of exchange in the Misr (Egypt), Al-Habash (Ethiopia) and Nubia (Sudan and Nile Valley) regions, all important nodes that linked West Africa and the Indian Ocean through complex trans-Sahelian networks of traders, pilgrims and enslaved people. I then examine the circulation of trade goods, such as beads, textiles and umbrellas, that were produced in India for West African markets during the transatlantic slave trade, illustrating how colonial transcontinental networks used objects from the Indian Ocean to support their Atlantic enterprises through a complex system of commodity exchanges. The central objective is to demonstrate how lesser-known processes of circulation and transversal ontologies reveal the fraught and interconnected histories of the Africana Atlantic and Indian Ocean universe.

Résumé

Cet article vise à élargir les limites épistémologiques de l'océan Indien en examinant des exemples distincts reliant les mondes africain et indien à travers des objets, des médias et des trajectoires d'échange non conventionnelles. L'histoire des échanges commerciaux, des migrations et de la circulation des objets entre l'Inde et l'Afrique, ainsi que le long de la côte occidentale de l'océan Indien, ayant été largement étudiée, cet article se concentre sur des circulations transnationales mineures qui nous obligent à réimaginer les échanges

afro-indiens. Autrement dit, l'auteur retrace les transits d'objets pour mettre en valeur les mobilités non linéaires, d'autres réseaux et des imaginaires rhizomatiques d'Afrique et d'Inde qui relient des lieux éloignés et des pratiques. Il s'intéresse d'abord à l'arrivée de saints africains en Inde occidentale à l'époque prémoderne et à leurs histoires étroitement liées aux empires précoloniaux et à la traite des esclaves dans l'océan Indien. Les objets commerciaux et rituels associés à ces saints les relient à des terrains d'échange dans les régions de Misr (Égypte), d'Al-Habash (Éthiopie) et de Nubie (Soudan et vallée du Nil), toutes des noeuds importants qui reliaient l'Afrique de l'Ouest et l'océan Indien à travers des réseaux trans-sahéliens complexes de commerçants, de pèlerins et d'esclaves. L'auteur examine ensuite la circulation des biens commerciaux, tels que les perles, les textiles et les parapluies, qui étaient produits en Inde pour les marchés d'Afrique de l'Ouest pendant la traite transatlantique des esclaves, illustrant comment les réseaux transcontinentaux coloniaux utilisaient des objets de l'océan Indien pour soutenir leurs entreprises atlantiques à travers un système complexe d'échanges de marchandises. L'objectif central est de démontrer comment des processus de circulation et des ontologies transversales moins connus révèlent les histoires chargées et interconnectées de l'univers *africana* de l'océan Atlantique et de l'océan Indien.

Resumo

Este artigo pretende expandir os limites epistemológicos do Oceano Índico, examinando exemplos distintos que ligam os mundos africano e indiano através de objectos, meios de comunicação e trajectórias de intercâmbio não convencionais. Embora as histórias do comércio, da migração e da circulação de objectos entre a Índia e a África, e ao longo da orla ocidental do Oceano Índico, tenham sido amplamente estudadas, este artigo centra-se em pequenas circulações transnacionais que nos obrigam a reimaginar as trocas afro-indianas. Por outras palavras, traço os trânsitos de objectos para realçar mobilidades não lineares, outras redes e imaginações rizomáticas de África e da Índia que ligam lugares e práticas distantes. Em primeiro lugar, analiso a chegada dos santos africanos à Índia ocidental durante os tempos pré-modernos e as suas histórias entrelaçadas com os impérios pré-coloniais e o comércio de escravos no Oceano Índico. Os artigos de comércio e os objectos rituais associados a estes santos ligam-nos a terrenos de troca nas regiões de Misr (Egito), Al-Habash (Etiópia) e Núbia (Sudão e Vale do Nilo), todos eles nós importantes que ligavam a África Ocidental ao Oceano Índico através de complexas redes trans saheliana de comerciantes, peregrinos e pessoas escravizadas. Em seguida, examino a circulação de bens comerciais, como missangas, têxteis e guarda-chuvas, produzidos na Índia para os mercados da África Ocidental durante o comércio transatlântico de escravos, ilustrando como as redes transcontinentais coloniais utilizaram objectos do Oceano Índico para apoiar as suas empresas atlânticas através de um complexo sistema de trocas de mercadorias. O objetivo central é demonstrar como os processos de circulação menos conhecidos e as ontologias transversais revelam as histórias complexas e interligadas do universo africano do Atlântico e do Oceano Índico.

Transits of people carrying a variety of goods across the Indian Ocean and along the trans-Saharan trade routes have historically shaped African–Indian relational exchanges and created opportunities for communities far from African and Indian coastal geographies to conceive and produce imaginaries about each other. From pre-modern times, locations in Africa were connected to multiple other places, with

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972025101216 Published online by Cambridge University Press

objects serving as important sources that mediated knowledge about Africa and India. This article triangulates various corridors, commodities and agents that link the Indian Ocean worlds with West Africa and Africa south of the Saharan desert at different points in time to explore how encounters with diverse mediums create multifaceted dimensions of Africa(n)–India(n) understanding. To investigate the *longue durée* history of connectedness shaped by objects, I examine the arrival of African saints in western India during pre-modern times and their subsequent histories entwined with trade items that connect these saints to exchange terrains in Misr, Al-Habash and Nubia, all significant nodes of trans-Sahelian trade extending into West Africa. I then analyse the colonial circulation of trade goods such as beads, textiles and umbrellas produced in India for West African markets during the transatlantic slave trade, illustrating how transcontinental networks link Atlantic world slavery with the Indian Ocean through a complex system of commodity exchanges. Finally, I explore the transformation of some of these trade goods into objects imbued with power, prestige and ritualistic value to discuss how these repurposed items represent Africa's connections with India, as specific places and memories become attached to the identities of these objects.

Although these case studies are spatiotemporally distinct, spanning from precolonial to postcolonial times, and involve different practices and objects, they chart the scope of inquiry required to review India's relationship with regions in West Africa and Africa south of the Sahara. These compelling examples of India's connections (rhizomatic, obscure, oceanic, overland) with Africa also illustrate the sensory modes through which people encountered the African and Indian Ocean worlds, regardless of direct contacts and journeys. This duality simultaneously complicates our understanding of the term 'Afro-Indian' or 'Afro-India' relations. The purpose of mapping African–Indian connections, shaped by materials, non-human agents and unscripted processes, is to demonstrate that African–Indian affinities have been created and recreated through complex material transactions since pre-modern times. When we examine the history of African migration to India alongside the exchanges of commodities between India, the Horn of Africa and West Africa, we observe not just a complex link between materialities and mobilities but also a relational intervention where cultural objects and forces influence the formation of African–Indian relations before and after empire and throughout globalization.

While the Indian Ocean networks and systems of exchange connected India with East African ports for centuries, itinerant travellers and the objects they carried across the Sahelian routes fostered an early connection with regions south of the Saharan desert, though minor in scale. Scholars including Ralph Austen (2010) and Ghislaine Lydon (2009), in exploring the caravan trade and the complex commodity exchange systems of the Sahara, have emphasized the expansiveness of the trans-Saharan trade that flourished with the spread of Islam. The Sahelian terrain and its pathways became significant transit portals for goods from the Indian Ocean. For instance, the transnational circulation of Indian trade objects such as beads through the Red Sea ports to sub-Saharan centres became vital to the formation of an African–Indian imaginary for the African-descent community in India. The arrival of African mystics and bead traders in Gujarat from regions south of the Sahara challenges the often explored history of African–Indian interactions channelled through Swahili ports and by trading diasporas such as the Gujaratis and Hadhramis. These migrations

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of African bead traders also added new locations beyond the littoral geographies, thereby demonstrating the interconnectedness of the Indian Ocean with inland trade centres in Africa. The history of the circulation of beads from Gujarat to Africa and the association of agate mining and bead making in Cambay with African saints represent a 'minor-to-minor' transnational relationship (Lionnet and Shih 2005) driven by minority agents. On the one hand, the arrival of African saints and entrepreneurs to western India and the influx of Indian materialities into African worlds meant that people on both continents began to perceive distant places through various objects and practices. On the other hand, a range of African–Indian sensoria was cultivated through ritual labour, embodied practices, arts, performances and essential storytelling.

One can argue that African–Indian relations and affinities are not merely defined by empire or formed by nation states; they were and are also shaped by people and their desire for cultural consumption, artistic recreation, spatial imagination and meaning making. In this sense, affective alliances are fostered through sensory experiences and the process of liking and consuming common interests such as textiles, popular culture, religious practices and texts, as well as by borrowing and adapting diverse materials and cultural fragments. The social connectedness nurtured through objects and other media has long facilitated affective solidarities between Indians and Africans as they enjoyed, produced and altered media to suit their market value, cultural needs and tastes (cf. Drewal 2008; Larkin 1997; Rush 2019; 2008; Young 2017). These African–Indian relations create meaning as people perceive each other through material, performative and aesthetic modes, and these affective solidarities, as Jean-François and Jeychandran argue, need to be analysed beyond the frameworks of empire and postcolonial non-aligned connection networks (see Jean-François and Jeychandran 2022).

In other words, by focusing on the transfer of goods, ideas and practices, I present different living imaginaries of African–Indian synergies and minor histories of affective bonding, thereby moving away from discussions of African–Indian non-aligned solidarity, political economy and even diaspora to reveal other ways in which Africa and India meet, with a particular focus on West Africa's connection with the Indian Ocean and western India. In doing so, I do not venture to answer questions such as what is African or Indian in the Indian Ocean and Atlantic spaces, nor do I address how Africa fuses, allies or coexists with India. Rather, I show the long-ignored histories of circulations that intimately linked distant geographies during precolonial empires, colonialism, and in the postcolonial global South. Additionally, in connecting the Atlantic with the Indian Ocean, my intention is not to flatten out the complex histories of colonialism, slavery and African diasporic practices in the two spaces, because the Indian Ocean differs from the world making of the Afro-Atlantic spaces. Furthermore, in studying Sidi histories, I treat these communities as African-descent communities and/or people of African heritage rather than as an African diaspora, since these ethnic groups are rooted in their regional cultures and can be deemed rightfully as African–Indian communities who retain some legacies of African pasts, are imbued with Indian Oceanic cultural memories and selectively repurpose them to fit contemporary socio-political demands. It is important to underscore that an Afro-Atlantic framing of Sidi memories is not directly borrowed here to unravel histories of forced migration, as

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consciousness of African-descent communities in India is different and offers a new sensibility of African mobility and historical distance/difference.

In revisiting the much studied histories of mobilities and the movement of goods between India and Africa, I also take a slightly different approach to im/materiality and bring together non-humans (i.e. jinns, animate objects and objects with power) and their agency, which fostered affective relations even for those who did not move. I also deploy transit (Byrd 2011) as a framework to unpack the merging of mobile goods, pathways and places to make sense of other constituents and realms that anchor African–Indian exchanges. More than 'migration', the concept of transit can inform us about non-linear and other forms of movement – real and re-enacted – and other kinds of movers – non-humans, objects and embodied knowledge. More than 'exchange', transit can help us look beyond movements governed by larger ideological structures and the commercial aspect of trade in the oceanic South towards sites of temporary anchorage and intercultural influences that are not temporally and spatially bound. More than 'diaspora', transit provides a novel framework for an enhanced understanding of communities of African descent in the Indian Ocean as African migrations towards India spanned centuries and followed diverse and multi-directional routes.

A transit-based approach also facilitates embedding a material turn to trace how Africa and India are represented and diffused through things, while situating new epistemological conversations within African–Asian and Indian Ocean studies. Furthermore, transit as an analytical category opens up the possibility of examining otherworldly realms and spirit geographies where Africa and India converge in the Indian Ocean and Atlantic worlds, enhancing our understanding of existing theorizations of Black oceanic geographies and histories of Black people. Here, I adopt the term 'Black people' from scholars who have utilized it to refer to a modern, socially constructed group that includes Africans and interracial communities (cf. Derbew 2022). The purpose is also to trace how Africans (i.e. ordinary people, mystics and spirit beings) have informed and crafted Indian Ocean world making, as they are often omitted from the histories of Indian Ocean mobilities and networks. As Michael Rummore has noted, there is not only an imbalance in representing Black African movement in the Indian Ocean, but also a challenge in defining what is African and 'un-African', as such categorizations build on colonial taxonomies of racial understanding (Rummore 2022: 284). In other words, the overall intention is to illustrate how contemporaneous African–Indian affinities and imaginaries, connected through material, ritualistic and creative practices, help us untangle older genealogies of knowledge that are lopsided and problematic in order to reclaim shared Black histories of the Atlantic and Indian Oceans that are fragmented, non-linear, non-textual, intimate and sensorial.

Aside from the plurality of oceanic worlds, this article also brings together different methodologies, such as archival and ethnographic research conducted in the West African countries of Ghana and Togo. That includes drawing on sources beyond formal archives, such as performances, oral histories and rituals, to ascribe agency to people in order to understand discontinuous histories of African–Indian exchanges. In West Africa, my conversations with local artists, chiefs and residents from Elmina and Cape Coast in Ghana and Lomé in Togo informed my intellectual approaches. As I attempted to make sense of the fragmented history of African

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972025101216 Published online by Cambridge University Press

mobilities towards India, I turned to performative memory, including the communal articulation of histories through Sidi ritual repertoires. I am indebted to the late Sidi matriarch Rumanaben, an *ustadi* (master artist), who has helped preserve the hagiographies of Africans through her recitation and teaching of Sidi *zikrs* or prayers. As alternative archives, the performed historiographies and material texts not only address the historical voids in colonial and vernacular archives but also illustrate that repositories retain stories of African–Indian exchanges that are plural.

Of a different kind of African–Indian encounter and imagination

When we pay attention to the material histories of the Indian Ocean, it becomes evident that regular people have driven and shaped transcontinental connections beyond the forces of colonialism and non-aligned nation states and their representatives. Ordinary individuals have fostered African–Indian imaginaries that are nuanced, speculative and intimate, differing significantly from the assumptions and desires professed by West African leaders such as Léopold Senghor and Kwame Nkrumah. While much has been said about African–Indian connections, we rarely ask how various media and materialities influence ordinary contemporary African–Indian imagination and world making, as most studies examine these relations through the lens of nation states, non-alignment, diaspora and oceanic cosmopolitanism (Aiyar 2015; Achenbach *et al*. 2020; Harris 1971; Jayasuriya and Pankhurst 2003; Hofmeyr 2007; 2012). The contemporary African imaginary of India and the Indian imagination of Africa do not necessarily originate from broader South–South globalization and infrastructural projects, nor from the Afro-Asian postcolonial accords defined by nation states and political figures; rather, they are driven by media, religious practices, performances, objects, labour, and the movements of humans and non-human agents who activate the connected histories of the two continents. As ordinary people nurture African–Indian affinities and imaginaries, they interpret Africa–India through a variety of materials (textiles, beads, shrines), visual media (performances, rituals, films, art), and mediums (spirit mediums, adepts, ritual specialists). In other words, in contemporary times, a diverse range of knowledge economies mediates African–Indian affinity as various individuals engage with different media, meet in intermediary spaces, and share migrant living and working environments in the global South.

Although the story of African saints' migration to India (discussed later in the article) is one instance of early minor transnational exchanges, such forms of African–Indian exchange, I argue, help us reimagine discourses on what constitutes 'Afro-India', an often used term that is broad and equally fuzzy. Before unpacking African–Indian crossovers, it is thus necessary to delve into the heuristic dimension of the very term 'Afro-India' and the academic rendering of the concept of Afro-India(n). 'Afro-Indian' and/or 'Afro-India' as a concept is often treated as a universal heuristic category, like the 'Afro-Atlantic' (Trouillot 2002), without much unpacking of how the term is read culturally in different contexts. While African–Indian connections in many academic debates represent partnerships or aspects of cultural sharing (Tan and Acharya 2008; Hawley 2008; Mawdsley and McCann 2011; Achenbach *et al*. 2020; King and Venkatachalam 2021), for Africans and Indians, 'Afro-India' continues to be

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972025101216 Published online by Cambridge University Press

an unspecified and mostly unused term and remains a flexible imaginary for many who retain and activate histories of African–Indian relations.

Scholars studying African–Indian imaginaries through literary representations, such as Antoinette Burton (2016), have observed that, while the Bandung Conference celebrated South–South solidarities, such connections were always approached through a deeply racialized and colonial-influenced mindset, especially regarding the treatment of Africans by Indians. As Burton suggests, both colonial and even postcolonial literary narratives about Afro-Indian imagination are entrenched in a racialized framing of the other and resonate with stereotypes of what constitutes Afro-Indian consciousness (*ibid.*). In a somewhat similar tone, yet as a contrasting perspective on African–Indian imaginaries, Gaurav Desai notes that Indians mostly appear as side characters in colonial and postcolonial Black African literature, and relations between the two groups are typecast as exploitative (Desai 2013). As subjects of the Empire, Africans and Indians have been uneasy partners, set apart because of race and class, which often created visible and invisible cultural boundaries. Nevertheless, there are examples from other repertoires and texts from Africa and the Indian subcontinent where African–Indian solidarities are constructed differently and where patches and pastiches of history have been repurposed to demonstrate unique African–Indian affiliations in the present (see Shankar 2021).

It is important to acknowledge that postcolonial political alliances established after the Bandung Conference[1] paved the way for diverse exchanges between African countries and India, including the arrival of African students in India. In the 1950s and 1960s, African students, primarily from Anglophone African countries, came to Indian universities to study for degrees in engineering, sciences and other subjects, as Indian universities offered a range of courses in English at an affordable price. These numbers have multiplied over the years; at present, African students are enrolled in various undergraduate and graduate programmes as well as on other short-term technical diploma courses in India (see Verma 2023). While the presence of African students in Indian educational institutions generated African–Indian fellowships, they were restricted to academic circles. They had little influence on the African imaginary among working-class Indians, nor among communities of African descent. These twentieth-century Afro-Indian cultural encounters occurred in cities, far away from Indian towns and villages and from the subaltern population who were rooted in their socio-economic conditions. This segment of the population was yet to benefit from the neoliberal momentum; moreover, they did not have access to India's transcontinental visitors.

However, the recent migration of Africans to India consists of a diverse group, from traders to medical tourists. The emergence of a newer African diaspora in Indian megacities such as Mumbai and New Delhi represents a different kind of African–Indian world making where Pan-African subjectivities are reinvented and performed to align with the prejudices and expectations of Indian society. As Meera Venkatachalam demonstrates, this also involves the enterprise of religiosity such

[1] The Bandung Conference, held from 18 to 24 April 1955, in Bandung, Indonesia, was a significant political event for Asian and African nations. It marked the first large-scale meeting of countries that were newly independent or still under colonial rule, aiming to promote strategic socio-economic and cultural cooperation and to oppose colonialism and neocolonialism.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972025101216 Published online by Cambridge University Press

as the Nigerian Pentecostal-Charismatic churches that serve not only as a focal point for community interaction but also play a vital role in showcasing the markers of imagined Africanness in India (Venkatachalam 2022).

On the other hand, on the African continent, commercial interactions and social exchanges with South Asian merchants, Islamic missions and other trans-religious networks since the early twentieth century have served as the basis for accessing Indian cultural elements. In the case of West Africa, interactions outside the influence of the Empire – or, at times, in its shadow – nurtured interesting cultural appropriations that had a remarkable influence on the spiritual and aesthetic practices of many communities. Spaces such as Indian grocery stores or the Ahmadiyya missions played a formative role in shaping Indian imaginaries through diverse visual landscapes, which continued even in the postcolonial era (cf. Shankar 2021). The unique forms of Afro-Indian imaginations shaped by the transmigration of people and the things they carried, and how they connect the Indian Ocean and the Atlantic worlds, remain understudied, with only a handful of studies exploring the resultant intercultural practices (see Rush 2019; 2008; Shankar 2021; Wuaku 2013). The overwhelming majority of work on African–Indian relations is still historical in nature, with histories of empires and religious economies (e.g. Basu and Werbner 1998; Alpers 2003; Catlin-Jairazbhoy and Alpers 2004; Eaton 2006; Obeng 2007; Shroff 2007; 2013) and a few works on expressive cultures (Larkin 1997; Rush 2013; Jeychandran 2016; Purdy 2020). Only a handful of works explore the quotidian imaginations of Africa and India as intimate geographies connected symbolically in the present through ritual, artistic and sartorial practices (see, for example, Graves Eyssallenne 2024; Hill 2022; Rush 2019; Shankar 2021; Srinivas 2022).

For the immobile population, for centuries itinerant travellers (i.e. traders, mystics, pilgrims, artisans) have crafted an awareness about Africa–India connections as they have rendered diverse images of African and Asian cultural landscapes through a range of texts, materials and oral accounts. These agents and the objects they carried have not only nurtured tactile familiarities with and sensitivities to each other's cultural codes for people far removed from them, but have also pushed back against ethnocentric perceptions about Africa in India and India in Africa. Even though this African–Indian knowingness was constituted through the mobile agent's sensorial and corporeal engagement, wherein individual experiences might have shaped their vision of socio-political structures and cultural landscapes, their immersive understandings informed their immediate networks, who consumed and might have participated in the dissemination of their imagined imageries third-hand. This meant that West Africa and India, though faraway places, have always been accessed, imagined, mapped and mythologized through things and people. In the following sections, I discuss how known African–Indian links and lesser-known connections extending to West Africa can be mapped together to challenge conventional and scholarly ideas of connectivity and the separation of terrestrial geographies from the oceanic worlds when studying Africa and the Indian Ocean.

Saints and place making

In contemporary times, media such as films and television produce avenues through which Africa and India can be consumed by ordinary people, but the historical

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circulation of everyday objects and luxury goods to East Africa and its hinterlands has linked Africa and India for centuries through practices of consumption, aesthetic displays and the efficacy of the object (Prestholdt 2008; Machado 2014; Meier 2015; 2016). Both luxury and everyday international items worn, displayed, used and preserved by the mercantile community in the Indian Ocean world have enabled people (both mobile and immobile) to perceive distant cultures and places haptically (cf. Meier 2015; 2016). A range of goods flowed into the Swahili ports and those around the Horn of Africa, and these commodities were carried further inland, as many of these ports functioned as transit geographies that connected maritime sea lanes with overland routes. For instance, Prita Meier notes that Chinese porcelain arrived in Great Zimbabwe from the Swahili ports in the sixteenth century through the hinterland routes (Meier 2015). Similarly, textiles from Gujarat that reached the interior of Lake Tanganyika were exchanged for enslaved Africans and ivory, thus exposing the complex economic ties of the Indian Ocean slave trade with commodity exchange. Thus, textiles, beads and spices from India were ferried inland to markets in North Africa, Sudan and Ethiopia from the Red Sea ports and carried further west along the Sahelian trade routes. Valued objects such as carnelian and agate beads from Cambay, Gujarat, reached West Africa through these routes (cf. Francis 1990); later, commodities from the Indian Ocean that were already in circulation in the Arab markets flowed along the Sahel to West Africa after Mansa Musa's legendary journey to Mecca in 1324, which had a paramount impact on the influx of Islam and trade goods to Mali and neighbouring regions (cf. Oliver 2013).

Even before and after Mansa Musa's travels, a network of global trade routes extended across the Sahel and to regions south of the Saharan desert, connecting the empires of Ghana (300–1200), Mali (1230–1600), Songhay (1464–1591) and Segu (1640–1861), and cultivated an enormously rich material culture (see Berzock 2019; LaGamma 2020). These precolonial material and aesthetic transfers were explored through monumental exhibitions including *Sahel: Art and Empires on the Shores of the Sahara* (LaGamma 2020), which originated at the Metropolitan Museum, and *Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time* (Berzock 2019) at the Block Museum of Art. Important transit geographies in Misr, Nubia and Al-Habash linked West Africa and the Indian Ocean through complex trans-Saharan networks of traders, pilgrims and enslaved people, and rhizomatic systems of commodity exchanges. Cultures south of the Saharan regions were connected to Nubia and Misr from very early times; art historian Annissa Malvoisin (2024) argues that the early cultural relationship between Nile Valley civilizations and Iron Age Western African cultures is visible through decorative representations on Nubian pottery from the Meroitic period (200–300 CE). Thus, we see a historical circulation of objects, creative knowledge and decorative designs passing through Nubia and Misr and other Sahelian transit points.

Trade objects, markets and port cities that were part of the trans-Saharan exchange routes are central to the histories and spiritual journeys of African mystics in India, the patron saints of the Sidi African-descent community. The Sidis, who view themselves as the descendants of the Black saints from Nubia, Misr and Al-Habash, carve out a place for themselves in the historical narrative of African migration to India by imagining their ancestry and making memories of generationally distant lands through commodities and places associated with their saints. Through oral

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972025101216 Published online by Cambridge University Press

hagiographies and ritual performances for Bava Gor,[2] the Sidis recount different histories of their saint's connection with Nubia, trans-Saharan trade centres and Indian Ocean mobilities. According to Sidi oral histories, Sidi Mubarak Nobi/Nubi, widely addressed as Bava Gor, hailed from Nubia. There are different, slightly varied, accounts that narrate Bava Gor's journey to India to fulfil his saintly calling. While most accounts depict Bava Gor as a pious man who travelled to Cambay to vanquish a menacing demoness, some versions note that he was a military leader who had commandeered a group of African soldiers travelling to Gujarat. In some instances, Bava Gor and his followers and/or kin are said to have migrated from Kano in Nigeria to India following the Sahelian routes to Abyssinia and then travelling towards Mecca (Patel 1986). Over the years, some of these narratives have either been forgotten or altered and, at times, conflated, as the socio-political context has changed. However, Sidi ritual specialists and caretakers of ancillary shrines recall the saint's connection with West Africa and regions south of the Saharan desert.

Irrespective of Bava Gor's mission and place of origin, he is closely linked with agate mining and trade. Sidi *zikrs* (recitations) illuminate the saint's connection to the *akik* or agate stones of superior quality and value. Some of the senior Sidi ritualists wear agate beads with great reverence, as they are perceived to be the material that haptically connects the saint to them. Bava Gor is credited with modernizing agate mining in Ratanpur (literally translated as 'place of gems') near Cambay in Gujarat. Other sources reference Baba Gor's knowledge of drilling and carving carnelian beads. There are many accounts of Baba Gor's connection with the agate trade. One version notes that his contribution to the lapidary was his knowledge of cooking the agate beads at high temperatures, which enhanced their lustre and the aesthetic value (Akhtar 2008; Francis 1986; 2002; Trivedi 1964). The banded agate called Babagoria is a synecdochical reference to the African holy man himself. These beads are also known as holy man's beads and are valued by the Sufis for the appealing black and white bands that appear after the firing process. Africa and India are fused into the banded agate, as knowledge of shared technologies shaped the finished beads that were used in Islamic prayers.

According to some records, Baba Gor expanded the export of agate beads to ports such as Suakin in Nubia and Jeddah in the Red Sea by collaborating with Abyssinian merchants who had already established themselves in Cambay. In the fifteenth century, Cambay had become a principal port for travel to Mecca (cf. Trivedi 1964). Pilgrims, travellers and traders from Cambay heading to Mecca and other towns in the Red Sea carried various kinds of agate, such as carnelian, with them. Baba Gor's connection to Mecca is also evoked in Sidi *zikrs*, which state that *mera pir aya Mecca se* (my saint has come from Mecca). This Sidi recitation serves as a fragmented historical notation suggesting a complex trade network that linked Africa, Arabia and India with the flow of goods and people in which Africans participated actively or coercively. Sidi *zikrs* also connected Baba Gor's Sufi brothers to the production and circulation of specific adornments, such as beads, and with the intertwined histories of the migration of Africans from Al-Habash and Nubia, thus referencing markets that engaged in the trade of enslaved Africans and goods. This historical period saw the

[2] The name of the saint is spelled in many ways and we see records such as the Gujarat state gazetteer publications and other accounts spelling his name as Baba Ghor or Bawa Ghor.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972025101216 Published online by Cambridge University Press

dynamics of pre-modern Afro-Arab polities and their commercial reliance on the Islamic Indian Ocean, which enabled a small group of African mystics and agate miner-traders, such as Baba Gor and his kin, to robustly link Ratanpur and Cambay in Gujarat with coastal and inland markets in Africa. For instance, Baba Gor's brother, Baba Saban, is credited with discovering agate bead markets in the Arab world (Trivedi 1964). Given that Muslim and African traders were highly active in Indian Ocean commerce, Baba Gor likely expanded the export of Indian agate through both sea and inland trade in the Islamic world, especially since carnelian was in great demand in Arabia and Africa because of its lustrous red colour and talismanic properties (Kenoyer *et al.* 1991).

Once the agate beads reached the Red Sea ports, they were transported further along the Sahelian trade routes and even made their way to regions in West Africa. A case in point is the discovery of carnelian beads from Cambay in the recently excavated sites of Gao and Timbuktu in Mali, which provides more insight into the export of carnelian from Gujarat to West Africa. Gao, the former capital of the Songhai empire, was a significant trans-Saharan trade centre in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, thus linking it to Indian Ocean trade systems. The carnelian trade between Cambay, Gujarat and regions south of the Sahara and in West Africa during the pre-modern period has been examined by historians and substantiated by archaeologists through visual analyses of agate beads found in Sudan and Nigeria (Insoll *et al.* 2004). In an article, A. J. Arkell (1936) argued convincingly that some of the old carnelian beads he collected in Darfur, Sudan and Kano, Nigeria, originated from Cambay and reached Red Sea ports via pilgrims and traders. This assertion can now be backed by a comparative chemical analysis conducted on carnelian beads collected from major working centres in Gujarat, including Ratanpur, alongside a variety of carnelian samples gathered from archaeological sites in Gadei, Gao Ancien, Gao-Saney and Timbuktu (Insoll *et al.* 2004). These locations in Western and West-Central Africa were merchant towns and transit points that were incorporated into overland trade routes, showcasing the extent of medieval sub-Saharan trade connections. As Arkell noted, the carnelians arrived in Nigeria and other West African towns via caravans, and he stated they were sourced in modern periods from towns along the Blue and White Niles by bead peddlers known as *fellata*, who are natives of Northern Nigeria and, at times, Senegal (Arkell 1936).

As Baba Gor was seen as a catalyst in expanding the agate trade, we can observe the names of places that facilitated the interconnected commerce of Sahelian systems with the Indian Ocean world, manifesting through oral narratives that are intended to celebrate Baba Gor's spiritual charisma. Due to his contributions to the agate trade and industry, he was highly respected and venerated upon his death by the Islamic bead makers of Gujarat. His grave, situated near the agate mines, became a sacred site, serving as the saint's resting place, while the agate minefield is regarded as sacred geography by the Sidis (cf. Francis 1982: 22–3). In the fourteenth century, the saint's *dargah* served as a pilgrimage site, visited by Muhammad Shah, the ruler of the Gujarat sultanate, after his ascension to the throne (Lokhandwala 1970).[3] The existence of the cult of Baba Gor was noted by the fourteenth-century Moroccan

[3] The text *Zafar ul walih bi muzaffar wa alihi*, written by Abdullah Muḥammad al-Ulughkhani Ḥajji al-Dabir (see Lokhandwala 1970), makes a note of the saint's *dargah.*

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traveller Ibn Battuta (see Sheikh 2010), and other accounts of the Indian Ocean have acknowledged that Battuta's reference provides insights into the formation of the worship culture surrounding the shrine of Baba Gor in Ratanpur, which likely developed much later.

Like Baba Gor, his sister, Mai Misra, also occasionally referred to as Mai Mariyam, is a patron saint of the African-descendant community and is associated with the calligraphic agate bead (Trivedi 1961; 1964). Mai Misra is believed to hail from Misr, or Egypt, and, according to Sidi oral hagiographies, she used her shawl as the sail of a dhow to traverse the Indian Ocean and reach Gujarat. The saint's true name remains unknown, and she has been respectfully addressed as *Mai*, or Mother. '*Mai*' could also be an Arab-influenced name, and in many instances she is also referred to as Maisha/Maisa, a popular Arabic name that means life. While not much is known about her persona, Sidi recitations describe her as someone with curly hair and wearing a red tie-dye dupatta (shawl). She is often symbolically represented by the Sidis through tie-dye textiles. The tomb of Mai Misra and ancillary shrines dedicated to her are covered in multiple tie-dye textiles offered by devotees, signalling her embedded connection with such textiles. Although deities in shrines across Gujarat are adorned in tie-dye textiles, what is interesting about the modest shrines for Mai Misra is that the textiles become a marker of her symbolic manifestation – the material medium of the textiles serves as an indexical presence of a deity whose historical identity is unknown.

Gujarat has been a centre of textile production for over a millennium, with artisans mastering exquisite resist-dyeing techniques. Textile scholar Ruth Barnes notes that fragments of printed cotton made in Gujarat were discovered in archaeological sites in Egypt during the Fatimid, Ayyubid and Mamluk periods (i.e. the tenth to early sixteenth centuries), including resist-printed or mordant-printed textiles that illuminate the densely interwoven medieval trades between Egypt, India and the wider Indian Ocean (Barnes 2017). Another particularly striking example demonstrating the pre-modern circulation of Indian textiles is the fragments of cotton textiles from Gujarat in the Metropolitan Museum collection, excavated during the 1920s and 1930s from Fustat, Egypt. As Ayesha Shaikh points out, some designs, like the chevron pattern, were specifically produced for the Egyptian market due to high demand (Shaikh 2023). These examples illustrate the expansiveness of the textile trade networks connecting India with Egypt and the understanding of manufacturing needs for the African consumer.

It can be argued that Mai Misra's association with tie-dye textiles and beads represents a memory-making process in which Sidi oral histories related to migration, religious practices, craft, trade and labour collectively illustrate a gendered history of African arrivals in India and their contributions to the creative sectors. Sidi elders recount that women worked in craft production, mining, textiles and dyeing industries. Even today, Sidi women in Jamnagar and Surat, both major textile centres in India, continue to engage in the informal textile sector as tie-dye or *bandhani* patternmakers, a role that requires the precise skill of creating tiny knots on fabric to produce intricate designs. The techniques of tie-dye and resist dyeing were forms of knowledge that circulated along the Indian Ocean rim and the Sahel, with each culture along the trade route sharing, adapting and reinventing dyeing styles, knot-securing techniques and complex designs. It is quite possible that African

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women who arrived in India either already possessed these skills or quickly acquired the techniques of tying knots in fabrics in Gujarat, thus becoming intrinsically linked to *bandhani* textiles. The tomb of Mai Misra is adorned with multiple tie-dye textiles offered by devotees, and the home altars of the saint are decorated with screens of tie-dye textiles to distinguish her shrine and suggest her identity as a mystic draped in a tie-dye veil or *purdah*.

The saint Mai Misra's connection to agate beads and textiles is symbolically preserved through the Sidi musical instrument, Mai Misra, which is a coconut rattle similar to the African shakers found in regions south of the Sahara and around the Indian Ocean. The Mai Misra musical instrument is made from dried coconut shells filled with small agate beads, and a wooden stick is inserted to hold the instrument and to create a sound when shaken rhythmically. The coconut shakers are wrapped in red tie-dye textile – a reference to the saint's identity – and play an important role in Sidi performance repertoires, including possession ceremonies. They are often placed on top of or beside the *chilla* or satellite shrines for the saint, Mai Misra. In Sidi ritual performances, the rattles are used by musicians alongside other traditional Sidi instruments such as the *mugarman* (standing drum) and *damama* (small cylindrical drum) (cf. Graves Eyssallenne 2024).

The brother of Bava Gor and Mai Misra, Bava Habash, also known as Habash Khan or Baba Abbas, is associated with the Al-Habash region and the military slavery of the Indian Ocean. While some accounts describe him as an Abyssinian military leader who crossed the Indian Ocean, others identify him as Bava Gor's brother who managed his agate business in Cambay (Trivedi 1964). Bava Habash is also referred to as Darya Dulha (groom of the ocean/sea) due to his extensive knowledge of oceanic waters and his navigational skills, possibly indicating an oceanic network he utilized. Such historical references demonstrate the interconnectedness of African bead traders with the Arab–African slave trade to western India during the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, a period when African soldiers played a crucial role for Islamic sultanates in the Indian subcontinent, safeguarding their reign amid political upheaval and conflict (see Eaton 2006). In the Sidi legend, the three saints are believed to have embarked on their journey from distinct regions of Africa, suggesting that they may not be related but were instead united through spiritual and creative kinships.

The intertwined history of Indian trade objects intended for markets south of the Saharan desert and the known provenance of African saints and their careers suggests rhizomatic connections, revealing how these objects shaped African–Indian exchanges. The journey of these trade goods simultaneously illustrates the extensive links through which West Africa was connected to India – a largely overlooked narrative of transcontinental ties in pre-modern times that continues to resonate today, as Sidis sing and dance the hagiographies of these saints. Later, during the transatlantic trade, some of the Cambay carnelians made their way to the Caribbean (cf. Handler 2007).

These early connections with Africa are expressed in various ways in India and West Africa. For instance, the Indian high commissioner to Nigeria in 2012, during an event organized by the Kano state government, cited Baba Gor's migration from Kano to demonstrate Nigeria's centuries-old cultural ties with India and the alliance between the two nations – an alliance that was established before any non-aligned

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partnerships.[4] For the Sidis, recalling places such as Kano and Nubia in their recitation of *zikrs* bookends the historiographies of migration. Although we can observe a process of fabulation in the historical recollection of places, the African saints' association with the trans-Saharan and Indian Ocean routes through the movement of sails, textiles and beads is a history that cannot be overlooked.

Objects and transmigratory histories

With the arrival of the Portuguese and Dutch in the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, precolonial routes of transcontinental commerce became realigned as European vessels began carrying textiles and beads from Gujarat and spices from the Malabar Coast to the Guinea Coast. European vessels travelling to ports in the Gulf of Guinea and the Gold Coast capitalized on the West African demand for international goods and carried tons of beads and textiles, which were exchanged for gold and later for captured Africans (cf. Alpern 1995). A range of agate beads, including jasper, agate cups and vases from Cambay, and textiles from Cambay and the Coromandel Coast flowed into the West African markets through the sea lanes (cf. Alpern 1995; Trivedi 1964). Some of these objects were also carried across the Atlantic Ocean to the Caribbean islands. Jerome Handler, who examined the goods of a slave burial site, interred from 1660 to 1820 in the Caribbean, notes that necklaces with carnelian beads were found buried with people in their graves. Although the story of how the beads made their way to Barbados is perhaps open to conjecture, the carnelian from Cambay must have been regarded as a valuable item and perhaps was carried with permission or smuggled across the Atlantic (Handler 2007).

As the transatlantic slave trade gained momentum, the European trading companies used Indian cotton and silk cloth to purchase slaves on the West African coast. The West African demand for Indian textiles grew (Kobayashi 2019); this is evident from the records of the Dutch vessel *The Unity* for its transatlantic journey in 1761–63. About 47 per cent of the cargo of *The Unity* consisted of textiles (i.e. 18 tons of thirty-five different textiles),[5] with the majority produced in India and with some Indian-style textiles manufactured in Europe. *The Unity*'s records show that at different ports of call in Liberia, the Ivory Coast and the Gold Coast, a range of textiles, including red *rumals* (handkerchiefs) and blue *rumals* known as Guinea cloth, was mainly traded to purchase slaves. For instance, during *The Unity*'s stay from 23 February to 8 May 1762, about twenty different types of textiles were traded for slaves (*ibid.*). Indian tie-dye textiles or *bandhani*, like the cloth associated with Mai Misra, were luxury goods that were later supplanted in West Africa by the English-manufactured tie-dye designs called bandanas. Along the Gold Coast, from the seventeenth century, we see chintz and silk tie-dye symbolizing social status for the Fante and Akan elites, and these materials became part of lavish displays of power, wealth and purpose.

[4] This statement by the Indian high commissioner to Nigeria was published on a Nigerian news website (see Shuaibu 2012).

[5] This data is from the online Zeeland archive 'On board *The Unity* 1761–1763' at <https://eenigheid.slavenhandelmcc.nl/trajecten-van-de-reis-en/afrika-en/samenstelling-cargazoen/textiel-slavenhandel/?lang=en#>, accessed 4 April 2025.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972025101216 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Aside from cloth, other objects made of textiles, such as parasols or umbrellas produced in India, were given to Ghanaian chiefs and kings as diplomatic gifts by the Portuguese, Dutch and English, who often competed for lucrative trade benefits on the Gold Coast. Sharon Patton notes that Europeans were well aware of the popularity of the Indian umbrella in the Asante kingdom, and from the seventeenth century, the English and Dutch gifted silk and velvet umbrellas with rich embroidery and fringes with ornamental metal handles to the Asante court (Patton 1984). In Asante *durbar* rituals and other royal settings, the umbrella became an insignia representing political rank and status. Although local artists had made umbrellas before the arrival of the Indian domed umbrellas, the Akan shapes and styles were different and less elaborate. With the Asante amassing power, the richly decorated umbrella became a ubiquitous political emblem, and we see the kings and chiefs using different styles and sizes of umbrellas to represent their political status. The local craftsmen catered to this rising demand and often emulated Indian designs and masterfully blended pastiches of various international fabrics such as chintz and damask, creating mixed multicolour patterns (*ibid*.: 66). The circulation of Indian trade items to West Africa not only reveals the integration of Atlantic slave trade commerce with that of Indian Ocean commodities but also brings to the fore how trade items were incorporated into cultural and political ceremonies.

Like the umbrellas, some of the Indian trade cloth that arrived in West Africa became the desired fabric of choice for urban elites. This was especially true for Eurafrican women merchants living in coastal trading towns, from Saint Louis in Senegal to Freetown in Sierra Leone. They incorporated imported cotton and silk handkerchiefs and ribbons as well as Indian, European, Chinese and African textiles into their outfits to display their wealth (Benjamin 2022). Other textiles gained cultural significance as ritual objects and became an indispensable part of lifecycle ceremonies even in contemporary times. For instance, the Indian Madras or *injiri*, a fabric produced by weavers along the Coromandel Coast in south-eastern India, has material significance for the Kalabari in the Niger Delta as it is gifted, exchanged and worn during ritual events and at a range of community gatherings (Evenson 1990). *Injiri*, translated as 'cloth from India' in the Kalabari language, is a brightly coloured plaid fabric used as a wrapper by men and women. Merchants also referred to the fabric as 'real India' in Kalabar, to distinguish the Indian handloomed and 100 per cent cotton textiles from factory-produced imitations that arrived in West African ports in the nineteenth century.

Erekosima and Eicher (1981), who have extensively studied Indian Madras, note that the Kalabari who lived and traded in the Niger Delta had access to imported textiles even before the arrival of the Europeans. Eicher labels these textiles 'Intorica' or 'Indian to Africa'; this refers to trade cloth that is woven in India specifically to cater to African markets (Eicher 2014). The Kalabari transformed the Indian Madras into their own artifact by pulling out the cloth threads, thus creating new patterns; they called this *pelete bite*. Both Indian Madras and *pelete bite* are significant cultural items and are featured in birth and death ceremonies, conveying international value and domestic artistry (Erekosima and Eicher 1981). These fabrics are also used to veil the face of masquerades, especially the masquerade of water spirits, probably to suggest the spirits' oceanic connections and potencies (Eicher 2004). We see a similar use of imported objects in rituals associated with the Mami Wata pantheon of water

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972025101216 Published online by Cambridge University Press

spirits in which international commodities are incorporated into the performance and altars of the spirits to suggest wealth and economic power that come from afar (cf. Drewal 2008; Rush 2019; 2008; Hill 2025).

The channelling of powers from India carried across the water is a recurring theme in mystic arts and performances in different parts of West Africa. For instance, in the Islamic mystic practices of Sierra Leone, the jinns that come to people to bring healing power and tutelage energy are from India. Samuel Anderson, who has extensively studied Islamic mystic performers in Sierra Leone, notes that supplicants whom he met narrated that they attained mystical powers after they went underwater and were contacted by jinns from India or somewhere afar.[6] In many mystical arts and masquerades, oceanic linkages with India through a range of things bring healing power and other mystic abilities that ritual specialists and supplicants harness. On the one hand, while these practices reveal transoceanic links and affinities mobilized by spirit mediums, non-human agents such as jinns and objects with power in West Africa, these materialities also highlight the different amalgamations and the attendant meanings of Indian trade objects in African social and cultural settings at different periods.

Particular ritual practices in West Africa are remarkable examples of amalgamations that suggest how Africa and India adopt one another visually. Take, for instance, the Hindu temple in Osu, Accra, where different faiths from the Indian subcontinent are given a place on the temple's altar. We see Hindu gods and goddesses, the Sikh religious text Guru Granth Sahib, images of the Sikh gurus and a large photograph of Sathya Sai Baba, a marble murti of Shirdi Sai Baba and busts of Jesus and Mary all occupying places on the central altar of the temple (see Jeychandran 2022). The striking cross-pollination of Ghanaian and Indian worship cultures can be seen during the Thursday evening *puja* for the Indian saints Shirdi Sai Baba and his incarnation Sathya Sai Baba. Africa and India converge every Thursday through visual symbols, objects and devotional singing performed by Indian diasporic and Ghanaian devotees with African drums as musical accompaniment. During the Thursday *puja*, a chair wrapped in Kente cloth is placed in front of the altar to symbolize the presence of Sathya Sai Baba. Kente, an Akan cloth reserved initially for royalty and for wrapping *obosom* shrines (cf. Silverman 1998), is used to upholster the chair for Sai Baba, which is a likely representation of the seat the Indian saint occupies during his audiences with devotees. The seat thus anchors his divine presence in the Osu temple. For devotees of Sai Baba, it is the most Ghanaian way of demonstrating their devotion to the saint, as the Kente cloth is a marker of Akan prestige and a garment reserved for the highest order. Such African–Indian convergences are evocative and affective and lend a different understanding to histories of contacts – of people, of cultures – and the reciprocal, impactful imaginaries and hybridities they produce.

Conclusion

The idea of bringing diverse examples into conversation, such as the African mystics' association with Indian Ocean trade goods, the arrival of Indian objects in West Africa

[6] This information was derived from conversations with Samuel Anderson, who works on Islamic mystics in Sierra Leone.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972025101216 Published online by Cambridge University Press

from the sixteenth century, and the contemporary uses of those objects, is to demonstrate how regions south of the Saharan desert were connected with the western Indian Ocean world. From very early on, knowledge about Africa in India and India in Africa was felt, heard, understood and modified in many ways as travellers and traders carried with them narratives of other places and products that, as haptic aids, activated imaginaries of faraway places. We see these haptic connections renegotiate geographical distance at the shrines for African saints through the singing of *zikrs*, during which distant locations such as Nubia, Misr and Al-Habash are accessed and made sense of through ritual performance. The affective knowledge produced at the shrines for Black saints not only narrows the distance between Africa and India, but this knowingness also continues to reproduce African–Indian solidarities in the present, even for those who are immobile. While places are thrown together, for instance in the recollection of Baba Gor's origins in Africa, with some versions identifying it as Kano in Nigeria, he is nevertheless venerated for his mystical charisma and contributions to the agate industry. Thus, these stories tell us how media, materials, arts and sacred geographies tether Africa and India.

African–Indian spatial imaginaries are thus fluid and remain a mobile concept, even for immobile people, as the imbrications of the past influence local imaginaries of African–Indian relations. In other words, we observe slippages between history, memory and performances as the histories of oceanic and overland transits between Africa and India are remade and manifested through material, ritual and imagined domains. Indeed, these non-discursive interpretations of Africa(n)–India(n) contacts suggest a selective sense making of transcontinental transfers, as communities re-fabulate their pasts by including or excluding histories of bondage and racial capital enterprises. Like the oral hagiographies recounting the origins of Bava Habash in the Al-Habash region, the centre of the African–Indian Ocean slave trade, or stories of jinns who possess great powers and offer mystical tutelage in Sierra Leone, these narratives suggest fraught pasts and the complex social currency of things that travel across the water. As a way to offer some conclusion, although the worlds of Africa and India are imagined, dislocated and generalized by ordinary people, many African–Indian connections are made relevant through materials, performed hagiographies, power objects and non-humans.

Acknowledgements. Open Access funding for this article is provided by Qatar National Library.

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Cite this article: Jeychandran, N. (2025). 'Transits of objects and people: traces of histories that connect the Africana Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds'. *Africa* **95**, 258–277. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972025101216