Jürgen Wasim Frembgen, Sheedi Yaqoob Qambrani, Aliya Iqbal Naqvi, and Hasan Ali Khan
Africans in Pakistan

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The descendants of Africans living in South Asia provide an instructive counterpoint to the many castes and tribes that make up the region's traditional social structure. Most often termed "Shidis," members of this diasporic community subsist on the economic and societal margins as what might be termed "perpetual foreigners," despite their Indian or Pakistani citizenship. The author of *Africans in Pakistan* hopes to right the historical record and acquaint readers with a misunderstood minority he has come to admire deeply.

Jürgen Wasim Frembgen is an anthropologist who specializes in the indigenous folk Islam of Pakistan. His engagement with Sufism, both scholarly and personal, has permitted fruitful interactions with the Afro-Pakistanis of coastal Sindh and Balochistan. Most of the estimated three-hundred-thousand-strong community lives in this southern part of the country, where Sufism, widely practiced across the social spectrum, is the predominant form of Islam. Frembgen has invited three co-authors to contribute their perspectives to his in-depth study: the Shīdī activist and political leader Yaqoob Qambrani, and historians Aliya Iqbal Naqvi and Hasan Ali Khan.

The author's objectives in writing his monograph, stated at the outset (xii) and reiterated on its final page, are not only to educate scholars about Afro-Pakistanis but, more crucially, to muster recognition and respect for them while "foster[ing] their cultural self-esteem" (169). This two-pronged approach, combining ethnographic enquiry with concern for social justice, can at times confuse the reader. In any case, Frembgen takes us along on his initial impromptu meeting with group members at the *ʿurs* (death commemoration) of Pakistan's best-known Sufi saint, the thirteenth-century Laʿl Shahbaz Qalandar. Here in Sehwan, on a sweltering July day in 2010, the ethnographer encounters a company of dark-skinned pilgrims and listens to them play their footed drum, the *muggarmān*. In its bass voice and complex rhythms he seems to hear the voice of an African past (xvii–xix). Intrigued, he determines to learn more about this ethnic minority.

The book's opening chapter familiarizes us with the widespread prejudice African-descended Pakistanis face, tying these negative perceptions to historical views of the "dark-skinned Other" on the subcontinent and, for comparative purposes, in Europe and the Middle East. Chapter 2 addresses the several ethnic categories of Afro-Pakistanis, most of which have resulted from intermarriage with Baloch and Sindhi tribes, and pinpoints where these populations are concentrated (primarily in Karachi). A dizzying array of ethnonyms evolved to define the subgroups, but most of the names and labels have been turned against the unfortunate Africans in order to disparage them. The second chapter also introduces some measures that the Shīdīs and related communities have taken to try and raise their status, including linking their lineages to African ancestor saints and to individuals mentioned in the Qur'an.

The historical record is analyzed, using both standard and ethnohistorical approaches, in chapter 3. The author draws upon archaeology and conventional accounts but is more interested in what some might consider dubious sources like legends and oral

traditions. He proffers a stirring defense of memory and orality for retrieving the saga of subcontinental Africans, reminding us that history is never truly objective, and the written word is not less susceptible to "fictive reconstruction [or] . . . nationalist claims" than are recollections passed down through successive generations (64–65). Following a consideration of early contacts in the region, he passes the torch to his historian co-authors for an account of the late-ninth-century Zanj Rebellion and its overflow of East African rebels from Basra to Makran (45–47). Frembgen then continues his narrative, tackling the primary driver of migration from Africa—the slave trade—and addressing the role of African servitude in South Asia's military, seafaring, and domestic economies. Sindh's counterpart to the famed Deccani slave-turned-Prime Minister Malik Ambar (1548–1626) was Hosh Muhammad Shīdī, who became an Afro-Pakistani hero when he was martyred defending Talpur rule against the 1843 British annexation. Here, too, the emic view is favored, for folk memory holds that Hosh Muhammad's battlefield plea for support from a Baloch contingent was rebuffed because of his dark skin. The valiant Africans' self-sacrifice in the face of colonial usurpers is a source of validation for his people.

Attention shifts to the socioeconomic and religious life of this beleaguered community in chapters 4 and 5. Whether engaged in manual and semi-skilled labor in Karachi or working as share-croppers in rural areas, the African-descended Pakistanis are almost universally poor, with low literacy rates and no real power. The better educated among them have founded social welfare organizations to tend to the needs of their less fortunate brethren, and a few members of the group have been elected to political office in recent years (87–90). However, in contrast to their bleak economic situation, the Shīdīs and other Afro-Pakistanis have a vibrant religious life that reflects their mixed heritage and migration journeys. They identify most strongly with Bava Ghor, an African saint entombed, along with his brother and sister, in Gujarat (India). The triad figures in trance-dance, and healing and possession rituals at Karachi's celebrated Mangho Pir festival, where a pod of crocodiles, led by the formidable Mor Sahib, is said to have originated from the lice shaken out of a holy man's cloak. The annual festival is described in an extensively illustrated section written by Frembgen and Yaqoob Qambrani (108–24). A short sixth chapter rounds out the book with a consideration of everyday life for the Afro-Pakistanis, including pastimes, secular manifestations of music and dance, and sports activities.

Frembgen has been visiting Pakistan since 1981; his fieldwork for this monograph alone involved eighteen research trips over the course of more than a decade. A keen and compassionate observer, he draws our attention to the little slights that wound even more deeply than statements made with outright racist intent. In his survey of the rather meager scholarship available on South Asians of African descent, he notes that more work has been done in India (with only about thirty-five thousand community members) than in Pakistan. Hence, his findings really are groundbreaking and should be of interest to scholars, students, and the general public. The book would be a useful source for university departments devoted to Africa and its diaspora, as well for courses in slavery studies and those addressing sacred sites contested by members of different faiths (as is Mangho Pir). Admittedly, there are certain lacunae in the author's analysis. He confesses that as a male outsider he did not have access to women's networks (xxiii). A female observer might have been able to question Shidi women about the apparent prevalence of genital mutilation, for instance. It is a relic of their African past mentioned

in a United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs publication (*IRIN News* 2011). Further quibbles are the absence of a glossary and index, and the print quality of the many photographs. I am certain that better photo editing and higher quality paper would have greatly improved some of the rather murky and sometimes nearly illegible images (fig. 55, for example). All in all, however, I highly recommend the book, and I learned a great deal from it.

References

IRIN News. 2011. "Pakistan: Low Awareness of Hidden FGM Practices." December 29, 2011. https://news.trust.org/item/20111229203000-us8xl/

Tryna Lyons
Independent Scholar