African topographies in India: (in)visible heritages, African prints and contemporary art across the Indian Ocean

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The Indian Ocean is recognized as a space of connections and interactions. If Asian communities are well known for having settled in East and Southern African coasts for centuries, African circulations are equally significant for the cultural landscapes across the Indian Ocean. This essay discusses an ongoing research project aiming to understand the contemporary presence of Africa in India through three main locations: the (in)visible presence of plural African-Asian communities, the production of African print textiles by Indian companies and contemporary projects that critically engage with African migrants in Indian metropolises. Identifying tocontest and disrupt the relational paradigm of the past with temporary, contemporaneousand postcolonial maps. Engaging with notions of cartography, location, territory or scale, it acts as surveying alternative maps across two layers: spatial templates and social geographies.

Historical port cities, which were fundamental nodal locations intersecting maritime networks with coastal landscapes and hinterland polities, and diverse geographical and cultural identities, have seen a rise in research and publications on them. Contemporary maps of plurality that render visible how African presences are connected to local social structures under the terms of Afro-Asian connections. The practices of circulation and following the cyclic monsoon winds have been central to the new discourses of Afro-Asian circulations. This conceptual frame investigates material and cultural heritages of Indian Ocean landscapes as archives of Afro-Asian circulations.

Using cartographic templates allows the overcoming of geographical and chronological limits to inquire how past circulations of Africans across the Indian Ocean relate with the 1951 Bandung conference and Afro-Asian solidarity movements, contemporary migration circuits, as well as the recent production centers in Guangzhou, and how they are connected, and with concepts around the Global South. In this way, space, geography and material circulations become visible as mnemonic archives of pluralized histories of exchanges that need to be registered in relation and interconnectivity.

African prints made in India constitute an archive that will discuss with other material testimonies, as decorative arts across the Indian Ocean and architectures and urbanities of port cities that embody disparate “elsewhere”, that constitute the Indian Ocean landscapes as archives of Afro-Asian circulations.

Notes


4. As, for example, the online exhibition on the African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean World, organized by the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York, Public domain: https://vimeo.com/follow-NY