Baine Maara-Indu Mama-Siddi Dhamal
Interwoven Performances of Epistemic Justice and Cognitive Freedom by the Siddis of Karnataka, India

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ABSTRACT
The Siddis were brought to India from the southern and eastern parts of Africa by the Arab and Portuguese colonisers. At present, the Siddis in India can be found in parts of Gujarat (a state located in western India), Hyderabad (a state located in southeastern India) and Karnataka (a state located in southwestern India). They are habitually subjected to colonially reconfigured violence of epistemic and cognitive injustices by the mainstream colonial/modern governing institutions in India through dehumanising their cultural practices, racially invalidating their food habits, preventing them from receiving education, practising racial suppression at workplaces, etc. To counter such violence of the colonial/modern governing institutions, the Siddis interweave narratives of epistemic justice and cognitive freedom through performing their Indigenous traditional socio-cultural practices of hunting, cooking, eating, singing and dancing. The interesting aspect of these socio-cultural practices is that they are socially, culturally, thematically and contextually interlinked to each other. The title of this article is a synecdochic representation of the interwovenness of Siddi histories and cultures. With respect to these arguments, the research article will argue how these socio-cultural practices function as Indigenous performances of epistemic justice and cognitive freedom for the Siddis of Karnataka.

KEYWORDS
Siddis, epistemic justice, cognitive freedom, synecdochic representation, and interwovenness.

Introduction: Who I Am and from Where Do I Speak?
I was born in the city of Kolkata, India, and my familial origin, on the maternal as well as on the paternal side, lies in Faridpur and Dhaka in Bangladesh. During the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971, my grandparents and parents were forced to migrate to what is known as West Bengal today. After arriving in West Bengal they settled in the districts of
Maldah and Raiganj. During my childhood, I went to my ancestral homes in Maldah and Raiganj and went around visiting different historical monuments like palaces, forts, mosques and temples that date back to the thirteenth century. While visiting these places my grandparents would narrate stories about the socio-historical origin of these monuments and it is from them that I came to know that there existed an African kingdom in Bengal in the fifteenth century. A few of their architectural remnants like the Firuz Minar and the Choti Dargah still exist in Maldah today. The Firuz Minar was built by the second king of the African dynasty (also known as the Habshi dynasty) (Dutta, 2017) known as Saifuddin Firoz Shah and the Choti Dargah (small shrine) is believed to have been constructed by Shams-ud-din Muzafar Shah—the last king of the Habshi dynasty. When I orally came to know about this historical narrative, I wondered why we are not taught these histories in our schools. My grandparents also shared with me how the family members and African slaves of the African kings married the locals and settled in different parts of Bengal (Dey & Dey, 1994). Such marriage alliances have given birth to the interracial communities of the African Indians (or Afro-Indians) in Bengal.

Gradually, with time, through mostly oral and a few written narratives, I came to know about the historical existence of various such African (and later African Indian) kingdoms in different parts of India like Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Goa, Kerala, and Daman and Diu. Besides being slaves, merchants, army chiefs and palace guards, musicians, dancers and poets, another interesting aspect of the African kingdoms in India was that they featured many eunuchs as kings. The professional, racial and gender diversities of the African Indians in India will be elaborately discussed in the section titled “Siddis and Habshis: Socio-historical Evolution and Contemporary Challenges”. The socio-historical narratives of the presence of the African kings in India and the consequent formation of the African Indian Diaspora are not discussed in the history syllabuses of the schools and higher education institutions. A lot of the linguistic structures, food habits, fashion ethics, sports culture, musical performances and dance patterns in India have been historically derived from the socio-cultural practices of the African immigrants in India, but they are hardly discussed. These experiences contributed to my academic and research interests in the African Indian communities in India. Currently, I am working on a postdoctoral project that engages with how the African Indian communities in India and the South African Indian communities in South Africa perform their Indigenous socio-cultural rituals of eating, singing and dancing in an interwoven manner to preserve their ancestral memories on the one side and weave collective networks of epistemic justice and cognitive freedom on the other. This article is a segment of my postdoctoral project and through the interwoven performances of eating, singing and dancing by the African Indian communities (also known as the Siddis) in Karnataka, it explores how the Siddis habitually practice peace-building, decolonial healing, epistemic justice and cognitive freedom. This detailed clarification of my positionality is motivated by how “our identities predispose us to see or not see; listen to or not listen to; read or not read; cite or not cite; concern ourselves or not concern ourselves; with specific Other peoples, issues, and societal dynamics” (Moya, 2011, p. 79). In the context of this aspect, I wish to acknowledge the fact that neither am I an expert on the African Indian Diaspora nor do I belong to the Siddi community. It is my
interest in the history, culture and the contemporary existence of the African Indians in India since my childhood days that has driven me to research the Siddi community of Karnataka. Being completely aware of my position as a community outsider, I wish to share that I have initiated my research on the Siddi community of Karnataka for this article with the presumption that “all knowledge is situated knowledge: there is no transcendent subject with a ‘God’s Eye’ view on the world who ascertain universal truths independent of a historically- and culturally-specific situation” (Moya, p. 80). Therefore, every piece of information and argument in this article has been shaped through personal conversations with the Siddis in Karnataka and by critically analysing unpublished notes, documentaries, research articles and books that engage with the history and culture of the Siddis in India from various geopolitical and spatio-temporal dimensions.

The following section will engage with the methodology and methods that have been implemented to develop this article.

**Research Methodology and Methods**

Based on my positionality, the research methodology that has been used is a qualitative research methodology. The methods that have been implemented under the qualitative research methodology are as follows:

a. Critical diversity studies: This methodology ensures that research observations and arguments are not interpreted and reduced to a singular narrative framework. Melissa Steyn in her article “Critical diversity literacy” (2015) observes that within the methodological framework of critical diversity studies “differences of many varieties increasingly co-exist” (p. 379). The research works that have been conducted for this article take into account the multiple narratives about the socio-historical origin and the practices of the Siddis in Karnataka, and the diverse spatio-temporal positionalities from where the narratives emerge. The article does not come to a singular conclusion but shares every possible narrative about the musical, culinary and dance practices of the Siddis in Karnataka that have been collected in an oral and written manner.

b. Intersectionality: Intersectionality as a research methodology unfolds how different forms of social, cultural, political, economic and geographical practices are intertwined with each other and how they can never be assessed separately. The dance, musical and culinary practices of the Siddis of Karnataka have been discussed in this article in an interwoven manner. To elaborate further, the article reflects on how the dance, the songs and the culinary practices of the Siddis in Karnataka are socio-culturally interrelated with each other.

c. Participatory action research and guesthood: While researching with communities, the methodologies of participatory action research and guesthood invite us to treat the community members not as passive data objects of research, but as active co-researchers. In the article “Guesthood as ethical decolonising research method” (2003), Graham Harvey observes that the methodology of guesthood is generated by the concern that “our methods, approaches, and outcomes are not only
appropriately academic but are also both ethical and decolonising in the experience of those among or with whom we research” (p. 126). During my fieldwork with the Siddis of Karnataka in 2019, I firmly observed the ethical values of participatory action research and guesthood by asking them elaborative open-ended questions. The following questions were asked:

a. Can you please share stories about your musical practices?
b. Can you please reflect on your habitual lifestyles?
c. Can you please talk about your food habits?

The Siddis also invited me to actively participate in their songs and dances as a part of their guesthood practices.

d. Citing community members: Usually, personal communications with community members are presented as footnotes or endnotes or in a separate unpublished section at the end of articles. Such a citation approach not only reduces the participants as mere objects of data collection but also ignores their active role in the research. To acknowledge the role of the Siddi community members as co-researchers, I have used the citation template that has been conceptualised by Lorisia MacLeod in her article “More than Personal Communication” (2021). She has developed this template to cite the voices of the “Indigenous elders” and the “knowledge keepers” (Macleod, 2021) from the Indigenous communities. In her article, she has categorically outlined the APA and the MLA formats for citing the oral narratives. According to the citation guidelines of the International Journal of Critical Diversity Studies, I have used the APA format as outlined by Lorisia, because, as per my knowledge, no other template for citing the oral narratives of the Indigenous community members and knowledge keepers exist to date.

Participant Invitation Process

Keeping the above-mentioned methods as a backdrop, I invited five participants from the Siddi community in Karnataka to participate in the conversations. The participants were chosen with the assistance of the Siddi Development Society (SDS). The SDS approached potential participants and from them five participants (three men and two women) agreed to participate. The participants were aged between 25 and 40 years, and their names have been anonymised for ethical reasons. The participants have not been separately cited in the article, but have been collectively cited and paraphrased through songs and other oral narratives. The participants have been collectively acknowledged as “Community Members”.

The following section will reflect on the socio-historical origin of the Siddi community in India and how their diverse origins have contributed towards building interwoven cultural practices.

Siddis and Habshis: Socio-Historical Evolution and Contemporary Challenges

The Africans arrived in India from southern and eastern Africa at different points in time. Abu Minda Yimene in his article “History of Indo-African Trade relations and the resulting slave
trade” (2008) discusses that after the Islamic capital shifted from Syria to Iraq (in Baghdad) in 750 AD, the Persian Gulf came close to the Indian Ocean through trade networks. As a result, on the one side, the trade networks between India and Africa expanded, and on the other side, the arrival of slaves to India (Gujarat, Karnataka, and Maharashtra) also increased. The East African island towns functioned as an active market space for the Gujarati Muslims and the Arabs to indulge in the purchase and sale of African slaves (p. 484–485).

The first Islamic invasion in Maharashtra and the Deccan took place in the 1300s and they brought several Africans as slaves and mercenaries from the eastern parts of Africa. Pashington Obeng in his article “Religion and empire” (2008a) notes that “from the beginning of the Bahmani empire (1347–1489) in the Deccan, Africans (Habshis/Abyssinians) served as mercenaries (jangju) fighting for or against various political and military powers” (p. 236).

In 1672, Abbe Carre came to Gujarat through Syria, Iraq and the Persian Gulf, and in his historical documents Carre said that during the seventeenth century India housed a large number of Africans, who were part of a “wide array of occupations like kings, slaves, eunuchs, guards, etc.” (cited in Baptiste, 2008, p. 150). Later on, historians like Helene Basu, Amy Catlin-Jairazbhoy, Edward A. Alpers, Abdul Aziz Yusuf Lodhi, Rosie Llewellyn-Jones, Kenneth Robbins, Beheroze Shroff and several others traced the socio-historical origin of the African Indian community in India from diverse regions of Africa like Abyssinia (currently known as Ethiopia), Nubian valley (encompassing the current regions of Egypt and Sudan), Portuguese East Africa (currently known as Mozambique), Sumal (currently known as Somalia) and the South African Republic (currently known as the Republic of South Africa). With respect to the thematic scope of this article, the socio-historical origin of the African Indian community in India has not been discussed in much detail. Moreover, a lot of books and articles on the origin of the African Indian community in India already exist.

The African Indian communities, also known as Siddis and Habshis, were involved in multiple professions. Besides being slaves, they worked as forest guards, mine workers, fishermen, textile workers, palace guards, agricultural workers, army leaders, etc. (Baptiste, 2008; Pinto, 2008; Prasad, 2008; Shroff, 2008; McLeod, 2008; Pereira, 2008). Many African slaves, because of their physical prowess, honesty and managerial skills also rose to the ranks of kings. For instance, Malik Ambar, an African slave in the Deccan laid the foundation of the African kingdoms in Janjira (located in southern Mumbai) and Sachin (located in Gujarat). Moreover, the African slaves, apart from professional and racial fluidity, enjoyed gender fluidity as well. The eunuch slaves were held in high esteem by the kings. Historical records reveal that they were recruited for guarding the harems and many of them, later on, emerged as kings. For instance, between 1487 and 1493, a Habshi (another name for the African slaves in India) kingdom was established in Bengal. The first two kings—Sultan Shahzada Barbak Shah and Sultan Saifuddin Firuz Shah were eunuchs (Robbins & McLeod, 2006; Llewellyn-Jones, 2014; Ali et al., 2020). These diverse evolutionary and professional patterns of the Siddis in India reveal their long and multifaceted socio-historical association with the country and the cultural exchanges that have been taking place between the Siddis and the local communities. The exchanges have been functioning as a precursor to their development of intersectional, porous and fluid socio-cultural practices of epistemic justice.
and cognitive freedom, which will be discussed in the following section, in the contemporary era. The exchanges also show that during the Islamic civilisation the racial segregation of African slaves was not very common.

It was with the arrival of the Portuguese colonisers in India that the African slaves in India were racially dehumanised and compartmentalised. As the Portuguese came to India, they brought with them African slaves from Mozambique, Eritrea, Somalia and South Africa, which diversified the already existing population of Abyssinian slaves in the country (Shah et al., 2011; Vallangi, 2016; India Today Web Desk, 2016). The Portuguese subjected the African slaves to severe states of existential inhumanity, as they did with the Indigenous communities in other parts of the world. As a result, many slaves escaped from the clutches of the Portuguese into the forests of Goa, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Gujarat. This is how the Siddi settlements in Karnataka came into existence.

The racial discrimination against the Siddis continues to take place in the contemporary era in terms of caste, class, economy, skin colour and geography. Usually, the Siddis in Karnataka live at the Karnataka–Maharashtra border and therefore they have physically settled away from the urban areas. Due to their close location to the forests, the Siddis experience multiple forms of infrastructural crises like lack of access to basic health facilities, educational facilities, communication facilities and job facilities in their localities. Though a few Siddis have been working as clerks, engineers, doctors, nurses, advocates, lawyers and have been involved in sports as athletes and footballers, the local governing bodies have not taken any initiative to improve the infrastructural conditions in the Siddi residential areas of Karnataka. On the contrary, every effort is being made by the governing organisations and the private enterprises to uproot these communities from the forests and confiscate their lands for industrial purposes (Sansad TV, 2017). Besides geographical racialisation, the community is also racialised in terms of their skin colour. While travelling in trains and buses and at their workplaces, they are often ridiculed because of their hairstyles and dark skin colours (101 India, 2016; Stuart, 2018). Despite sufficient skills, many offices in Karnataka and Maharashtra refuse to recruit the Siddis because they are often perceived as foreigners (Asthana, 2020; AFP, 2021). Within the socio-religious systems in India, the Hindu Siddis are regarded as low castes, the Muslim Siddis are regarded as low-class Muslims, and the Christian Siddis are perceived as inauthentic Christians (Shroff, 2015; Czekalska & Kuczkiewicz-Fras, 2016).

These diverse racial experiences have pushed the Siddis within a liminal diasporic existential framework, where they live “on the threshold of society, enduring a life of segregation and oppression, marked by difference underscored by mourning for lost homelands, in the everyday practices of living” (Gairola et al., 2021, p. 5). The Siddis in Karnataka, exist “neither here nor there” and they are “betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial” (Turner, 1969, p. 95). Technically, the Siddis are regarded as the tribal communities of India, but, due to official lapses, the Siddis of the Uttara Kannada district have only been granted the status of Scheduled Tribes (Japhet & Sitapati, 2008, pp. 225–226). Personal conversations with the Siddis in the Uttara Kannada district have revealed that despite being granted reservations and scholarships at government-run
education and work institutions, due to caste and racial biases, a majority of the Siddis work as domestic workers, cleaners, untrained labourers, agricultural workers, garage mechanics, tourist guides and in other odd jobs (Community Members, 2019a).

These critical and transitional experiences of the Siddis in Karnataka have provoked them to build collective and collaborative spaces of interwoven resistance through the cultural performances of singing, dancing, hunting, cooking and eating. The following section will outline how through the above-mentioned cultural performances the Siddis practice epistemic justice and cognitive freedom in daily life.

Porosities and Fluidities: A Repertory of Intertwined Existence

The habitual practices of eating, hunting, cooking, dancing and singing of the Siddis in Karnataka (specifically in Uttara Kannada district) are not only interconnected to each other, but they are also archipelagic in nature. To elaborate further, due to intermingling with the local natives in India for several centuries, the Siddis have adopted various sociocultural practices of the locals without compromising their ancestral memories. For instance, let us look into the lyrics of the following song:

Ami Savi Sana Miloun Soduya  
Ami Savi Sana Miloun Soduya  
Ami Savi Sana Miloun Soduya  
Ami Savi Sana Miloun Soduya  
Soduva Soduva Soduva Soduva  
Soduva Soduva Soduva Soduva  
Soduva Hey Soduva Hey  
Soduva Hey Soduva Hey.

(Community Members, 2019b)

This song talks about the existential diversity and the togetherness of the Siddi community in Karnataka. The concluding lines (the last two lines) are sung more loudly than the previous lines and the expression “Hey” unfolds the celebratory aspect of the song. This loudly expressive performative pattern of concluding the song has been imbibed from the African ancestors. The rhythm of this song also matches the musical beats of many songs in Kenya, Tanzania, Sudan and Mozambique. The first four lines are sung in a pattern of four beats and the last four lines are sung in an alternate beat pattern of two beats. This rhythm is very specific to the Ngoma drums that the Siddis mostly play while singing their songs. The Ngoma drums are similar to the Goma drums that are played by the Indigenous communities in eastern and other parts of Africa. While performing the songs, the Siddi women wear saris, kurtis, and long skirts. This dressing pattern has been adopted by the local Indian women.
The lyrics and the performative methods of the above-mentioned song address both Indian socio-cultural traditions and African ancestral traditions, without assimilating the latter with the former. These exercises of socio-cultural cohabitation, collaboration and co-creation without assimilation function as significant tools of epistemic justice and cognitive freedom where the Siddis resist their racial, social, cultural, political, economic marginalisation not through creating differences and conflicts, but through weaving interactive and discursive spaces of caring and sharing (Community Members, 2019c). This is what Ananya Jahanara Kabir and Ari Gautier identify as archipelagic memories and fragments (2021). Similar to a group of islands, the cultural performances of the Siddis distinctly display the diverse social, cultural, geographical and historical aspects of India and Kenya, Tanzania, Sudan and Mozambique within their archipelagic socio-cultural spaces. These spaces are porous and fluid, where the cultural performances of the Siddi community do not get restricted within specific geopolitical compartments and move back and forth in multiple directions like liquid entities. Recently, Ananya, in one of her lectures has compared the phenomenon of porosity with a “semi-permeable membrane that allows matters to pass in both directions” (Kabir, 2021a). In the same lecture, she also adds that porous cultural performances “allow a two-way flow” (2021a). The instances of the porous cultural performances of the Siddis in Karnataka show that their liminal identities flow in multiple directions at the same time.

More instances of cognitive justice and epistemic freedom through socio-cultural sharing and caring can be found in Purnima Mehta Bhatt’s book “The African Diaspora in India” (2018), where she mentions the following Siddi welcome song that consists of Swahili words and is usually performed by the Muslim Siddis:

Jumbo Jumbo Re
Jumbo Jumbo Re
Shana Shana Re
Shana Shana Re.

(Bhatt, 2018, p. 63)

The word jumbo is a locally adapted version of the Kiswahili word jambo, which is commonly used in eastern Africa as a greeting. The Muslim Siddis of Karnataka and Gujarat sing this song (also known as zikr⁷) to invite guests during religious rituals (Mehta, p. 63). While performing this song the Siddi singers wear handwoven taqiyas⁸ and long traditional gowns that are traditionally worn by the Muslims in India and the Siddi dancers wear dresses made out of bird feathers, cowrie shells,⁹ skins of domestic animals and leaves that resonate with the native Indigenous dressing patterns of many African communities (Catlin-Jairazbhoy, 2008; Community Members, 2019b). The cultural and aesthetic values of these performances are influenced by the types of dresses they wear and the ways they dance. These songs are accompanied by dances which are known as Siddi Dhamal. The Siddi Dhamal dance is similar to the Goma dance form, which is practised in different parts of Africa like Congo, Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, etc. (Staff Reporter, 2011; Samuel, 2020).
The body movements of the Siddi Dhamal dancers imitate wild animals and narrate stories about their historical connections to the Indian Ocean and their harmonious relationship with the natural environment.

Apart from the interconnections between music, dance, languages, dressing patterns and religious rituals, the existential patterns of the Siddis of Karnataka also reflect how their habitual cultural performances of singing, hunting, cooking, and eating are woven with each other as essential tools of peacebuilding, decolonial healing, cognitive justice and epistemic freedom. The following Kannada song is sung by the Siddi women to wake up their children and to signal to the male members of the family to go hunting and collect vegetables:

Amanika Jaamanika Laalmaadu Re
O Raja A Raja Teri Hawale
La La La La La La
doors are removed with a machete and the soft inner part is consumed as food. Besides fulfilling their hunger, the juiciness of the inner part meets the thirst of the Siddis as well. The plant is also a source of high protein and energy and therefore during financial crises when the Siddis cannot buy food items from the market, they live on Baine Mara (101 India, 2016). Another food item that serves as a source of rich protein for the Siddis is fresh honeycombs. The culture of consuming fresh honeycombs has been inherited by the Siddis from their African ancestors and many native Indigenous communities in Africa continue to consume fresh honeycombs as a part of their habitual food habit (Hollmann, 2015).

Another culinary practice that the Siddis have inherited from their African ancestors is the consumption of red ants (Niassy & Ekesi, 2017; Grabowski et al., 2020). Red ant chutney is an integral part of Siddi delicacy, and it is prepared by creating a paste with onion, garlic, ginger, turmeric, chilli powder and salt. This is another example of how the Siddi communities maintain their cultural porosity and fluidity in an archipelagic way. The interwoven performance of native Indian and native African socio-cultural practices by the Siddis is what Ananya understands as “a chain of cultural recognitions” (Kabir, 2021b). After the ants are collected by the Siddi men from the forests, the Siddi women prepare the chutney. While preparing the chutney the Siddi women sing different songs as a way of offering respect to nature’s abundance. Usually, the red ant chutney is consumed at the time of dinner because according to the Siddis the best time to catch red ants is around five in the evening when the
ants return to their nests (101 India, 2016; Community Members, 2019c). After dinner, the Siddis celebrate their day with the following song:

Indu Mama Indu Mama Indu Mama
Pattam Pattam Pallamcharey
Indu Mama.

(101 India, 2016; Community Members, 2019c)

This song is sung along with Ngoma drums by the Siddis to show their gratitude towards the natural environment. This is how the daily Siddi activities of hunting, cooking, singing, dancing and eating intersect with each other to generate a diverse archipelagic space of social, cultural and historical performances. This archipelagic space not only outlines the socio-cultural practices of the Siddis in Karnataka but also functions as an emancipatory zone by resisting against the colonially structured “complex systems of domination and oppression” (Dutta et al., 2016) that consistently marginalises and dehumanises the Siddis in the contemporary era.

These intersections of songs, hunting practices, food habits, dance and culinary cultures unfold complex and deeply entangled socio-cultural performances of epistemic justice and cognitive freedom that are racially, socially, economically and culturally very diverse. The diversity provokes individuals and institutions across the country to question the socio-historical narratives that violate, dehumanise and demonise the Siddis through moulding peaceful and unassimilated socio-cultural spaces where the Siddis can share their existential practices with other communities in India and vice-versa. The performances of cognitive justice and epistemic freedom will be more categorically elaborated in the following sub-sections.

**Epistemic Justice**

The interwoven socio-cultural practices of the Siddis, as discussed above, generate collaborative and co-creative networks of epistemic justice, where the non-Siddi people are invited to actively participate. This invitation to participate is not to give consent to the colonially idolised socio-political organisations to marginalise, victimise, dehumanise and assimilate the Siddis, but to open gateways for justice that propose the necessity of “decommissioning the underpinnings of the colonial order of things, including neo-colonialism, and pursuing decoloniality as an imperative for the achievement of full liberation” (Zondi, 2017, p. 106). The establishment of the All Karnataka Siddi Development Association (AKSDA) in 1984 played an important role in bringing all the Siddis of Karnataka under one umbrella organisation and addressing their grievances effectively. But the organisation did not last long because it was founded and led by non-Siddi “well-wishers”, who were more interested in “representing” the Siddis in the state and central socio-political organisations rather than allowing the Siddis to speak for themselves (Obeng, 2008b, p. 189). As a result, the AKSDA collapsed and it was replaced by the Siddi Development Society in 1995. The SDS was founded by the Siddis in Karnataka and is run by the Siddi community members, who socially, culturally, and politically organise and mobilise their fellow community members (Obeng, 2008b, p. 190).
On the one side, the SDS makes sure that the non-Siddi people are compassionately welcomed, treated and introduced to the Siddi socio-cultural practices, and on the other side, they ensure that the non-Siddi people are respectful of the Siddi existential practices and do not make any effort to distort them. When I visited the community at Uttara Kannada district for two-week fieldwork in 2019, members from the SDS were continuously assisting me in communicating with the community members. They also made sure that I was given information about the historical and cultural practices of the Siddis as accurately as possible. Therefore, I was introduced to the community elders who are widely experienced with the diverse socio-historical practices of the Siddi community. During the communication, the elders revealed that to transform the racist attitude of the non-Siddi people, it is necessary to invite them to the community and make them participate in the Siddi socio-cultural practices (Community Members, 2019b). While documenting the dance performances, the Siddi women invited me to participate and taught me the way the dances are performed. During the songs, the Siddis invited me to play the Ngoma drum and taught me a few rhythms. They were also pleased to see me playing *Tabla* rhythms on the Ngoma drum. Such exchanges generate awareness about the richness and diversity of the Siddi socio-historical practices on the one side and build “decolonial ethics of co-existence” that nurtures “lasting peace and prosperity” (Zondi, 2017, p. 107) on the other. These collaborative and co-creative practices of epistemic justice lead to cognitive freedom where individuals are healed from violence, hatred, self-centredness and ignorance.

**Cognitive Freedom**

The Siddi community members are strictly against the capitalisation and the commercialisation of their socio-cultural practices. Therefore, the members of the SDS make sure that the visitors do not have to “buy tickets” to watch the performances and that their socio-cultural activities are not “sold” to the visitors. But, to socio-economically support the performers, the Siddis request the visitors to make financial donations according to their own choice. A majority of the Siddis in the Uttara Kannada district do not have access to education and jobs. A lot of government and private sector organisations have been making efforts to take away the forest lands from the Siddis and relocate them to the cities. But the members of the SDS, who are mostly educated and who work in different governing and private offices in Karnataka and Maharashtra, make their fellow community members aware of the “invisible colonial matrices of power” (Dastile & Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013, p. 105) within which the governing institutions function. The invisible matrices of power in the forms of reservations (the Siddis of Uttara Kannada are recognised as Scheduled Castes), housing schemes, job schemes, education schemes, health schemes and many more are launched by the governing organisations for selective communities in return for their consensual dehumanisation and violence. To elaborate further, the governing organisations sign an invisible contract with certain communities that if the communities allow the governing organisations to exploit them, then the governing organisations will grant them certain socio-economic privileges in return. Such violent schemes of governance are strategically hidden under the rhetoric of development and modernity and are safeguarded by the community members, who are consensually entrapped by the governing organisations.
To avoid such traps, the members of the SDS organise awareness programmes for the community members and mobilise them to protect their lands and forests. The Siddis consistently remind each other that their habitual practices of hunting, singing, dancing, cooking and eating are situated within the contexts of the natural environment and if they are relocated to the city, then they would not only be physically dislocated but also psychologically decapitated from their social, historical and cultural roots (Community Members, 2019d). It is amidst these habitual existential tensions that the interwoven cultural performances allow the Siddis to “forge new categories of thought”, construct “new subjectivities”, and create “new modes of being and becoming” (Dastile & Ndlovu-Gatsheni, p. 107). The new modes of being and becoming are articulated by the Siddis within the forests. The forests function as emancipatory sites for epistemic justice, where the Siddis breathe, live, dance, sing, hunt, cook and eat to remember and re-member their ancestral memories on the one hand, and acknowledge their porous and fluid relationship with the local Indian socio-historical practices on the other.

These practices, in turn, have given birth to “a pluralism of cultures” that flows towards and interacts with each other without compromising with the roots of their origin (wa Thiong’o, 1993, p. 11). The consistent effort of the Siddis to build economies of care and share through their socio-cultural performances is a way of reclaiming their epistemic justice and cognitive freedom. The planetary project of European colonisation has not only caused physical injustice but has also caused epistemic injustice and cognitive injustice against the Indigenous communities in the Global South (de Sousa Santos, 2018; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018a; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018b). Similarly, the physical colonisation of the Siddis by the Portuguese expanded into epistemic colonisation and cognitive colonisation in post-independent India. The governing institutions epistemically and cognitively colonised the Siddis by racially dehumanising their socio-cultural practices. The purpose behind racially dehumanising the socio-cultural practices of the community is to sterilise them, distort them, inferiorise them and then compel them to assimilate with the dominant and mainstream Indian socio-cultural practices. The Siddis, through their interwoven socio-cultural activities, have been building frameworks of physical, epistemic and cognitive resistance against such violent tendencies.

The Siddis in Karnataka may not frequently feature in television shows, news channels, museum collections and social media, but their peaceful, collaborative, co-creative and compassionate ways of resisting colonial/modern social, cultural and political elitism of the mainstream socio-political institutions in India have generated quite a few research projects in the recent times. But no research works on the interwoven socio-cultural practices of singing, dancing, hunting, cooking and eating by the Siddis in Karnataka have been conducted to date. The Siddis’ ways of resisting the self-profiting motives of capitalist modernism and generating pan-global awareness about their histories, cultures, and traditions through practising guesthood, stand out as a powerful example for African Diaspora communities in the Indian Ocean World and beyond.

**Conclusion**

The introduction of the Special Area Games Project (SAGP) in 1987 by the Indian government in the Siddi localities of Karnataka attracted the attention of media and researchers
from India and abroad. The SAGP was launched to train potential Siddi children in athletics, football and other sports and prepare them for various national and international competitions. But a lot of the media narratives and the research descriptions were underpinned with the intention of remanufacturing the colonially structured racial stereotypes (based on skin colour, economic status, geographical origin, etc.) by either identifying the Siddis as a socio-economically prosperous community or benevolently demonising them as a socio-economically backward community and justifying why they should be uprooted from their natural environment and relocated to the cities. To celebrate the propagandist intentions of the then-contemporary Indian government the media benevolently demonised the social, cultural, economic and political situations of the Siddis as backward and unmodern and presented the SAGP initiative as a way of developing the community through training and promoting them in sports (Lulla, 2009; Rajvanshi, 2016; Singh, 2016). But, after the SAGP was shut down in 1992, the media gradually started losing interest in the community and there was hardly any concern about the future of the Siddi athletes who were part of the project. A lot of academic research works also followed the same pattern of socially, culturally and economically stereotyping the Siddis of Karnataka by treating the Siddis as objects of data collection; hunting, mining and gathering selective information from them; and presenting half-baked and distorted socio-historical narratives about their historical evolution and contemporary situation.

This article thematically, theoretically and methodologically interrogates the misrepresented histories and cultures of the Siddi community of Karnataka by presenting their socio-cultural narratives in an ethnographic manner and unpacking the socio-historical porosities, fluidities and the interwovenness of their narratives. Such narratives of the Siddis make an effort to build subversive histories and generate border epistemologies. The subversive histories and border epistemologies that are being recovered and maintained by the Siddis, through habitually performing their socio-cultural practices within the natural environment and resisting the relocation policies of the national and state governments, encourage and invite the researchers to interrogate, decentralise and dismantle the mainstream, elitist, communalised and racialised historical narratives of India and generate de-hierarchical, tangential, and diverse pathways of relationality, reciprocity, accountability and coalition.

NOTES
1. Prior to becoming a king Saifuddin Firoz Shah was a eunuch slave and his slave name was Malik Andil Habshi.
2. The oral narrative has been cited on the basis of the citation template as shared by Lorisia MacLeod, an indigenous member of the James Smith Cree Nation, in her article titled “More than personal communication”. https://kula.uvic.ca/index.php/kula/article/view/135/258. More details about the relevance and the context of this citation methodology can be found in the “Research Methodologies” section of this article.
3. The term “Scheduled Tribes” (STs) was first used in the Constitution of India under Article 366(5). Scheduled Tribes refer to native indigenous community groups, who have originated in India or have originated somewhere else and have been settled in India for a considerable period of time. The status of Scheduled Tribes grants scholarships and reservations at education and job institutions to the native indigenous communities.
4. The caste and racial bias against the Siddis are intertwined with each other. Due to their dark skin color, the caste and racial positions of the Siddis in Karnataka are regarded equivalent to the Dalits (Hindu outcaste communities), and accordingly they are marginalised in every aspect of their existence.

5. The research article is based on a field work that was conducted in the Uttara Kannada district. Though the cultural practices of all the Siddi communities in Karnataka are almost similar to each other, yet I thought of specifically mentioning the geographical area of research so that the readers are clear about the geographical and the socio-cultural positionality of the Siddi participants.

6. Kurtis is a tunic-type or shirt-type dress that is widely worn by the women in South Asia. The dresses are usually short size (maximum till the lower waist) in size.

7. In Islam, the Urdu term zikr is used to refer to devotional songs and dances.

8. Muslim skull caps.

9. Shells that are derived from the sea snails.

10. Tabla is a traditional Indian percussion instrument that consists of a pair of hand drums. The hand drum on the left is slightly bigger and wider than the hand drum on the right.

REFERENCES


