

# White Camphor and Peppercorn Hair: Blackness in Medieval Arabo-Asia

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## Abstract

*Reading classical Arabic and Chinese sources at once comparatively and intersectionally, this article initiates an investigation of Black labor—specifically Black sailors and slaves—employed in medieval trade networks that connect Africa, Arabia, and Persia to South Asia, Southeast Asia, and China. It does not presume a homogeneous definition of Blackness, nor a generalized notion of slavery. While informed by concepts developed in scholarly studies of transatlantic slavery and Euro-American colonial history, this article strives to expand our understanding of the global articulation of Blackness beyond both the modern period and the Atlantic world. I draw on numerous genres of classical literature—Islamic ḥadīth commentaries, stories of marvels, geographical works, poetry, Buddhist dictionaries, and polemical treatises—and corroborate them with visual evidence from the same or adjacent periods. Rather than aiming for a social history of Black labor, I suggest that we harness the magical qualities of these half-true, half-invented narratives, capitalize on their marvelousness, and instead of laying claim to a definitive account of who the Black sailors were and what they did, create new avenues of research and imagination that may help us regain access to the breathtakingly rich and layered world of a Black subalternity articulated translingually across the medieval Indian Ocean world.*

Of the numerous exquisite paintings included in a thirteenth-century illustrated manuscript of *Maqāmāt al-Ḥarīrī*, fol. 119v depicts a dynamic dhow in motion, with its Black crew on full display (see Fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> While its impeccably groomed and elegantly turbaned passengers were neatly arranged below deck, looking expectantly toward their destination, on deck (and in the hold, emptying waste or excess water from possible leakage) are almost exclusively Black sailors staffing all key positions, from working the rudder, adjusting the sail, to keeping watch for approaching land. Their obvious differences in dress and hairstyles—the long flowing hair of the proportionally larger seated figure is likely one of the most prominent features to first catch the viewer’s eye—indicate that the illustrator, Yaḥyā b. Maḥmūd al-Wāsiṭī (ca. thirteenth century), made it a point to represent the varied racial and ethnic origins of the Black sailors aboard.

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1. The full illustrated manuscript, [Arabe 5847](#), can be accessed at the Bibliothèque nationale de France’s Gallica website. I thank BnF for their permission to reproduce fol. 119v in this article.

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Fig. 1. *Maqāmāt al-Ḥarīrī*, BnF *Arabe* 5874, fol. 119v. Courtesy of Bibliothèque nationale de France.

There is a message of cosmopolitanism here: as if the marvelously trans-regional oceanic adventures of the globe-trotting medieval Arab merchants were mirrored by the myriad origins of their slaves and servants recruited—kidnapped, bought, or “hired”—along the coasts of East Africa, Arabia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. In a 2020 keynote speech delivered at the invitation of the Asian Civilisations Museum in Singapore, Tansen Sen used the term “floating cosmopolitanism” to characterize the vital role such vessels played in creating and sustaining vast economic, social, and religious networks: he used the same illustration yet the striking presence of Black labor somehow escaped his attention.<sup>2</sup> Sen is not exceptional in this omission, however; this particular folio from BnF Arabe 5847 has acquired unique publicity in that it is featured on the covers of numerous books and is included as an in-text illustration in even more.<sup>3</sup> Its reprints can be found in great numbers of museums and galleries across Asia, from Singapore’s Asian Civilisations Museum to Quanzhou Maritime Museum in China’s Fujian Province. Yet despite such rare popularity, the illustration is often used as a symbolic token to pay homage to the global connectivities of medieval Muslim trade; seldom do we find its Black seamen treated as a significant, if not ineradicable presence to be reckoned with and properly addressed.<sup>4</sup>

Instead of piecing together a coherent account of these dark-skinned laborers based on snippets of information gleaned from historical records, this article traces the cross-Indian Ocean trajectories of two special commodities, namely, camphor and peppercorn, whose material circulation and figuration in literature intertwine to demonstrate how Black labor—whether as sailors or (domestic) slaves—is sublimated into Black metaphor. My aim is not to craft another narrative on medieval trans-regional trade that pivots on two popular commodities; neither do I intend to add another brick to the already lofty historiographical mansion showcasing premodern globalization. While close attention to Black labor informs my interpretation of classical Arabic and Chinese literature, I do not aim to write a social history of the circulation of enslaved Black mariners. Rather, my intention is to read literary archives—in Arabic and Chinese—against the grain, locate the material within the figurative (and vice versa), and investigate the subtle yet profound processes of racialization and the literary sleight of hand hiding their operation across multilingual sources.<sup>5</sup> To wit, let me

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2. “Keynote Lecture—‘Floating Cosmopolitanism: Conceptualising Indian Ocean Interactions beyond Silk,’” Asian Civilisations Museum, November 16, 2020: 44:08–45:12.

3. Three books that have featured the illustration on their front covers and that are in fact essential reading for those interested in medieval Arab travels across the Indian Ocean are George F. Hourani, *Arab Seafaring: In the Indian Ocean in Ancient and Early Medieval Times*, exp. ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995); Omar H. Ali, *Islam in the Indian Ocean World: A Brief History with Documents* (New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2016); Buzurg b. Shahriyār al-Rām Hormuzī, *The Book of the Wonders of India*, ed. and trans. G. S. P. Freeman-Grenville (London: East-West Publications, 1980). 119v of BnF Arabe 5847, reproduced as a frontispiece to the latter translation, bears the caption “merchants sailing to India,” thus conveniently erasing the presence of the Black sailors and laborers aboard.

4. Two notable exceptions are Finbarr Barry Flood and Beate Fricke, *Tales Things Tell: Material Histories of Early Globalisms* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2024), 196–204; Lamia Balafrej, “Domestic Slavery, Skin Colour, and Image Dialectic in Thirteenth-Century Arabic Manuscripts,” *Art History* 44, no. 5 (2021): 1012–36.

5. Methodologically I am indebted to Cord J. Whitaker’s brilliant *Black Metaphors: How Modern Racism*

demonstrate my interpretative strategy by means of a short poem from the Andalusian poet Abū ‘Alī al-Nashshār, who hailed from Valencia and of whose biography we know woefully little: we only know that he likely lived in the late twelfth century under the reign of the Almohad Caliphate.<sup>6</sup> The poem is a conventional exemplar from the popular poetic genre in praise of physical beauty—in this case, that of a boy’s fair face with a black mole placed on a rosy cheek:

مَتَى مِنْ حُبِّي أَرْجُو سَرَاحًا      أَلْوَامِي عَلَى كَلْفِي يَبْحَى  
كَرْنَجِي أَتَى رَوْضًا صَبَا      وَبَيْنَ الْحَدِّ وَالشَّقَّتَيْنِ خَالٌ  
أَيَّجِي الْوَرْدَ أَمْ يَجْنِي الْأَقَا      تَحَيَّرَ فِي جَنَاهُ فَلَيسَ يَدْرِي

Do my detractors denounce me for my love of Yaḥyā,  
When my affection for him even led me to wish for a divorce?

Between his cheek and two lips is a mole,  
Like a Zanj who entered the garden in the morning—

Confused he was in his harvest,  
Knowing not whether to pick the rose or the daisy.<sup>7</sup>

Two double entendres appear in the first line, if we keep in mind that classical texts in Arabic, especially those from lesser-known poets, often omit the *ḥarakāt* (short vowels): *kalaf*, which I translate as “love,” also refers to freckles or sunspots. “My love of Yaḥyā,” interpreted differently, can thus also mean that “I find the freckles of my fancy on Yaḥyā’s fair face.” And *ḥubb*, whose common meaning is also love or affection, shares the same trilateral roots as *ḥabb*, referring to seed or grain. It is not uncommon to hear even contemporary speakers of Arabic associate love (especially of God) with a “seed” in the heart that in the fullness of time comes to fruition in piety and worship: “my affection for him” therefore can also refer to “his seed” or “his grain,” that is, “the grain of dark spot on the fair face of my beloved.” (The Arabic is wonderfully ambiguous in that the word *ḥubbihi* literally means “his love,” in this case, “love of him,” but when it is read as *ḥabbihi*, it becomes “his seed” or “his grain.”) Love is thus inextricably bound up with the black mole, and the latter makes its first appearance in the poem through two consecutive double entendres before the poet introduces it explicitly in the second line.

Al-Nashshār further analogizes the black mole to the Black Zanjī gardener—most likely a domestic slave—who, upon entering the garden for his morning routine, was astounded by the beauties he witnessed that he was at a loss as to whether he ought to pick the red

*Emerged from Medieval Race-Thinking* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), in particular ch. 1, “Black Metaphors in the *King of Tars*,” 20–47.

6. Abū ‘Alī al-Nashshār’s poems are included in the collection of Andalusian poetry from the Almohad period compiled by Ṣafwān b. Idrīs (d. 1202), *Zād al-musāfir wa-ghurrat maḥyā al-adab al-sāfir* (Beirut: Dār al-Nashr, 1939), 57–59. While we do not know exactly when he was born and when he died, it is likely that he passed before Ṣafwān b. Idrīs, which would locate him squarely in the twelfth century.

7. *Ibid.*, 57.

rose—symbolizing the rosy cheek—or the daisy—whose fan of fair petals is but a simile to the pearl white teeth of the beloved Yaḥyā. The immobility of the mole is thus converted from a simple bodily mark to a charming affective rapture, while in the meantime an enslaved Black laborer in his place of work is sublimated into a black mole on a fair face. The aestheticized thematization of his Blackness has all but erased his Black body. He is abstracted into a color: he is made to disappear into his own darkness. And this darkness is perhaps not even black, for in poems of the same genre, we frequently come across sunspots not so much associated with blackness as they are cast as dark in comparison to the brighter sun. This means in effect that the mole on a fair space too is fair and not black: the contrast is between white and whiter, not between black and white. Blackness thus makes an appearance only to likewise be disappeared. Poetry, indeed, can be a cruel business.

This is an extreme yet by no means exceptional literary specimen from classical Arabic demonstrating how the figurative exposes and erases the material in one and the same rhetorical move. Just as camphor and peppercorn are two essential commodities transported across vast geographical distances to acquire handsome profits, so too is the laboring body of the Black slave a commodity to be inspected, priced, and traded. Yet I do not mean to use the circulation of commodities and commodified labor to highlight premodern global commercial connectivities. Rather, it is my purpose to draw attention to the fact that as commodities change hands, Blackness moves in and out of its material embodiment and is entered into another circulation, or a concatenation of permutation, where literary representation puts under erasure, strikes through, but not completely effaces traces of Black bodies and/or Black labor.

In capitalizing “Black” this article does not evince the dubious claim that the Black bodies here examined, even if obliquely, through their sublimated representations in literature and other canonical religious texts, somewhat belong to a homogeneous group. Even a cursory glance at Figure 1 shows that there is no one “Black people” involved, and the Black laborers, both in the same period and no doubt more so across periods, are likely recruited from a great variety of groups divided by numerous racial, ethnic, geographic, linguistic, cultural, and religious gulfs. What they had in common likely goes rarely beyond the arbitrary incidence that for one reason or another, willingly or unwillingly, they ended up on the same ship. Many probably did not or were not able to travel the full length of the trip: some died and were cast overboard, while others were brought up along the way, still others fled when the ship docked to replenish for fresh food and potable water. The “floating cosmopolitanism” that Tansen Sen so ingeniously names is as much fluid in the composition of its crew members as it is in its transport on water.

My use of Blackness when dealing with medieval Arabic and Chinese sources is only mirroring the fact that no nuanced distinctions are made in these sources of the many groups thus lumped together. I include in Blackness all people who have been labeled “black” in medieval Arabic and Chinese sources: it is therefore an etic imposition, not an emic self-description advanced by those thus described. This means that Blackness in this article does not directly correspond to our current perception of skin color, for who counts as black depends on whom one asks and how those questions are framed, and a “black” person in

the eyes of a tenth-century Arab merchant may not at all appear “black” to us now. Neither is Blackness in this article used as a *political* concept deployed by Black revolutionary theorists to describe and theorize shared experiences of exploitation and colonization, as well as rebellion and revolution, that transcend one place and one people and are bound together by their confrontation with a common foe, that is, Western imperialism.<sup>8</sup> While my general conception of Blackness is heavily informed by the Black radical tradition and the larger project that gives rise to this article would not have been possible without engaging with theorists such as Cedric Robinson, C. L. R. James, Walter Rodney, or W. E. B. Du Bois, in this article Blackness is used in a way that is more empirically elastic than deliberately political. It aims to disconnect Blackness from anachronistic colorism, not to reestablish its relationship to political resistance. A more elaborate exposition on the appropriateness of “medieval” to non-European historiography as well as the applicability of “race” and “racialization” to premodern forms of hierarchized differentiation of humankind is beyond the scope of this article, though I wish here to briefly gesture toward their centrality to a project that examines premodern trans-regional articulation of Blackness.<sup>9</sup>

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8. The debate over the application of “race” in medieval studies and how Blackness ought to be examined outside the modern transatlantic context is a long and winding one. For recent publications on this key issue, which this article cannot engaged with fully, see Adam Miyashiro, “Race, Medieval Studies, and Disciplinary Boundaries,” *boundary 2* 50, no. 3 (2023): 107–21; Mariah Min, “Undoing Medieval Race Studies,” *boundary 2* 50, no. 3 (2023): 173–87. For Blackness in medieval studies, see Cord J. Whitaker, “Black Metaphor in the King of Tars,” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 12, no. 2 (2013): 169–193; and his well-researched *Black Metaphors*. Geraldine Heng’s *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018) is no doubt an essential reference, so is the [Global Middle Ages Project](#) (G-MAP) she spearheaded with Susan Noakes and Lynn Ramey. Of the many criticisms made of Heng’s book and G-MAP in general, see, e.g., Justin Stearns, “Race in the Islamic Middle East: Reflections after Heng,” *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 9, no. 1 (2022): 114–21; Rebecca de Souza, “Are There Limits to Globalising the Medieval?” *postmedieval* 15, no. 1 (2024): 257–83. With regard to Blackness in medieval Islamic studies, see Rachel Schine, “Race and Blackness in Premodern Arabic Literature,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*, published online October 29, 2021; idem, “Conceiving the Pre-Modern Black-Arab Hero: On the Gendered Production of Racial Difference in *Sīrat al-amīrah dhāt al-himmah*,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 48, no. 3 (2017): 298–326; idem, “[Translating Race in the Islamic Studies Classroom](#),” *Al-‘Uṣūr al-Wuṣṭā* 30 (2022): 320–83; Kristina Richardson, “The Boundaries and Geographies of Medieval Blackness,” in *Islam on the Margins: Studies in Memory of Michael Bonner*, ed. Robert Haug and Steven Judd, 220–34 (Leiden: Brill, 2023). Studies of Blackness and racialization in the modern Islamic world are far too many to enumerate; however, a recent study of Blackness in modern Iran deserves special attention: Beeta Baghoolizadeh, *The Color Black: Enslavement and Erasure in Iran* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2024).

9. A recent issue of the journal *postmedieval* (vol. 15, no. 1, March 2024) includes a cluster of essays (“Grounds for a Trans-Regional Medieval Studies, Beyond the Global”) debating whether terms such as “medieval” and “the Middle Ages” can be employed in the study of the premodern non-Western world, and the intellectual and political implications of this terminological decision. In Chinese the term 中古 *zhong gu*, literally “the Middle Ancient,” has an extended history. While its current usage often refers to the period of Wei, Jin, Nan, Bei, Sui, and Tang Dynasties, i.e., from the third to the ninth centuries, historically its reference varies depending on who in what period is referring to which dynasty. It is obvious that 中古 in Chinese refers to a period that includes both late antiquity and the early Middle Ages in European historical periodization. For the shifting reference of 中古 in Chinese historiography, see Xie Weijie, “He wei ‘zhong gu’?,” in *Zhongguo Zhong gu shi ji kan*, ed. Zhang Dazhi, 2:3–19 (Beijing: Shangwu Yinshuguan, 2016). For early debates over the periodization of Islamic history, see S. D. Goitein, “A Plea for the Periodization of Islamic History,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 88,

While poetry, belles-lettres, and canonical religious texts are utilized herein, the majority of the Arabic sources, especially those that tend to offer more direct information on the geography of medieval trade, belong to what has often been called the ‘*ajā’ib*’ literature, the Arabic term often translated into English as “marvel.” Two Arabic ‘*ajā’ib*’ works in particular are the mainstay of this article: ‘*Ajā’ib al-Hind*’ (Marvels of India) by Abū ‘Imrān Mūsā b. Rabāḥ al-Sīrāfī (ca. tenth century), and *Kitāb akhbār al-Ṣīn wa-l-Hind* (Book of reports on China and India) by Abū Zayd al-Sīrāfī (ca. late ninth to tenth century).<sup>10</sup> It is of great significance for our purposes that both authors hailed from the ancient Sasanian port city of Siraf, whose seamen are known to be the direct sources for some of the most renowned geographers of the medieval Muslim world.<sup>11</sup> Syrinx von Hees argues that while great numbers of classical Arabic works include ‘*ajā’ib*’ in their titles or have been accepted as specimens of ‘*ajā’ib*’ in established scholarly convention, their immensely varied contents and structures mean that it makes little sense for contemporary scholars to consider them exemplars of the same genre.<sup>12</sup> Fantastical creatures with human faces and avian wings are not “marvelous” in the way a lofty building with awe-inspiring architecture is, or the “marvel” of Chinese stenography that fascinates the famed bibliographer Ibn al-Nadīm (d. 995 or 998) is not of the same kind as the “marvelous” turns of phrase in the Qur’ān that give rise to weighty tomes in the scholarly field of ‘*ajā’ib al-qur’ān*.<sup>13</sup> “I would suggest,” von Hees states, “that each text now designated as part of ‘*aḡā’ib*’ literature needs to be studied in greater depth to elucidate its main aim, formal structure, and specific use of the term ‘*aḡā’ib*. It may well turn out that each one belongs to a different literary genre and uses the term ‘*aḡā’ib*’ in a different way.”<sup>14</sup>

How does this debate over the generic integrity of ‘*ajā’ib*’ literature bear upon our concern over the articulation of Blackness across the medieval Indian Ocean? Roy Mottahedeh in his illuminating reading of *The Thousand and One Nights* embarks on what he refers to as a more

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no. 2 (1968): 244–48; Michael G. Morony, “Bayn al-Fitnatayn: Problems in the Periodization of Early Islamic History,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 40, no. 3 (1981): 247–51; Shahzad Bashir, “On Islamic Time: Rethinking Chronology in the Historiography of Muslim Societies,” *History and Theory* 53, no. 4 (2014): 519–44. Needless to say, Marshall G. S. Hodgson’s three-volume magnum opus *The Venture of Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974) is an indispensable reference. For debates over “racialization,” largely confined to the early modern to modern period, see the series of essays in “Special Topic: Comparative Racialization,” *PMLA* 123, no. 5 (2008).

10. For a long time ‘*Ajā’ib al-Hind*’s authorship was attributed to a Buzurg b. Shahriyār al-Rām Hormuzī. In 2005, Yūsuf al-Hādī, while combing through Ibn Faḍl Allāh al-‘Umarī’s (d. 1349) *Masālik al-abṣār*, discovered that ‘*Ajā’ib al-Hind*’ is but an abridged version of a longer work bearing the title *al-Ṣaḥīḥ min akhbār al-biḥār wa-‘ajā’ibihā*, by Abū ‘Imrān Mūsā b. Rabāḥ b. ‘Īsā b. Rabāḥ al-Awsī al-Sīrāfī. See Abū ‘Imrān Mūsā b. Rabāḥ b. ‘Īsā b. Rabāḥ al-Awsī al-Sīrāfī, *al-Ṣaḥīḥ min akhbār al-biḥār wa-‘ajā’ibihā*, ed. Yūsuf al-Hādī (Damascus: Dār Iqra’, 2006), 8. For Abū ‘Imrān Mūsā b. Rabāḥ’s biography, see Ibn al-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist*, ed. Yūsuf ‘Alī Ṭawīl (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2010), 304–5.

11. Al-Mas‘ūdī (d. 956), for instance, frequently cites from Sirafī and Omani captains. See al-Mas‘ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, ed. Kamāl Ḥasan Mar‘ī (Beirut: al-Maktaba al-‘Aṣriyya, 2005), 1:101.

12. Syrinx von Hees, “The Astonishing: A Critique and Re-Reading of ‘*Aḡā’ib*’ Literature,” *Middle Eastern Literatures* 8, no. 2 (2005): 101–20.

13. For the curious—and surely “marvelous”—description of legendary Chinese stenography, see Ibn al-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist*, 28–29.

14. Von Hees, “Astonishing,” 114.

“treacherous” journey: rather than finding cognates and derivatives of *‘ajā’ib* in the book, he sets out “to describe the place of the emotion of astonishment called *‘ajab* or *ta‘ajjub*, and the *‘ajā’ib*, those objects or events that inspire this astonishment, in *The Thousand and One Nights*.”<sup>15</sup> He is less interested in determining whether there is a distinct genre of Arabic literature that can be denominated *‘ajā’ib* than he is in examining from within the literary sensibility of classical Arabic, a unifying emotional or affective element—in this case, astonishment—that is able to give some sort of integrity, not necessarily to a body of literature with clearly drawn boundaries, but to a range of “objects” and “events” that will likely evoke a different set of affective reactions from contemporary readers, or will prompt them to name these reactions with terminologies other than astonishment. Mottahedeh examines the presence of suspense and irony in *The Thousand and One Nights* and argues that while considered separate literary devices in our current understanding, they are affinitive in *The Thousand and One Nights* and share the same element of astonishment. In other words, the shared sense of *ta‘ajjub* would see a medieval author writing in Arabic subsume both suspense and irony under the same category of *‘ajā’ib*, while a contemporary scholar would likely resort to a different schema for generic categorization.

This is not an insignificant observation in that it explains why under the same title of *‘ajā’ib*, we find works as apparently disparate as natural history and fantastical literature, sailors’ legends and serious geographical tomes, romance between humans and jinn, and sacred hagiographies of revered saints. *‘Ajā’ib* defies simple categorization that imposes contemporary scholarly presumption on medieval Arabic literature. Travis Zadeh has recently shown that even works of natural history—those that we now would consider to fall squarely within the realm of objective natural sciences—can and often do function as sources of entertainment and pleasure as much as they exist as repositories of scientific knowledge. In the inventory of all the manuscripts in the Ottoman imperial collection that Hayreddīn ‘Aṭūfī (d. 1541) created for Sultan Bāyezīd (d. 1512), “the organization of titles suggests ways natural history and geography could intersect with writings meant to edify and entertain.”<sup>16</sup> This accords with both Ibn al-Nadīm’s categorization of Arabic and Persian texts in his tenth-century encyclopedic bibliography and Mottahedeh’s astute observation that some genres in Arabic literature, such as the *maqāmāt*, which constitute a significant component to the *‘ajā’ib* literature, “began as overtly homiletic literature and subsequently became profane.”<sup>17</sup> Literature that abounds in suspense and irony, depictions of exotic flora and fauna, magnificent cities and mysterious islands, is meant to cultivate specific moral—not moralistic—sentiments such as patience (appreciation of suspense requires patience), curiosity (natural history evokes a sense of curiosity), and piety (existence of magical beasts demonstrates the magnanimity of God’s power in creation): in other words, science and geography in the medieval Islamic world are as much about morality as they

15. Roy P. Mottahedeh, “*‘Ajā’ib* in *The Thousand and One Nights*,” in *The Thousand and One Nights in Arabic Literature and Society*, ed. Richard C. Hovannisian and Georges Sabagh, 29–39 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 29.

16. Travis Zadeh, *Wonders and Rarities: The Marvelous Book That Traveled the World and Mapped the Cosmos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 238.

17. Mottahedeh, “*‘Ajā’ib* in *The Thousand and One Nights*,” 37.

are about knowledge. Moreover, as Zadeh already hints at, moral edification, gratifying entertainment, and the accumulation of scientific knowledge often intersect, to the point where *‘ajā’ib* works—those with unequivocal scientific value as natural histories as well as fantastical tales about exotic beasts and winged humans—can also function as props to generate pleasure along with profound moral messaging, despite the fact that morality may appear to be the last thing to be considered when oral tales drawn from *‘ajā’ib* circulate in rowdy drinking parties at royal courts or in the mansions of affluent merchants.

My use of Arabic *‘ajā’ib* sources here is thus less interested in the verity of their accounts as historical or scientific facts. They may well contain reliable knowledge of Asian flora and fauna and may provide extraordinarily accurate information on medieval Asian geography. What matters more to me is the configuration of power, pleasure, and knowledge they exhibit and reproduce. When a book of natural history describes an exotic land with rich gold reserves inhabited by dark-skinned half-human, half-beast creatures, and when this book is offered to an amir for his education and entertainment in equal measure, we cannot but ask who the subject is for the enjoyment of pleasure and who the object is that is used to create such pleasure. Zadeh in an earlier book of his shows the ways in which *‘ajā’ib* can also reflect and reinforce an ‘Abbāsīd imperial ambition to map the medieval Islamdom for political control and dominion.<sup>18</sup> Using *‘ajā’ib* literature, along with poetry, belles-lettres, and religious texts, to examine the sublimation of Black labor into Black metaphor, and harnessing this sublimation to the circulation of camphor and peppercorn—two essential commodities sourced primarily from maritime Asia—thus constitutes a project that views the conjunctural generation of knowledge, pleasure, and power in the medieval Indian Ocean world as an intrinsically racializing enterprise, where a trans-regional articulation of Blackness remains but only one of its manifold effects.

### White Camphor and Black Natives

One of the most acerbic poems from the paragon of classical Arabic poetry al-Mutanabbī (d. 965) is an acidic jab at Abū al-Misk al-Kāfūr (d. 968), ruler of the Ikhshīdīd dynasty whose dominion included Egypt and the Levant—until their conquest by the Fāṭimids in 969. While a great deal of background information can be introduced to situate the poem—for instance, why al-Mutanabbī turned to Egypt instead of Iraq after his fallout with Sayf al-Dawla (d. 967), the powerful ruler of the Emirate of Aleppo<sup>19</sup>—suffice it to state here that al-Kāfūr is a Black eunuch who rose steadily in the political and social hierarchy after gaining favor from the founder of the Ikhshīdīd dynasty, Muḥammad b. Ṭughj al-Ikhshīd (d. 946). Al-Kāfūr ensured the succession of a line of Ṭughj’s descendants after the latter’s death, and only ascended to the throne and declared himself master of Egypt in 966, when the next heir in line was a minor.<sup>20</sup> Al-Mutanabbī’s jab is derived from a common resentment poets laureate

18. Travis Zadeh, *Mapping Frontiers across Medieval Islam: Geography, Translation and the ‘Abbasid Empire* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017).

19. The renowned Ṭaha Ḥussein, for instance, once wrote on this question. See Ṭaha Ḥussein, *Ma‘a al-Mutanabbī* (Cairo: Hindāwī, 2012), ch. 3 “Under the Shadow of al-Kāfūr,” 235–90.

20. For a short biography of al-Kāfūr, see A. S. Ehrenkretz, “Kāfūr,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed.

can feel toward their royal patrons: he considers his poetic service unjustly recompensed. “Indeed, I have fallen amongst shameless liars, whose guest neither receives hospitality nor is let go,” he declaimed in his attack. To get a taste of the viciousness of the language as well as the nuances of the verbal assault, a couple of lines shall suffice:

أَوْ خَانَهُ فَلَهُ فِي مِصْرٍ تَمَهِيدُ	أَكَلِمَا اغْتَالَ عَبْدُ السُّوءِ سَيِّدَهُ
فَالْحُرُّ مُسْتَعْبِدٌ وَالْعَبْدُ مَعْبُودٌ	صَارَ الْخَصِيُّ إِمَامَ الْآبِقِينَ بِهَا
...	...
لَوْ أَنَّهُ فِي ثِيَابِ الْحُرِّ مَوْلُودٌ	الْعَبْدُ لَيْسَ لِحُرِّ صَالِحٍ بَأَخٍ
إِنَّ الْعَبِيدَ لَأَنْجَاسٌ مَنَاطِدُ	لَا تَشْتَرِ الْعَبْدَ إِلَّا وَالْعَصَا مَعَهُ
يُسِيءُ بِي فِيهِ كَلْبٌ وَهُوَ مُحَمَّدٌ	مَا كُنْتُ أَحْسِبُنِي أَحْيَا إِلَى زَمَنِ
وَأَنَّ مِثْلَ أَبِي الْبِيضَاءِ مَوْجُودٌ	وَلَا تَوَهَّمْتُ أَنَّ النَّاسَ قَدْ فُقِدُوا
تُطِيعُهُ ذِي الْعَضَارِيطِ الرَّعَادِيدُ	وَأَنَّ ذَا الْأَسْوَدِ الْمَتَّقُونَ مَشْفُورُهُ
...	...
أَقَوْمُهُ الْبِيضُ أَمْ آبَاؤُهُ الصَّيْدُ	مَنْ عَلِمَ الْأَسْوَدَ الْخَصِيَّ مَكْرَمَةً
أَمْ قَدْرُهُ وَهُوَ بِالْفَلَسِينِ مَرْدُودٌ	أَمْ أَدْنَاهُ فِي يَدِي النَّخَاسِ دَامِيَةً
فِي كُلِّ لَوْمٍ وَبَعْضِ الْعُدْرِ تَنْفِيدُ	أَوْلَى اللَّئَامِ كَوْفِيئِرٌ بِمَعْدِرَةٍ
عَنِ الْجَمِيلِ فَكَيْفَ الْخَصِيَّةُ السُّودُ	وَذَاكَ أَنَّ الْفُحُولَ الْبِيضَ عَاجِرَةً

Is it that whenever a slave slaughters his master or his ruler,  
In Egypt he finds his comfort?

The eunuch has become the imam for all the slave fugitives in Egypt,  
Where the free man is enslaved, while the slave is worshipped.

...

The slave is not fit to be the brother of a free man,  
Even if born he was in the clothes of a free man.

Do not buy a slave unless he is sold along with a club [to beat him with],  
Indeed, the slaves are naught but filthy, despicable creatures.

Never have I thought, that I would live to see such a day,  
When a dog causes me disgrace—while people still lavish praise on it!

Never did I imagine, that the world would be so lost,  
That someone like Abū Bayḍāʿ would even exist!

(Leiden: Brill Online, 2012). An early annotated translation of all al-Mutanabbī's poems on al-Kāfir, both eulogies and satirical attacks, can be found in Kamal Khalaili, “Al-Mutanabbī in His Role as Eulogist and Satirist of Kāfir: A Study, Edited Text and Annotated English Translation of the *Kāfirīyyāt*” (PhD diss., University of Manchester, 1978). In this article, all translations from Arabic and Chinese texts are my own unless otherwise noted.

Such a Black thing, with fat lips as thick as the pierced lips of a camel,  
Only loathsome cowards will obey him.

...

Who taught the dickless Black thing nobleness?  
Are his people noble (*al-bīd*), or are his ancestors venerable kings?

Or are his ears forever in the hands of a slave driver?  
Or is he so cheap that the buyer refuses the offer even if the seller raises  
the price for only two cents?

Worthiest of detestation, O little Kāfūr, you have an excuse  
for every shameful thing you do, and one excuse, for your being so reprehensible,  
Is such that if even a noble (*al-bīd*) dignitary cannot lay claim to perfect beauty,  
Who the heck is a Black eunuch?<sup>21</sup>

Three characteristics of al-Kāfūr's form the triad that is the object of al-Mutanabbī's mockery: his castration, his Blackness, and his former slave status. Each of the three reinforces the conceived contemptibility of the rest. Al-Mutanabbī describes an Egypt that is the refuge of rebellious slaves who have slayed their masters, an Egypt where a complete inversion of the normal social order reigns supreme. In another line, not reproduced here, he describes all the eunuchs serving al-Kāfūr as "fat fartomaniacs" whose pot bellies burst through the seams of their clothing, and who are "neither men nor women" (*min kulli rakhwin wikā'i l-baṭni munfatiqin / lā fi r-rijāli wa-lā n-niswāni ma'dūd*).<sup>22</sup> Most pertinent to our discussion, however, is the verbal play related to Blackness that exhibits both al-Mutanabbī's literary ingenuity and the linguistic convention prevailing in the Arabic of the tenth century (and with lasting impact on contemporary usage, too): he nicknames al-Kāfūr, a Black man, Abū Bayḍā', "father of whiteness"—the inversion is the sting—and the word for "white," *bīd*, is also used to refer to nobleness and moral superiority.<sup>23</sup>

The verbal play between whiteness and Blackness is apparent even in al-Kāfūr's own name. His full name is Abū al-Misk al-Kāfūr, obviously an epithet he was likely given by his master Muḥammad b. Ṭughj al-Ikhshīd. It means "father of musk, camphor," with musk often signifying the beauty and virtue of Blackness while the pure cream-colored fragrant camphor frequently functioning as a stand-in for whiteness. To name a Black eunuch camphor is both to accentuate his Blackness through contrast and to highlight his existence as a rare curiosity in the royal court. Two lines attributed to the twelfth-century Alexandrian poet Abū al-Futūḥ b. Qalāqīs (d. 1172) are a fine specimen from a vast archive:

21. 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Barqūqī, *Sharḥ Dīwān al-Mutanabbī* (Cairo: Hindāwī, 2014), 402–3.

22. In translating *rakhw wikā' al-baṭn* as "fat fartomaniacs," I am following the commentary of 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Barqūqī. See al-Barqūqī, *Sharḥ Dīwān al-Mutanabbī*, 542. An alternative rendering of the line in question is: "Every one of them with loose-strapped bellies, bloated in the sides, not to be counted among either men or women" (Khalaili, "Al-Mutanabbī," 179).

23. Al-Barqūqī, *Sharḥ Dīwān al-Mutanabbī*, 546.

رُبَّ سَوْدَاءٍ وَهِيَ بِيضَاءٌ مَعْنَى  
فَهِيَ مَسْكٌ إِنْ شِئْتَ أَوْ كَافُورٌ  
مِثْلُ حَبِّ الْعَيُونِ يَحْسِبُهُ النَّاسُ  
سُوًى سَوَاداً وَإِنَّمَا هُوَ نُورٌ

Many are such Black women, that are white in their virtue.  
They are musk, if you so will, or they are camphor.

Like pupil of the eye that people consider black,  
Yet it is where light is perceived.<sup>24</sup>

Compare these lines with the following attributed to ‘Alī b. al-Jahm (d. 863), where *sumr*—a dark brown color that is at times also used to represent a certain shade of black displayed by the Abyssinians—is contrasted with camphor by way of its analogy to musk:

وَعَائِبٌ لِلسُّمْرِ مِنْ جَهْلِهِ  
مَفْضَلٌ لِلْبِيضِ ذِي مَحَكٍ  
قُولُوا لَهُ عَنِّي أَمَا تَسْتَحْيِي  
مَنْ يَجْعَلُ الْكَافُورَ كَالْمَسْكِ

O he who finds fault with brown/black (wo)men because of his own ignorance,  
He who prefers white (wo)men out of his stubbornness.

Let them convey to him a message from me: “Are you not ashamed of yourself?  
For who would consider camphor equivalent to musk?”<sup>25</sup>

With both musk and camphor in his name, thus broadcasting far and wide the extent to which Blackness is central to his personal identity and political career, al-Kāfūr is rendered almost a perfect target for al-Mutanabbī’s sarcastic sobriquet Abū Bayḍā’, “father of whiteness.” What is more relevant to us, however, is that by the tenth century, camphor, the finest of which was sourced primarily from Sumatra, had become so sufficiently well-known as a rare luxurious scent that it is firmly established in high ‘Abbāsīd literature as representing unblemished whiteness—with all its aesthetic and moral implications—as a counterpoint to Blackness. The fine quality of the camphor requisitioned is at times contrasted with the utterly alien and hostile environment where it was found:

وفي هذا البحر إذا رُكِبَ إلى سرنديب جزائر ليست بالكثيرة غير أنها واسعة لا تُضبط. منها جزيرة يقال لها الرامني فيها  
عدّة ملوك وسعتها يقال ثمانماية أو تسعماية فرسخ وفيها معادن الذهب وفيها معادن تُدعى فنصور يكون الكافور الجيد  
منها.

ولهذه الجزائر جزائر تليها منها جزيرة يقال لها النيان لهم ذهب كثير وأكلهم النارجيل وبه يتأدمون ويدهنون. وإذا أراد  
أحد منهم أن يتزوج لم يُزوّج إلا بقحف رأس رجل من أعدائهم. فإذا قتل اثنين زوّج اثنتين وكذلك إن قتل خمسين زوّج  
خمسین امرأة بخمسين قحفاً. وسبب ذلك أن أعداءهم كثير فمن أقدم على القتل أكثر كان رغبتهم فيه أوفر. وفي هذه  
الجزيرة أعني الرامني قبيلة كثيرة وفيها البقم والخيزران وفيها قوم يأكلون الناس. وهي تشرع على بحرين هرکند وسلاھط.

24. Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Nuzhat al-‘umr fī al-tafḍīl bayn al-bīḍ wa-l-sūd wa-l-sumr*, ed. Sumayr Ḥusayn Ḥalabī (Cairo: Maktabat al-Turāth al-Islāmī, 1987), 37.

25. Ibid., 28. For some of ‘Alī b. al-Jahm’s poems in English translation, see Reuven Snir, trans. and ed., *Baghdad: The City in Verse* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2013), 95–100.

In this sea [i.e., the sea of Harkand, usually considered to be the Bay of Bengal], if one is to sail to Sarandīb [i.e., Sri Lanka], one comes across islands the number of which is not many, yet they are wide and spacious. Among them is an island called Rāmanī. On it are many kings. It is said that its width is around eight to nine hundred *farsakh* [a *farsakh* is one nautical league ≈ 18,000 feet]. On the island are many gold mines, and mines called Fanṣūr.<sup>26</sup> The camphor from the island is of the finest quality.

There are other islands that are adjacent to these islands, one of them called Niyān, which has a great deal of gold. The people there eat coconuts and they use it as a relish [coconut milk?], and they too anoint their bodies with it [coconut oil?]. If one of them wants to get married, he cannot do so unless with the skull of an enemy. If he has killed two enemies, [and thus brings two skulls,] he can marry two women. If he has killed fifty enemies, he can marry fifty women with these fifty skulls. The reason for this is that they have far too many enemies, and he who kills the most is the one they are most satisfied with (*fa-man aqdam ‘alā al-qatl akthar kāna raghatuhum fīhi awfar*). On this island—I mean Rāmanī [i.e., where camphor “of the finest quality” is found, per the previous paragraph]—there are many elephants, and on it, too, there is Indian redwood and rattan. People there are cannibals. This is the norm in the sea of Harkand and the sea of Salāhiṭ [usually considered to be somewhere close to the strait of Singapore].<sup>27</sup>

Medieval Arabic sources that deal with Southeast and South Asia contain a great many descriptions of the islands where camphor was obtained.<sup>28</sup> Contemporary scholarship on the historical geography of camphor suggests that of the three types of camphor, two—*Dryobalanops aromatica* and *Blumea balsamifera*—originate in Southeast Asia (and spread to India from early on), with Sumatra being a main source, while the third kind, *Cinnamomum camphora*, originating from coastal south China, is of a distinctly inferior grade.<sup>29</sup> There is little information in the cited text to suggest that Abū Zayd al-Sīrāfī is an expert in telling the fine differences between grades of camphor, though as a seasoned traveler, daily rubbing shoulders with merchants, he more likely than not knows a thing or two about it.

26. One of the most eminent figures of Southeast Asian Islam, Ḥamza Fanṣūrī, traces his origin to Barus, his *nisba* thus an indication that Fanṣūr is either Barus or geographically adjacent to it. Barus is on the west coast of Sumatra. For an earlier work on Ḥamza Fanṣūrī, see Syed Muhammad Naguib al-Attas, “The Mysticism of Hamzah Fanṣūrī” (PhD diss., School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1966).

27. Abū Zayd al-Sīrāfī, *Kitāb Akhbār al-Ṣīn wa-l-Hind*, ed. Tim Mackintosh-Smith, Library of Arabic Literature (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 1.2.3–1.2.4. One must always avoid drawing direct connections between medieval Arabic geographical accounts and contemporary ethnographic writings. Yet it is also true that headhunting as a social practice has a long and complicated history in Southeast Asia in which the ritualization of headhunting and cannibalism is embedded in intricate social relations, and so it is rather self-congratulatory for a foreigner to consider himself immediately exposed to such risks (i.e., to think himself important enough to be eaten). For modern anthropological debates over the practice of headhunting in Southeast Asia, see Janet Hoskins, ed., *Headhunting and the Social Imagination in Southeast Asia* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996).

28. See G. R. Tibbetts, *A Study of the Arabic Texts Containing Material on South-East Asia* (Leiden: Brill, 1979), e.g., 19, 25, 28, 32–33, 37–38, 40–42, 49, 51.

29. R. A. Donkin, *Dragon’s Brain Perfume: An Historical Geography of Camphor* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 49–87.

Ibn Khurradādhbih (d. 913) in his *al-Masālik wa-l-mamālik* stated that the Radhanite Jewish merchants traveled to Sind, Hind (South Asia), and China, and brought back from China musk, aloe wood, camphor, cinnamon, and other items—although the text is ambiguous with regard to the origin as well as the grade of the camphor in question.<sup>30</sup> If we take Ibn Khurradādhbih at this word, he at most gives a passing mention of the last leg of a camphor trading route (it is a pretty long last leg, though), and by no means preempts the possibility that China was merely a depot, perhaps a waystation, for the global circulation of the finest camphor. That the main source for the procurement of such fine camphor is likely Sumatra, specifically the region close to Barus, is corroborated by contemporaneous Chinese records. In Duan Chengshi's (d. 863) 酉陽雜俎 *You Yang Za Zu*, we find the following entry:

龍腦香樹 出婆利國，婆利呼為固不婆律，亦出波斯國。樹高八九丈，大可六七圍，葉圓而背白，無花實。其樹有肥有瘦，瘦者有婆律膏香。一曰瘦者出龍腦香，肥者出婆律膏也。在木心，中斷其樹劈取之，膏與樹端流出，斫樹作坎而承之。入藥用，別有法。

Camphor Tree. From the Kingdom of Poli. In Poli it is called *gu bu po lü*. One can find it in the Kingdom of Bosi, too. The tree is eight to nine *zhang* [one *zhang* in ninth-century China ≈ 3.33 m], and bigger ones among them can be as wide as the width of six to seven men holding hands. Leaves are circular with white backs. The tree bears no flowers, nor fruits. Some of them are richer than others; the less fertile ones produce scented *polü* paste. It is also said that the less fertile ones produce camphor, while the richer ones produce *polü* paste. The scented substance is contained in the wood of the tree. Once one cuts it open, the liquid substance will flow from the slit. One makes a dent in the tree to catch the flowing liquid. If it is to be put to medical use, other processing methods will need to be employed.<sup>31</sup>

Poli is likely a Chinese transcription of Barus, and *gu bu po lü* is then *kapur barus*—the Malay name for camphor.<sup>32</sup> The Kingdom of Bosi—the term 波斯 Bosi is often used to refer to Persia in Chinese—as Berthold Laufer showed over a century ago, is more likely in Southeast Asia than in West Asia: he named it “the Malayan Po-Se,” a geographical toponym so broad

30. Abū al-Qāsim ‘Ubaydullāh b. ‘Abdullāh Ibn Khurradādhbih, *al-Masālik wa-l-mamālik*, ed. M. J. de Goeje (Leiden: Brill, 1889), 153–54. The text is more ambiguous than my translation lets on, for the complete sentence may be read as exhibiting a stronger sense that China might have been a depot rather than the place of origin of all these commodities: “They brought back from China musk, aloe wood, camphor, cinnamon, and other items that were brought back from these directions (*mimmā yuḥmal min tilka al-nawāḥī*).”

31. Duan Chengshi 段成式, *You Yang Za Zu* 酉陽雜俎, ed. Zhang Zhongcai (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2017), 2:719.

32. The explanation given of camphor, or *kamper*, in *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia* is as follows: “kapur barus; kristal (hablur) mudah menguap, terbuat dari getah pohon kapur barus, digunakan sebagai bahan antihama atau untuk campuran obat-obatan.” The uses of camphor are therefore primarily as a pest repellent and a component to a medicinal mix. Its whiteness, on the other hand, is not mentioned once in this explanation. See Suharso Retnoningsih and Ana Retnoningsih, *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia* (Semarang: Widya Karya, 2011), 218.

and obscure its only function is to distinguish it from the other Bosi, that is, Persia.<sup>33</sup> Could this “Malayan Po-Se” have been Pasai, the kingdom that encompassed northern Sumatra, including in its dominion and sphere of influence contemporary Aceh, Barus, and likely the island of Nias, and later in the thirteenth century became perhaps the earliest Islamic sultanate in Southeast Asia, Kesultanan Samudera Pasai?<sup>34</sup> Chinese sources provide a little more information about the people of this “Malayan Po-Se,” though the source in question is compiled admittedly at a later date, in the fourteenth century:

波廝國 其人矮小極黑，以金花布縵身。無城郭，王以虎皮蒙机。出則乘軟兜，或騎象。食餅肉，出異寶等物。

Kingdom of Bosi. Its people are short and extremely black. They wrap their bodies in fabric embroidered with golden flowers. They have no cities, thus no city walls. Their king covers his throne with tiger skin. When he leaves his palace, he is carried in a soft palanquin, or he rides an elephant. They eat pan-fried bread with fillings of meat, and export rare, precious objects.<sup>35</sup>

By the fourteenth century the sultanate of Samudera Pasai had been firmly established, though we see no hint of that in this short description. If one allows oneself the liberty of conjecture with scanty evidence, the 餅肉 (pan-fried bread with fillings of meat) could have been the mouth-watering *martabak* that remains a delicacy in Indonesia to this day, and that can potentially be traced to the Indian (Tamil?) merchants of Kerala from the western coast of India. The fact that camphor, an exemplary object used for literary representations of whiteness in medieval Arabic literature, is procured from a wider region where some of its peoples are considered “extremely black”—this time by Arab and/or Persian Muslim merchants—is once again affirmed by Abū Zayd al-Sīrāfī himself:

33. Berthold Laufer, *Sino-Iranica: Chinese Contributions to the History of Civilization in Ancient Iran* (Chicago: Field Museum of Natural History, 1919), 468–87. Here there is an interesting piece of evidence that demonstrates exactly how and why it is at times difficult to tell apart the West Asian Persia and the Southeast Asian Malayan Bosi in medieval Chinese sources: *You Yang Za Zu* lists as one of the plants of the Kingdom of Bosi 波斯棗, Bosi date. And it goes on to state that this date is referred to locally as 窟莽 *kumang*. In Persian, date is called خرما *khurmā*, while in Malay/Bahasa Indonesia, to this day it is referred to as *kurma*. It is not unlikely that the latter is derived from the former. Most scholars of medieval East Asian geographies rely on sources such as *You Yang Za Zu*, but sources of this kind rarely account for the histories of circulation of goods in areas that lie outside the Chinese sphere of influence. This small detail, when considered along with the fact that this entry appears next to a group of accounts where 波斯國 Kingdom of Bosi is constantly mentioned and where there is little doubt that they refer to the Southeast Asian Bosi, would inevitably make one wonder if by this time the Persian date palm as a new species had already entered Southeast Asia. That would open up a whole new avenue of research I am simply unequipped to carry out. See Duan Chengshi, *You Yang Za Zu*, 2:723. The original entry reads thus: 波斯棗。出波斯國，波斯國呼為窟莽。樹長三四丈，圍五六呎。葉似土藤，不凋。二月生花，狀如蕉。花有兩甲，漸漸開罅，中有十餘房。子長二寸，黃白色，有核，熟則紫黑，狀類幹棗，味甘如錫，可食。

34. The earliest historical account of Kesultanan Samudera Pasai, if we do not count its appearance in snippets of medieval Arabic and Chinese records, seems to be *Hikayat Raja Pasai*, completed in the late fifteenth to early sixteenth century. Dr. Ahmat Adam has done an extraordinary job producing a corrected, transliterated—from *Jāwī*—edition of the text. See Ahmat Adam, translit. and ed., *Hikayat Raja Pasai* (Selangor: SIRD, 2019).

35. Zhou Zhizhong 周致中, *Yi Yü Zhi* 異域誌 (Shanghai: Shangwu Yinshuguan, 1936), 59–60.

ومن وراء هؤلاء جزيرتان بينهما بحر يقال له أندمان. وأهلها يأكلون الناس أحياء. وهم سود مفلفلو الشعور مناكير الوجوه والأعين طوال الأرجل قدم أحدهم مثل الذراع يعني ذكره عراة. ليست لهم قوارب ولو كانت لهم لاكلوا كل من متر بهم. وربما أبطأت المراكب في البحر وتأخر بهم المسير بسبب الريح فينفذ ما في المراكب من الماء فيقربون إلى هؤلاء فيستقون الماء وربما أصابوا منهم ويفلتون أكثر.

After the two islands [Niyān and Lanjbālūs—the latter likely in Sumatra, too] is a sea between them that is called Andamān. The people of these two islands eat humans alive. They are black (*sūd*) and curly-haired (*mufalfalū al-shu‘ūr*) [literally “peppercorn-haired”—a characterization we will return to in the next section], ugly of face and eyes. They have long feet, and one of them has a penis that is one cubit (0.68 m?) long. They are all naked. They have no canoes, and if they had them, they would have eaten everyone who happened to pass by them. Perhaps ships would linger in the sea and get delayed because of wind, and having exhausted their fresh water they would have to approach these people and seek from them potable water. Maybe they would be struck by them, or more often, they [i.e., the merchants and crew] would manage to slip away.<sup>36</sup>

The Blackness of indigenous peoples of coastal and littoral South and Southeast Asia is a common perception among Arab (and Arabophone Persian) merchants of the high ‘Abbāsīd period. Such perception appears to be a cliché in Arabic literature of the ninth century. Al-Jāhīz (d. 868 or 869), in defending what he considers the virtues of Black people and their superiority over light-skinned people, casually threw in captives of South and Southeast Asian origins (the word *Hind* in medieval Arabic literature covers a region far wider than the nation-state of India with which we now associate the toponym):

فإن قلتم: وكيف ونحن لم نر زنجياً قط له عقلٌ صبيّ أم امرأة؟

قلنا لكم: ومتى رأيتم من سبي السند والهند قوماً لهم عقول وعلم وأدب وأخلاق حتى تطلبوا ذلك فيما سقط اليكم من الزنج. وقد تعلمون ما في الهند من الحساب وعلم النجوم وأسرار الطب والخرط والنجر والتصوير والصناعات الكثيرة العجيبة. فكيف لم يتفق لكم من كثرة ما سيتم منهم واحدٌ على هذه الصفة أو بعشر هذه الصفة؟

...

والسودان يُعدُّون الزنج والحبشة وفزان وبربر والقبط والنوبة وزغاوة ومرو والسند والهند والقمار والديبلا والصين وما صين. والبحر أكثر من البر، وجزائر البحر ما بين الصين والزنج مملوءة سوداناً، كسرنديب وكله وأمل وزاج وجزائرها إلى الهند إلى الصين إلى كابل وتلك السواحل.

If you say, “How come we have never seen a Zanj who is intelligent, whether that be a young man or a woman?”

36. Al-Sirāfī, *Akhbār*, 1.2.5. There is a slight uncertainty in the edition of the manuscript I used. While there is no doubt that someone’s penis is being described here, the manuscript prepared by Tim Mackintosh-Smith has *qadam* (“foot”) for the word penis, a somewhat odd choice, though the text glosses the word as meaning *dhakar*, “penis” (*ya‘nī dhakarahu*). Another transmission of the text has in place of *qadam*, *farj*, which often refers to female genitalia.

To this we would reply, “When did you ever meet among the Sindi or Indian captives anyone with intelligence, knowledge, manners (*adab*), or good morals (*akhlāq*), and [if not] why would you demand such from a Zanj [slave]? Indeed, you know that the Indians possess knowledge of accounting and astrology, they have access to the secrets of medicine, they know how to peel and sculpt and they are master carpenters, and they have knowledge of design and produce a great many wonderful contraptions. Why do you think that among the innumerable prisoners you captured of them, you have found not even one who has these characteristics, or even just a tenth of them?”

...

The Black people (*al-sūdān*) include the Zanj, the Abyssinians (*al-ḥabasha*), Fazzāns, Berbers, the Copts, the Nubians, the Zaghāwas, the Marws, the Sindis, the Indians, the Qamāris, the Dabilas, the Chinese, and those residing in the land of the Turks (*al-Ṣīn wa-mā Ṣīn*). [In this region] there is more sea than land, and the many islands strewn in the ocean between China and the Zanj land are filled with Black people (*sūdān*), such as in Sarandīb [i.e., Sri Lanka], Kalah [on the west coast of the Malay Peninsula], Amal, Zābaj, and other islands all the way to India, China, Kābul, and all their shores.<sup>37</sup>

Al-Jāḥiẓ’s account is mostly based on the great amount of information he gathered from books and likely oral transmissions, too, and *al-Ṣīn wa-mā Ṣīn* is a Persian term—چین وماچین *chīn-o māchīn*—by this time well absorbed into Arabic that refers to a broad region encompassing great swaths of Central Asia and China. It appears frequently in the early eleventh-century Persian epic *Shāhnāmeḥ* and thus likely has a considerably older origin. It seems that according to this towering figure of medieval Arabic literature, the vast ocean that separates the ‘Abbāsīd Empire from East Asia is populated by Black people, most of them residents on islands or along coasts. Compare this with the following account from a medieval Chinese Buddhist dictionary (completed in 810):

崑崙語 上音昆下音論。時俗語便亦曰骨論。南海洲島中夷人也。甚黑，裸形，能馴伏猛獸犀象等。種類數般，即有僧祇、突彌、骨堂、閣蔑等。皆鄙賤人也。國無禮義，抄劫為活。愛啖食人，如羅刹惡鬼之類也。言語不正，異於諸蕃。善入水竟日不死。

Language of the *Kunlun*. The sound of the name is *kun lun*, and colloquially *gulun*. Refers to the aliens on islands of the South Seas. Quite black, mostly naked. They can tame wild beasts—rhinoceros and elephants and such. There are multiple types [of *Kunlun*]: some are Sengqi, others are Tumi, still others are Gutang, Gemie, and others. Regardless—they are all base and lowly. They have no manners, and they live by robbing and kidnapping. They are cannibals—like the evil rakshasa. Their language is odd and different from that of all the other aliens. Good at swimming. They can dive and survive a whole day in water.<sup>38</sup>

37. Al-Jāḥiẓ, “Fakhr al-sūdān ‘alā al-bayḍān,” in *Rasā‘il al-Jāḥiẓ*, ed. Muḥammad Bāsil ‘Uyūn al-Sūd, 1:121–62 (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2013), 212, 216. It is notoriously difficult to match these toponyms to places in our current world map. To take Kalah as an example, see S. Q. Fatimi, “In Quest of Kalah,” *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 1, no. 2 (1960): 62–101.

38. Shi Huilin 釋慧琳, *Yiqie Jing Yinyi* 一切經音義, Taishō Tripiṭaka (Tokyo: Daizo Shuppansha, 1988),

A great deal can be made of this short paragraph—for example, that the word *Kunlun* has different written forms in the same period strongly suggests that it is an approximate transcription from a non-Chinese language—yet most relevant to our discussion is the fact that many groups of *Kunlun* are lumped together into one homogenous hodgepodge of savagery and repugnance, despite the author having some feeble inkling of their differences. *Sengqi* is the Chinese equivalent of Zanj, and *Gemie* are likely the Khmers from mainland Southeast Asia. The generalized “South Seas” is almost an exact mirroring of the vast seas where al-Jāḥiẓ locates the many groups of *sūdān*. There is an eerie symmetry between Shi Huilin (d. 820)—author of the above dictionary—and al-Jāḥiẓ.<sup>39</sup>

What is also clear is that, while camphor by the high ‘Abbāsīd period has been firmly established as a literary trope for representing unadulterated whiteness, rarely does such eminent presence in literature refer back to its harvesting primarily in Southeast Asia, whose indigenous peoples are frequently depicted as Black, despicable, cannibalistic, and foreign.<sup>40</sup> It is thus profoundly ironic that one of the most famous exemplars of literary mockery in the history of classical Arabic poetry has as its target a Black eunuch, whose name is al-Kāfūr, camphor, thus invoking and erasing in the same gesture the complex articulation of Blackness along a vast chain of trade and/or plunder across the Indian Ocean. This is all the more significant considering the fact that *‘Ajā’ib al-Hind*, compiled by another Sirafī native and a contemporary of Abū Zayd, Abū ‘Imrān Mūsā b. Rabāḥ al-Sīrāfī, was initially presented as a literary tribute to none other than al-Kāfūr himself, to be used for knowledge as well as pleasure.<sup>41</sup> Whether a manuscript of *‘Ajā’ib al-Hind* was actually in al-Kāfūr’s possession, there can be little doubt that enticing exotic tales drawn from *‘ajā’ib* literature, some perhaps lifted directly from *‘Ajā’ib al-Hind* and *Kitāb Akhbār al-Šīn wa-l-*

81:835. This same paragraph is also discussed in Guangtian Ha, “From Baghdād to Baghpūr: Sailors and Slaves in Global Asia,” in *Who Is the Asianist? The Politics of Representation in Asian Studies*, ed. Will Bridges, Nitasha Tamar Sharma, and Marvin D. Sterling, 53–74 (Ann Arbor, MI: Association for Asian Studies, 2022).

39. For a short biography of Shi Huilin, see Zan Ning 贊寧 (d. 1001), *Song Gaoseng Zhuan* 宋高僧傳 (Shanghai: Zhonghua Shuju, 1987), 1:108–9.

40. Camphor in medieval Chinese literature appears largely as precious scent imported from foreign lands; rarely if ever does its creamy whiteness become the object of eulogy or literary imagination. The following quotation from *You Yang Za Zu* should suffice for those who can read classical Chinese: 天寶末，交趾貢龍腦，如蟬蚕形。波斯言老龍腦樹節方有，禁中呼為瑞龍腦，上唯賜貴妃十枚，香氣徹十餘步。上夏日嘗與親王棋，令賀懷智獨彈琵琶，貴妃立於局前觀之。上數秤子將輸，貴妃放康國獶子於坐側。獶子乃上局，局子亂，上大悅。時風吹貴妃領巾於賀懷智巾上，良久，回身方落。賀懷智歸，覺滿身香氣非常，乃卸襪頭貯於錦囊中。及上皇復宮闕，追思貴妃不已，懷智乃進所貯襪頭，具奏他日事。上皇發囊泣曰：此瑞龍腦香也。 Alas, the beloved is gone, while the scent lingers. Better, that scent comes from another man’s headcover that had but brief contact with the scented silk scarf of the beloved, and this scent arrives years after the death of the beloved and after a major war that shook the empire to its core. And this is not to ignore the fact that it was the emperor himself who ordered her killing, under pressure from his own ministers. Camphor is where the story begins, and camphor is where it ends. This short story, while in simpler form, already exhibits an exemplary literary sensibility that later receives a more refined elaboration in the full-fledged *chuanqi*. The imperial concubine in question is Yang Yuhuan (d. 756), and the *chuanqi* story, titled 長恨歌 *Chang Hen Ge* (the song of everlasting wistfulness), which can be considered a developed version of this short story in *You Yang Za Zu*, remains to this day one of the best specimens of this remarkable genre.

41. Al-Awsī al-Sīrāfī, *al-Šaḥīḥ*, 12.

*Hind*, must have been at the forefront of the minds of many a reader bearing witness to al-Mutanabbī's bile.

If al-Jāhiz is to be trusted, it is almost as though a piece of raw whiteness—finest camphor in its unprocessed state—was originally extricated, by force or by exchange, from the diverse indigenous Black peoples of the many islands and coasts across Southeast Asia, then refined and offered to another Black man, who happened to have enjoyed the blessings of fate and was thus on the receiving end of a purified, scented, and flawless whiteness, to the point of having been named after it by his own (former) master. Was al-Kāfūr able to detect the irony since he must have been well-versed in *‘ajā’ib* literature himself, as he was known to have been something of a medieval Black philosopher king ruling tenth-century Egypt? An instance of whiteness shapeshifts across a vast chain of many adventures, yet at both ends of this chain is a sublimated, abstract, homogenized Blackness—homogenized by the likes of al-Jāhiz, for whom the entire Indian Ocean is a sea of darkness. Incidentally, his contemporary Shi Huilin arrived at the same conclusion a world away.

### Peppercorn and Conch Shell: The Curly-Haired *Kunlun*

There have been modern scholarly efforts to uncover the exact location of 崑崙國, the Kingdom of *Kunlun*, as the assumption has often been that the dark-skinned *Kunlun* were named after their place(s) of origin.<sup>42</sup> Historians at times also presume that some sort of definitive conclusion has been reached regarding its cartographic position. In his well-researched and elegantly written *In Asian Waters* (2022), for instance, Eric Tagliacozzo, citing from Philip Snow, places the Kingdom of *Kunlun* somewhere among the Comoro Islands near the coast of Madagascar, while acknowledging that the term *Kunlun* refers to a broad range of dark-skinned peoples by no means limited to those of African origins.<sup>43</sup> We may never know with certainty the location of the Kingdom of *Kunlun*, or whether the *Kunlun* slaves 崑崙奴 were so denominated because they came from a place so named, or because the word *kunlun* is a transcribed/transliterated term that means “black” in another one or several languages: काला *kālā* in Sanskrit, for instance, means “black” or

42. An early article that combs through some of the main medieval Chinese sources on *Kunlun* slaves is Julie Wilensky, “The Magical *Kunlun* and ‘Devil Slaves’: Chinese Perceptions of Dark-skinned People and Africa before 1500,” *Sino-Platonic Papers* 12 (2002): 1–51. My discussion draws on some of the same sources yet with more caution. For instance, I haven’t adopted Edward Schafer’s translations of the ethnonyms in Shi Huilin’s dictionary entry on the language of *Kunlun* as I find them presumptive and potentially misleading (8). See Edward Schafer, *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand: A Study of T’ang Exotics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), 46. Neither do I think it is accurate, from my reading of contemporaneous Arabic sources, that *zanj* is “the Arabic word for ‘dark,’” though, of course, *Zanj* are invariably described as Black in these sources (7). In dealing with Chinese sources, Wilensky relies heavily on another essential reference, namely, Zhang Xinglang, “The Importation of Negro Slaves into China under the T’ang Dynasty (AD 618–907),” *Bulletin of the Catholic University of Peking* 7 (1930): 37–59.

43. Eric Tagliacozzo, *In Asian Waters: Oceanic Worlds from Yemen to Yokohama* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022), 33; Philip Snow, *The Star Raft: China’s Encounter with Africa* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 7 (map 1). Of course, the foundational work written on the presence of Black people in medieval Chinese sources is Don J. Wyatt, *The Blacks of Premodern China* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), which Tagliacozzo also references in his discussion of *Kunlun*.

“dark blue,” a semantic and chromatic ambiguity that makes perfect sense if one is to keep in mind the Hindu iconographic palette.<sup>44</sup> One could also pin the mysterious Kingdom of *Kunlun* to Kalah, on the west coast of the Malay Peninsula. Nineteenth-century Chinese scholarly common sense would likely have agreed with this adjudication. When combing through earlier sources on *Kunlun*, for instance, Wen Tingshi (d. 1904) in his 純常子枝語 *Chun Chang Zi Zhi Yu*—an encyclopedic record of his lifetime’s research—suggests that “the *kunlun* script should have been today’s *wulaiyou* script. I have seen the *wulaiyou* letters: they are the same as the Arabic letters” (崑崙書當即今巫來由書，余曾得巫來由字母，乃與阿拉伯同).<sup>45</sup> This is practically error upon error: *Wulaiyou* is likely *Melayu* (the phonetic shift from /m/ to /w/ is a common feature in Hokkien), but the script that used an adapted Arabic alphabet to write *Melayu* is *Jāwī*, and *Jāwī* came into being considerably later than the tenth and eleventh centuries. There can be no doubt that Wen Tingshi is imposing his nineteenth-century knowledge on tenth-century sources; yet it is also clear that by his time it is fairly well established in mainstream Chinese scholarly tradition that *Kunlun* refers to a place in Southeast Asia rather than Africa, and Kalah would thus not be a guess too far off the mark.

While the exact location of the so-called Kingdom of *Kunlun* may continue to remain clouded in mystery—Kalah and Comoro Islands remain two possibilities among others, and Wen Tingshi’s error shows that Chinese scholars of the nineteenth century were perhaps as clueless as we are today—I am less interested in where the Black people in question originated than how they are portrayed in literature and at times even attributed a certain fantastical agency. The previous section pivots on camphor; in this section let us begin with black peppercorn. We have already seen that in Abū Zayd al-Sīrāfī’s account of the native Black peoples of north and northwest Sumatra, their curly hair is described as *mufalfalū al-shu‘ūr*, literally “peppercorn-haired.” In doing so he is merely reproducing a literary cliché of his time. Ibn Manẓūr (d. 1311 or 1312) in his *Lisān al-‘Arab*, an authoritative dictionary of classical Arabic, states:

44. Monier Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (Dehli: Motilal Banarsidass, 1986), 277. Unfortunately, I have zero knowledge of Sanskrit, which constitutes a main defect if one is to excavate a global literary history of the *Kunlun* slaves—for the latter, as we shall see in this section, are often closely associated with Buddhism, and the Blackness of the *Kunlun* slaves, in particular its treatment in *chuanqi*, cannot but invoke the sanctity of the black/blue color in the Hindu-Buddhist iconographic tradition. An extraordinarily interesting twist of this fact, placed in the modern period and given a globalized articulation, appears in Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies* (London: John Murray, 2009), 174: the moment in question is when Baboo Nob Kissin finally affirms his conjecture that Zachary is Black and that indeed, he is the incarnation of Lord Krishna he has been seeking. It is a remarkable moment of the visual identification and affirmation of Blackness where such seems absent or not as eminently present as is normally assumed. (But how Black does one need to be to be considered “Black”? This is a question that surely has a great deal more to do with specific histories of racialization than with epidermis.) Blackness is a hidden thread in this exceptionally imaginative fictional work: Serang Ali is a Rohingya Muslim from Rakhine (before the Rohingyas became victims and refugees, they were resourceful and cosmopolitan sailors with their own networks); Zachary is a Black man with “skin the color of old ivory” and the son of a Maryland freedwoman; and Kalua, whose name is derived from the word *kālā*, is named literally “Blackie.” The Ibis trilogy is as much about slavery as it is about the fluidity and complex global articulation of Blackness across the nineteenth-century Indian Ocean and beyond.

45. Wen Tingshi 文廷式, *Chun Chang Zi Zhi Yu* 純常子枝語 (Nanjing: Jiangsu Guji Keyinshe, 1990), 198.

وشعرٌ مفلفلٌ إذا اشتدَّتْ جعودتهُ. المحكم: وتفلفلَ شعرُ الأسودِ اشتدَّتْ جعودتهُ، وربّما سُمِّيَ ثمرُ البروقِ فُلْفُلًا تشبيهاً  
بهذا الفلفلِ المتقدّم، قال:

وانتنفض البروقُ سوداً فلفلُهُ.

Peppercorn hair (*shaʿr mufalfal*), if hair is extremely curly. Further: black hair *talfalfal* when it has tight curls (*ishtaddat juʿūdatuhu*). Perhaps the fruit of asphodels is called peppercorn (*fulful*) because of its likeness to ripe [dried?] peppercorn. For example, [in the following line of a poem:]

The asphodels have come to full term, its *fulful* now all black.<sup>46</sup>

We need to couple this entry with a few other pieces of evidence to make our point. The first is a *ḥadīth* contained in multiple *ṣaḥīḥ* collections:

اسمعوا وأطيعوا وإن استُعِيعَ حبشيٌّ كأنَّ رأسَهُ زبيبةٌ.

Transmission (a): Listen and obey [your leader], even if he was an Abyssinian as though with a head like a raisin.<sup>47</sup>

اسمعوا وأطيعوا وإن استُعِيعَ عليكم حبشيٌّ كأنَّ رأسَهُ زبيبةٌ.

Transmission (b): Listen and obey [your leader], even if imposed upon you was an Abyssinian slave as though with a head like a raisin.<sup>48</sup>

The message seems deceptively simple: Prophet Muḥammad is suggesting that Muslims ought to obey their leaders under all circumstances, and to reinforce this point, he resorts to what must have been a common phenomenon in late antique Arab society, namely, the presence of Black Abyssinian slaves. What does the Prophet mean by the token slave having “a head like a raisin”? The *ḥadīth* is often read along with a cluster of *aḥādīth* that deal with the question of leadership and obedience, a matter that also includes whether it is permissible to follow the lead of a slave in collective prayers. The following *ḥadīth* is a case in point:

عن أبي ذرٍّ، قال: إنَّ خليلي أوصاني أنْ أسمع وأطيع وإنْ كان عبداً مجذع الأطراف.

Abū Dharr said, “My closest friend [i.e., the Prophet] advised me to listen and obey, even if [the leader] is a slave with amputated limbs.”<sup>49</sup>

46. Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿArab*, ed. ʿAbdullāh ʿAlī al-Kabīr, Muḥammad Aḥmad Ḥisb Allāh, and Hāshim Muḥammad al-Shādhilī (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 2016), 3467.

47. Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, ed. Muḥammad Tāmir (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 2011), 126 (no. 693).

48. *Ibid.*, 1146 (no. 7142).

49. Abū al-Ḥusayn Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, ed. Muḥammad Fuʿād ʿAbd al-Bāqī (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 1991), 3:1467 (no. 1837).

Abū al-Ḥusayn Muslim (d. ca. 875), compiler of the *ḥadīth* in question, also provides other transmissions with slightly varied wording but considered to convey the same message, and one of these transmissions adds a bit more detail regarding the imagined slave: ‘*abdan ḥabashiyyan mujadda‘at al-aṭrāf*, “an Abyssinian slave with amputated limbs.”<sup>50</sup> The debate over political and military leadership as well as the permissibility of slaves leading prayers revolves around the length to which Muslims’ obedience to their leaders could go, to the point where even an unworthy leader is deserving of submission. All of these *aḥādīth* essentially make their point by recourse to what some classical scholars consider an utter counterfactual: for how can a Black slave, unfree and “hideous-looking,” stand in front of a congregation of free men and lead them in prayers or command them in battles? Al-Nawawī (d. 1277), arguably one of the most authoritative commentators on Muslim’s *ḥadīth* collection, explains that the characterization of the slave with “amputated limbs” is to convey his hideous (*akḥass*) look, and to use such physical despicability to prove the point that the leader must be obeyed even if he has no noble blood (*danā’ al-nisb*) and even if he is but a Black slave (‘*abd aswad*) with amputated limbs.<sup>51</sup> Blackness is added to amputated limbs to further increase the repulsiveness of the fictional slave, and by so doing, the *ḥadīth* practically entertains an ultimately impossible scenario to drive home the point that the leader, however despicable, unappealing, and unworthy, must nonetheless be obeyed.<sup>52</sup>

Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī (nos. 693 and 7142), where the famous (and controversial) “head like a raisin” expression appears, needs to be understood in the same context. As a matter of fact, the Arabic word for “head” (*ra’s*) in these two narrations likely refers to hair instead of head. Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī (d. 1449) in his encyclopedic commentary on Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī notes as much:

وانما شبه رأس الحبشي بالزبيبة لتجمعها ولكون شعره أسود، وهو تمثيل في الحقارة وبشاعة الصورة وعدم الاعتداد بها.

The head of an Abyssinian is compared to a raisin because of the raisin’s shrunk gatheredness (*li-tajammu‘ihā*) and the Abyssinian’s black hair (*li-kawni sha‘rihi aswad*). This is a metaphor for his ignominy (*ḥaqāra*), the ugliness (*bashā‘a*), and contemptibility (*‘adam al-i‘tidād*) of his appearance.<sup>53</sup>

Perhaps more interesting and pertinent to our present discussion, demonstrating the extent to which a scholar as formidable as al-‘Asqalānī can also equivocate over the basic meanings of key words, is his following commentary:

50. Ibid., 1468.

51. Yaḥyā b. Sharaf al-Nawawī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim bi-sharḥ al-Nawawī*, 2nd ed. (Cairo: Mu’assasat Qurṭuba, 1994), 12:312.

52. This is affirmed by al-Bukhārī’s most authoritative commentator in the classical tradition, Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī. See Aḥmad b. ‘Alī b. Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, *Fath al-Bārī*, ed. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz b. ‘Abdullāh b. Bāz (Cairo: al-Maktaba al-Salafiyya, 1960), 13:122–23.

53. Ibid., 122.

(كأن رأسه زبيبة) قيل شبيهه بذلك لصغر رأسه، وذلك معروف في الحبش، وقيل لسواده، وقيل لقصر شعر رأسه وتقلفه.

“As though his head was a raisin”: it is said that his head is so compared because of its small size. That their heads are small is well-known of the Abyssinians. It is also said that the comparison is due to his blackness, or because the hair on his head is short and curly (*tafalfuluhu*).<sup>54</sup>

The semantic ambiguity of *ra's* lends itself to two readings: it can mean either head or hair. Both readings are extensively replicated in the classical *ḥadīth* hermeneutical tradition. With regard to the reading that treats *ra's* as head, Jonathan Brown argues that the 1200s seems to mark a turning point in its interpretation among Muslim scholars: while pre-1200 commentaries appear to state this as a phenotypical fact and medieval Arabic literature on physiognomy at times considers a small head set on a large chest and neck to be an indication of strength and courage, the interpretation took a more pejorative turn post-1200s. Brown cites precisely al-Nawawī to prove this point.<sup>55</sup> Be that as it may, it is the reference to peppercorn in this *ḥadīth* that concerns us the most, for certain types of kinky hair with tight curls may actually look like many grains of raisin on the scalp, and this would render the characterization of such hair as peppercorn-curly (*tafalful*) perfectly comprehensible.

Here we come upon another grain of materiality in literature, for peppercorn from the high 'Abbāsīd period was acquired from precisely the same region of the world where camphor was obtained. While the Bay of Bengal separates the Malabar coast from Sumatra, in medieval Arabic travel literature South India, Southeast Asia, and China are often treated as belonging to one closely interlinked world, both geographically and culturally. Abū Zayd al-Sīrāfī made an astute, if less charitable, observation when he stated that, “The Chinese have no knowledge, for the root of their religions is from India. They claim that India gave them the buddhas, and that the Indians are the people of religion. Both countries believe in transfiguration (*tanāsukh*); they only differ in the schools they follow.”<sup>56</sup> Where he mentions the “lands of peppercorn” (*bilād al-fulful/filfil*), he too juxtaposes China with India:

وأهل الصين أهل ملاء وأهل الهند يعييون الملاهي ولا يتخذونها ولا يشربون الشراب ولا يأكلون الخلل لأنه من الشراب. وليس ذلك دين ولكن أنفة ويقولون أي ملك شرب الشراب فليس بملك وذلك أن حولهم ملوكاً يقتلونهم كيف يدبر أمر ملكه من هو سكران. وربما اقتتلوا على الملك وذلك قليل لم أر أحداً غلب أحداً على مملكته إلا قوم تلو بلاد الفلفل. وإذا غلب ملك على مملكة وتى عليها رجلاً من أهل بيت الملك المغلوب ويكون من تحت يده لا يرضى أهل تلك المملكة إلا بذلك.

54. Ibid., 2:187.

55. Jonathan A. C. Brown, *Islam and Blackness* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2022), 156–58. The “smallness” of the heads of the Abyssinians, however, barely if at all appears in some of the most important medieval Arabic sources on Blackness. This is perhaps due to the fact that these sources deal in large part with the conceived superiorities of Black people: al-Jāhīz, “Fakhr al-sūdān ‘alā al-baydān”; al-Suyūṭī, *Nuzhat al-‘umr*; Abū al-Faraj ‘Abd al-Rahmān Ibn al-Jawzī, *Tanwīr al-ghabash fī faḍl al-Sūdān wa-l-Ḥabash*, ed. Marzūq ‘Alī Ibrāhīm (Riyadh: Dār al-Sharīf, 1998).

56. Al-Sīrāfī, *Akhbār*, 1.10.7.

The people of China enjoy entertainment (*malāhin*), while the people of India find it shameful. They do not take themselves to it, and they do not drink wine. Nor do they consume vinegar, for they consider vinegar a sort of wine [because it is also fermented?]. This is not for the sake of religion, however. Rather, it is because of disdain (*anafa*). They say, “What sort of a king would drink wine? Such behavior is beneath that of a king.” This is due to the fact that around them are many kings with whom they have constant battles—so how can a drunkard manage the affairs of his kingdom? Perhaps at times they would fight to conquer a kingdom, but this is rare. I haven’t seen a king defeat another king and get hold of his kingdom—except the people just next to the lands of peppercorn (*qawm tilwa bilād al-fulful/filfil*). If a king does accomplish such a feat, he would place in charge of the conquered domain a man from the royal family of the conquered kingdom. This man is to serve him. Nothing else will please the people of the conquered kingdom.<sup>57</sup>

Al-Sīrāfī’s positive view of the Indians and their religion is evident in that the word for entertainment, *malāhin*, is derived from *lahw*, which means amusement, distraction, and diversion, and has a definitively negative connotation in the Qur’ān.<sup>58</sup> While al-Sīrāfī offers no hint of the whereabouts of these “lands of peppercorn,” it is likely that the term refers to the Malabar coast of southwest India, with Kollam as its main port functioning as a depot for the transportation of peppercorn from the hinterland.<sup>59</sup> This much is affirmed by ‘Ajā’ib *al-Hind*. The account in question contains a remarkable suspense story of a baby thrown overboard in the midst of a violent night storm yet caught by the railings of the rudder and found safe and sound in the morning by his despaired parents.<sup>60</sup> The father in the story is one Mardanshāh, said to be a “captain to the lands of peppercorn” (*aḥad nawākhithat bilād al-fulful/filfil*). The incident in question took place while Mardanshāh was sailing on a ship with his own wife and newly born son Marzubān, and he was said to be “traveling in the Bārbān Sea toward Kūllam” (*yasīr fī baḥr bārbān yurīd kūllam*).

While camphor is an instance of whiteness that straddles the literal and the figurative, the material and the metaphorical, connecting two manifestations of Blackness across the Indian Ocean and articulating them relationally, peppercorn—this time bodying forth not skin color but hair texture, and not whiteness but Blackness—seems to present itself as a parallel example of a precious commodity that sublimates Black body into Black metaphor.

57. Ibid., 1.10.1.

58. As a matter of fact, Qur’ānic verses where *lahw* appears are often used by classical Muslim scholars to make contending arguments regarding the legal permissibility of musical performances. Some of the verses where *lahw* appears include Q 6:32, 47:36, and 57:20. Q 6:32 shall suffice for our present purposes: “What is the life of this world but play and amusement? But best is the Home in the Hereafter, for those who are righteous. Will ye not then understand?” Translation by ‘Abdullah Yūsuf ‘Alī.

59. Sebastian R. Prange, *Monsoon Islam: Trade and Faith on the Medieval Malabar Coast* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 39.

60. Buzurg b. Shahriyār al-Rām Hormuzī, *Kitāb ‘Ajā’ib al-Hind* (Cairo: Muṣṭafā Fahmī al-Katabī, 1908), 70–71. See n. 10 above on the misattribution of the author.

Yet within classical literature that vilifies “peppercorn hair” and exploits it as an exemplary trope to represent physical ugliness, we find not the effacement of Blackness but the metaphorical deployment of peppercorn to describe exactly the conceived phenotypical disfigurement of the Black people from whom the precious good is procured.

In Chinese sources we rarely find curly hair described as “peppercorn hair.” Two other expressions instead frequently appear: 拳髮 (*quanfa*, “fisted hair,” i.e., hair curled as though it was a clenched fist with tightly curled fingers) and 螺髮 (*luofa*, “conch-shelled hair,” presumably because of the curly patterns commonly found on conch shells—hence a reference to the maritime world). A late fourteenth-century source, 異域圖志 *Yi Yü Tu Zhi*, that cites works traced back to the eleventh century, describes *Kunlun* with the term 拳髮 (see Fig. 2):

崑崙層期國

在西南海上，接海上，接海島。有大鵬，飛則蔽日，能食駱駝。昔有人拾其羽者，截管可作水桶。有野人，身如漆，拳髮，國人布食誘捉賣與蕃商作奴。

Kingdom of *Kunlun Cengqi*

On the southwest sea. Connected to an island. They have a species of giant birds. If it flies its wingspan is so wide it blocks the sun. It can eat a whole camel. Once someone came to possess one of its feathers, and made a barrel out of the rachis. On the island are savages, their bodies as black as lacquer, and they are fist-haired. [Other] inhabitants of the island often put out food as bait to attract and catch them, so as to sell them to foreign merchants as slaves.<sup>61</sup>

In describing Funan, a late antique kingdom that encompasses parts of contemporary Cambodia, Thailand, Vietnam, and Burma, 晉書 *Jin Shu*'s (completed in 648) language uses analogous if not almost identical terms when describing its inhabitants:

西去林邑三千余里，在海大灣中。

...

人皆醜黑拳髮，裸身跣行。

Over three thousand *li* west of Linyi. Located in a capacious bay area... All the people there are black and ugly, and fist-haired. They wear neither clothes nor shoes.<sup>62</sup>

61. Anonymous 佚名, 異域圖志 *Yi Yü Tu Zhi*, Wade Collection, Cambridge University Library.

62. *Jin Shu* 晉書, Sibu Congkan Shibu 四部叢刊史部 (Shanghai: Hanfen Lou Yingyin, 1919–22), Liezhuan 列傳 10 (no. 67).

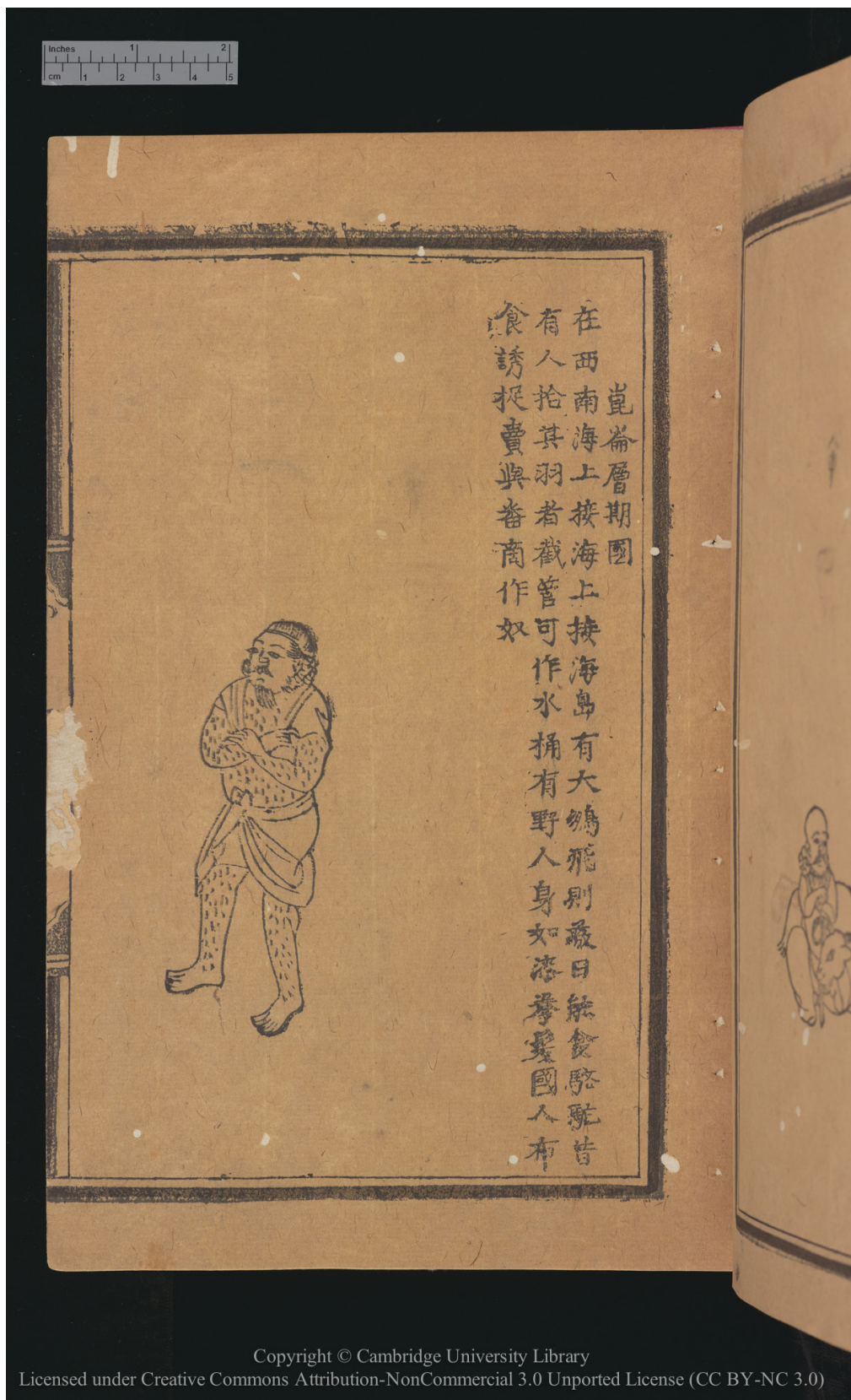


Fig. 2.  
Kunlun as  
depicted in  
*Yi Yü Tu Zhi*,  
Cambridge  
University  
Library,  
FC.246.5.

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The association of Blackness, curly hair (tight or loose curls), and nakedness with the ocean—in other words, the idea that Black people, often deemed uncivilized and physically repulsive, and lumped into one group despite their differences, are to be found in a vast area most of which is the open sea dotted by overgrown islands—finds its way into poetry, too, as attested by the following 七言律詩 titled 崑崙兒 *Kunlun er* (the little *Kunlun*) by Zhang Ji (d. ca. 830):

崑崙家住海中州	蠻客將來漢地遊
言語解教秦吉了	波濤初過郁林洲
金環欲落曾穿耳	螺髮長卷不裹頭
自愛肌膚黑如漆	行時半脫木綿裘

Home to the *Kunlun* are the islands amidst the sea;  
Yet, led forth by barbarian visitors, they have come to roam Han lands.

Grasping language, they are the mythical Mynah birds,  
Crossing billowing waves, they first set foot on Yulin Island.

Gold rings once dangled luridly from their ears;  
With conch-spiraled hair, long and coiling, they still refuse to bind their heads.

Black as lacquer is the flesh and skin they cherish;  
They stride about half-stripped of tree-cotton garments.<sup>63</sup>

That *Kunlun Cengqi* in *Yi Yü Tu Zhi*—an admittedly later source—could have been the Comoro Islands is the view of the archivist at the Cambridge University Library who compiled the English table of contents for the cited manuscript.<sup>64</sup> Notwithstanding, as stated earlier, there is no conclusive evidence to corroborate this conjecture; and the fact that *Kunlun* and *Cengqi* (the Chinese transcription of Zanj) are combined into a compound toponym indicates that the author is likely unable to pin its exact location on a map. While the Black people of Funan as portrayed in *Jin Shu* seem not to have been directly involved in maritime travels, Zhang Ji's poem resonates eerily with *Yi Yü Tu Zhi* despite a temporal gulf of a half millennium: could the *Kunlun er*, Black as lacquer, curly-haired, and adorned with gold earrings, have been captives, kidnapped and sold into slavery by their co-inhabitants on the same island who hold more power or command more resources or simply belong to a different racial-ethnic group that happens to be the majority in that society?

While a fuller examination of the figure of the mysterious, peppercorn- (or conch-shell-) haired *Kunlun* in medieval Chinese literature will have to await another occasion, it would be remiss of us not to draw attention to a religious hue often applied to this figure. A

63. Translation adapted from James K. Chin, "Ports, Merchants, Chieftains and Eunuchs: Reading Maritime Commerce of Early Guangdong," in *Guangdong: Archaeology and Early Texts (Zhou-Tang)*, ed. Shing Muller, Thomas O. Hollmann, and Putao Gui, 217–39 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2004). My gratitude to Benjamin Ridgway and Eric Schluessel for helping me improve this translation.

64. *Yi Yü Tu Zhi*.

vernacular text from the genre of 變文 *bian wen*, “changed [i.e., simplified, vernacularized] text,” contained in the documents retrieved from Dunhuang (fifth to eleventh centuries), includes the following lines as part of a colloquial interpretation of the Buddhist classic *Vimalakīrti Sutra*, or 維摩詰經 in Chinese:

文殊隊仗實堪誇，暫別牟尼聖主家，  
迎引仙童千萬隊，相隨菩薩數河沙。  
金冠玉佩輝青目，雲服珠璣惹翠霞，  
獅子骨崙前後引，翻身卻坐寶蓮花。

Glorious are the guards of Mañjuśrī, as he leaves the abode of the Buddha Shaykamuni.

Thousands upon thousands of immortal youths, companions of the Bodhisattva.

The gleam of gold crowns and jade pendants dims the sun, their flowing robes and pearl necklaces are the envy of the heavenly glow after fresh rain.

Served closely by his lion and *Gulun* [i.e., *Kunlun*], there Mañjuśrī was, turning around and seating himself on a sublime lotus throne.<sup>65</sup>

There are numerous poems and frescos from medieval China that either place a *Kunlun* slave next to Mañjuśrī as the latter’s guard or, in particular, as his lion tamer, or attribute to the Black *Kunlun* a uniquely mysterious quality with an unequivocal Buddhist hue (see Figs. 3 and 4). In medieval Chinese literature, a *Kunlun* slave is a magical being: he serves his master with fealty, he possesses extraordinary physical and spiritual capabilities, he is perceptive and discreet, and at times he performs a rare miraculous feat and quickly vanishes—only to reappear, with but a fleeting resemblance to his former self, somewhere else in the world, in the market or in the street (typical venues for those transient encounters that could leave a lasting impression), brushing past his prior master, causing him confusion and a wistful sense of *déjà vu*.<sup>66</sup> A *Kunlun* slave straddles the realistic and the imaginative, he combines in himself an ineffable trace of materiality—the materiality of global trade, of a mobile slavery where both the origins and the destinations of the slaves remain in flux. Coming from the “South Seas,” from “islands amidst the sea,” they are remade into servants of bodhisattvas, of a religion that too comes from “the South,” that is, from South and Southeast Asia. The peppercorn-haired Black men who appear almost like a racial stereotype in some classical Islamic literature become magical mariners who man the masts on the seagoing vessels that carry Buddhist monks and Muslim merchants across the eastern Indian Ocean world.

65. Wang Chongmin 王重民, ed., *Zhou Shaoliang pijiao Dunhuang bianwen ji* 周紹良批校《敦煌變文集》兩卷 (Beijing: Guojia Tushuguan Chubanshe, 2017), 2:442.

66. One of the most remarkable literary portrayals of *Kunlun* slaves is a *zhuānqī* 傳奇 story in Taiping Guangji 太平廣記. A fuller discussion of *zhuānqī* as a literary genre and how this bears upon the representation of Black labor and the articulation of Blackness in medieval Tang and Song Dynasty China will have to await another occasion given the scope of this article. See “*Kunlun nu*,” in Taiping Guangji, ed. Li Fang et al. 李昉等 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1961), book 4, 194:1452–54.

Fig. 3.  
*Kunlun* as depicted  
on the western wall  
of the main chamber  
of the twenty-fifth  
cave in the Yulin  
Caves (created in the  
late eighth century),  
Dunhuang, China.  
Courtesy of the  
Dunhuang Academy.



Fig. 4.  
*Kunlun* as depicted  
on the western wall  
of the main chamber  
of the twenty-fifth  
cave in the Yulin  
Caves (created in the  
late eighth century),  
Dunhuang, China.  
Courtesy of the  
Dunhuang Academy.



## Conclusion

It is perhaps not incidental that the majority of the Arabic and Chinese sources cited in this article, whether ‘*ajā’ib*, Chinese geographical literature, or vernacularized exegesis of Buddhist canon, all combine the transmission of knowledge, creation of pleasure, and cultivation of moral sentiment. Depictions of Black people and articulation of Blackness in the medieval Indian Ocean world are thus intrinsically moralizing projects. This conclusion applies as much to Chinese as it does to Arabic sources, despite the obvious fact that the social processes of racialization and localized articulations of Blackness must have diverged significantly within and between the two societies that gave rise to these sources: tenth-century China is different from fourteenth-century China, and Baghdad is different from Basra and is different from Fustat.

I have not selected camphor and peppercorn as two precious goods to write a conventional material history of cross-Indian Ocean trade; rather, my interpretation of their commercial as well as literary careers, the ways in which they straddle and shapeshift across these two registers of existence, is informed by an enthusiasm to view objects as strategic nodes where literature and trade are made to intersect and reciprocate to give rise to subtle processes of racialization where, as we have seen, Black labor and Black bodies are sublimated into, struck through but not erased by, Black metaphor. Writing a robust *social* history that describes in great detail medieval Black nautical labor across the Indian Ocean may be out of the question; however, a supple interpretation of literature informed by a literarily minded reading of history—an approach demanded by the very object of study we set ourselves—may create new avenues of research and imagination helping us regain access to the breathtakingly rich and layered world of Black subalternity articulated translingually across the medieval Indian Ocean world.

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