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The Unsung Glories of the Imam: Silence, Absence and the Islamicate
in the Kwok On Collection's India holdings

(English version of the text presented at the Museu Oriente on April 19, 2017, as part of the series A Índia Visual. The original Portuguese version can be downloaded [here](#). For the PDF of the English version [click here](#).)

Before anything else I would like to thank a couple of people who have ensured that I have this opportunity today. I would like to thank, first of all Ines Lourenco for having invited to make this presentation. I have been following the India Visual series for a while and always nursed a secret desire to be able to speak from this platform. For this opportunity Ines, many thanks.

I would also like to thank the team at Museu Oriente, Liliana Cruz, Sofia Lopes and Cátia Souto for their help with this presentation. I recognize the presence of my doctoral supervisor Profa. Rosa Maria Perez. And finally, I would like to thank the members of the audience for their presence.

To move on to the substance of today's presentation, I would like to begin with a confession. When I received the invitation to present at the India Visual lecture series I was told that I would have the option to visit the reserves of the Kwok On Collection and choose a piece, or pieces I would like to speak on.

As any museum aficionado knows, it is a huge opportunity to visit the reserves of a Museum, and not one to be missed. I was particularly excited because it would give me the chance to determine if my suspicion about the nature of the holdings was fact or simply a wild idea. The suspicion was that the India segment of the Kwok On collection would in fact be a collection of Hindu objects. This is to say, that India will have been implicitly understood as 'Hindu' by those who constitute the collection. I was not wrong in my assessment, and what I beheld in the collection, or at least the portion I was able to review, was rack upon rack of material that is associated with what we call Hinduism. Missing from these racks, at least on first glance, were materials that could be associated with Islam and Christianity. It is to this absence that

the title of my presentation makes reference to, and which I would like to reflect on for just a moment before moving forward.



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As can be seen from this advertisement of TAIP from 1961, which depicts an orientalised and Hindu Goa, there is a long tradition of equating India with what has come to be seen as Hinduism. This trend emerged first with Orientalist representations of India, where both Islam and Christianity, faith traditions that have existed in South Asia almost immediately after their appearance in human history, have been represented as foreign faiths. As any observer of contemporary Indian politics will see, this is a trend that receives state support as well, not just today, but almost from the very inception of the Indian state. What needs to be pointed out, however, is that Hinduism is, in fact, an invention of the 19th century. Contemporary Hinduism emerges as a result of two distinct but related strands. The first, as depicted in this image of a lithograph titled "*Our Moonshree*," [one of the 40 plates by George Francklin Atkinson in the second half of the 19th century during his stay in South Asia] resulted from the tendency of orientalist scholars from the eighteenth century, a number of them in the employ of the East India Company, who in association with their Brahmin or dominant caste secretaries and native informants, sought to club the diverse faith traditions within the subcontinent as part of a single religion, i.e. Hinduism. The second was thenationalist attempts to create a single community out of the dominant castes, primarily in Northern India and stake claim to the British Raj. Thus, when the famous S. V. Radhakrishnan (1923) spoke about Indian philosophy, he meant, Hindu philosophy. The fact, however, is that Hinduism can be produced only by silencing the complexity of these multiple faith practices and their location in regional, and local contexts. What gains voice in this process of silencing is the narrative of Brahmanism. Once again, this is what Radhakrishnan actually did which was to privilege brahmanical philosophy. Very often Brahmanism exists in complex relationships with a variety of other local belief systems. As a result of being alive only to "Hinduism" and not this complex multiplicity however, all too often it is only the brahmanical narrative that gains voice. Other narratives within this Hindu complex are either ignored, or silenced. It is to this silence, or the active process of silencing, that the second key word of the title refers to.

Before I move on to discussing the complex ways in which Islam is present in the subcontinent, even in things that appear Hindu, I would like to spend a little more time reflecting on the absences in the representation of subcontinental practices. As I mentioned before, both Islam and Christianity, found presence in south Asia soon after their appearance in human history. Thus, while Christianity in India is traced to St. Thomas, the apostle and companion of Christ in 52 A.D. the scholarly consensus is that Christian communities were

definitely established in India at least by the 6th century common era. This image demonstrates the popular myth that St. Thomas performed a miracle to convert Malayali (i.e. from Kerala) Brahmins to Christianity. Islam, on the other hand, established about 6th century C.E, is said to have come to India by about the 7th century. This image is of the 7th century Cheraman Malik Masjid in Kodungallur, contemporary Kerala, possibly one of the earliest mosques in south Asia. Despite having emerged in India almost at their very inception, and having century long histories in the subcontinent, they are often written out of the representation of India, as a result of being foreign belief systems. This exclusion could be traced from intellectual traditions that have dominated since the Romantic movement. The Romanticists saw authenticity only in those things that sprung from the soil, that were linked to nature. By this logic, if a practice did not spring from the soil it was not really authentic, and did not really belong to the valid authentic traditions of the territory. The implications of this practice have had devastating impacts for Christians and Muslims in India who have been seen as foreigners and justified targets of Indian nationalist violence, both overt as well as subtle.

The ridiculousness of this proposition is perhaps evident in the way in which I just presented the history of Christian and Islamic presence in South Asia, i.e. their emergence in the subcontinent immediately after appearance in human history. Added to this given the kind of diversity of practices in South Asia, as well as their fluidity, the anthropologist Jackie Assayag rightly points out that:

In view of a social system marked by so much turmoil, it is impossible to consider Islam an entity introduced into an alien Hindu universe (2004: 42).

The exclusion of Christianity from India has a peculiar history in Portugal as well which we should reflect on for just a moment before I turn to Islam, which will be the focus of my presentation today. There is often a practice among Portuguese scholars, to link Christianity only with the colonial past of this country. Various groups respond to this in various manners. I can identify two, both of which are extremely problematic. The first, one could see these as those continuing the Estado Novo rhetoric which views Catholicism as a gift of the Portuguese to the "Indians". This places the Portuguese in a superior position vis-à-vis the south Asian Catholic groups, the metropolitan Portuguese are the givers, and the South Asian Portuguese are the passive receivers. The second, responding to this Estado Novo rhetoric, see Catholicism as an unwelcome colonial imposition on the Indians. For this reason members of this second group are apologetic about the introduction of Christianity and seek to undo the

violence of their putative ancestors by representing the “Hindu” side of India. What both groups fail to realize is that Christianity in India, even the one introduced by the Portuguese, has a life that is entirely independent of the Portuguese who implanted the faith in the sub-continent. Christianity, even Catholicism, was taken and given a different inner and external form. If there is an absence in representation therefore, it is of organic Christianity in the representation of Christianity in South Asia. This is not to say that it is a ‘syncretic’ Christianity, as is so popular in some representations, but a Christianity as proper and orthodox as those in continental Europe. Thus, while one can be grateful to the Portuguese for being the “luzes do Occidente” who brought the light of the gospel to Asia (Xavier 2008) one can also recognize that while we do our Catholicism similarly, we also do it differently. It is the presence of this kind of organic Christianity that I would personally like to see attested to in museums in Portugal: where Catholicism in India is not merely a reference to what the Portuguese gave, but to the agency of the locals, what they did with it.

But I have spent too much time on peripheral issues and much come to the core of my presentation today, which is the manner in which practices associated with the Shia faith, and the historic figure of Imam Hussein are central to much South Asian (Indian), culture, and how this presence is actively silenced.

For this purpose I would like to introduce to you the primary object that this presentation will focus on. What we have before us is an image, or idol, of the Goddess Yellamma, which means mother of all. As we can tell the image is iconic - i.e. it represents the goddess, with an image of her face in silver, which is placed on another object, dressed with a sari, there are representations for her hands, and she is decorated with necklaces and other objects that speak of her royal stature. Let us not forget that in South Asia, royalty and divinity flow into each other. Simultaneously, what we have on screen is the way in which this image would normally be used. Placed on the head of a devotee who may ask for alms.

The dominant, brahmanical, story of the Goddess Yellamma is rather interesting and knowledge of this myth allows us to appreciate the divergence of the myth from other more interesting versions.

In the brahmanical version about the Goddess Yellamma, the story begins, typically, with the Brahmin woman Renuka, who was wife to the rishi, or ascetic, Jamadagni. The story goes that suspecting Renuka of infidelity, Jamadagni commanded his elder sons to kill their mother. Sensibly, these young men refused to fulfill their father's command, which only enraged him further. Turning to Parashuram, the youngest of his sons, he repeated his command, and Parashuram obediently took up his axe and beheaded his mother.

Unfortunately, when he did so he also beheaded a lower-caste woman, who in various versions of the myth, was either Renuka's attendant, or a kindly woman who sought to help the hapless wife of the sage. Jamadagni was delighted that he had one son who was obedient, and promised Parashuram anything he asked for. Parashuram asked that his mother be brought to life. Jamadagni acquiesced, whereupon Parashuram quickly joined heads and bodies together, and stood aside for his father to work magic. On bringing the women back to life both men realised that in his haste Parashuram had switched the heads. As such, the upper-caste Renuka now had the body of a lower-caste woman Yellamma, and Yellamma's head was on the body of the upper-caste Renuka. The situation was resolved by recognising the bodies as constitutive of identity. Given that Yellamma's lower-caste body now had an upper-caste head, she was granted a divine status. For this reason, in brahmanical narratives about the Goddess Yellamma, she is often referred to as Renuka-Yellamma, or worshipped as two different entities, the softer and upper caste Renuka, and the volatile lower-caste Yellamma.

There are other narratives of Yellamma, however, and the one I am going to narrate now, is derived from the Dhangar caste in the Kolhapur region (Skyhawk 2008). This group is a marginalised caste that often herds cattle in the western ghats and Deccan region of the subcontinent.

The Dhangar narrative begins by underlining the fact that Yellamma was the youngest and most stubborn of seven sisters: Yekva, Mhakra, Durgava, Durgva, Margva, Jakva, and Tukva. This youngest sister was once separated from her siblings when she felt thirsty during a hunt. Though she was unable to find her sisters, she did eventually find water in Mahadev's pond. While at the pond, her eyes fell on a chickpea plant, whose stem she felt compelled [by hunger no doubt] to pluck. As she leaned forward to do so Mahadev cried out that should she carry out this action, "blame" would fall on her. Yellamma did not listen, however, and pulled

a twig from the bush. Instantly, a burning blister formed on her palm.



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Alone and frightened, Yellamma ran in pain until she could bear the pain no longer. She pricked the blister, and found in it a lump of blood, and a radiant little baby was born. The baby, born from the blister was Parasarama, or Parasurama.

It was after having birthed the baby Parasurama and traveling some more that Yellamma finally stumbled upon her sisters. When they saw her carrying the little baby, however, the sisters cried out, "Stay away! Don't come closer! You have made us the relatives of a bastard! We don't want to touch you! And we don't want you in our group! As you have borne a bastard, go away from us! Don't ever come to us!"

With now nowhere and no one to go, and after much wandering, she came upon "the Musalman brothers Asan [and] Usan," that is, the Shia Imams Hassan and Hussein. She requested, and received, shelter from them, and spent the night on the verandah of their home. In the morning, she requested a place to live. The brothers responded by placing a stone in a sling, flinging the stone in the air and indicating to Yellamma to follow the stone, for where it fell, that place would be hers. Yellamma did as requested and followed the stone, which had fallen on Saundatti hill.

Yellamma reached the hill at sundown and encountered the home of one JagulSatyava, whom she petitioned for shelter for the night. Satyava responded that he would have gladly given her a place to stay, "but mine is a Musalman house and there will be meat." Yellamma would not take no for an answer, however, and persuaded Satyava to let her spend the night in the house. When Satyava's sons, Bhram, Apa, Asan, and Usan, returned home with two wild goats, Yellamma called out, "Your maternal aunt has come! My boy should sit down with you. Let your sister join your dining row!" And so it was, the narrative tells us, that Yellamma, with the baby Parasuram on her lap, sat with the Muslim boys as they prepared to eat.

The narrative also informs us that "Yallamma sprinkled the nectar of immortality on all the meat they had there, and gave [the dead animals] their full life-force again. And Baby

Parasarama was accepted in the circle of the Musalman boys, and in bliss did they eat together.” Subsequently, in the morning, the four brothers erected a temple to the virgin goddess on Saundatti hill, so that there would be space for all of them. The narrative concludes that “After they had built the temple the Canarese Yallava took Baby Parasarama and stayed in the temple on the hill.”(the contemporary temple is depicted on the screen).

To those of us accustomed to the neat divisions between the monolithic identities of “Hindu” and “Muslim”, this narrative would present something of a shock. Indeed, the narrative seems to have all the makings of a contemporary soap opera. According to Skyhawk (2008), it highlights the role of the Shia heroes, Hassan and Hussein, as protectors of helpless women and children in South Asia. There are others who, using a lens of power, would argue that this myth demonstrates the way in which the local followers of the cult of Yellamma found a convivial arrangement with those who follow Islam. As much as I also agree with this understanding, I think such “rational” responses do not capture the complexity of what is/ was going on. This is to say, it does not demonstrate the extent to which Islam itself becomes a part of the local reality of people, and shapes their belief systems, including contemporary Hinduism.

Before I go forward, there is a need for a slight detour while I explain the actors Hassan and Hussein.

The death of the Prophet Mohammad in 632 CE created a crisis among the young Muslim community. While there were some who believed that Ali, the Prophet’s son-in-law should be the Caliph, or leader of the community, it was Abu Bakr, one of the companions of the Prophet, who was selected instead. It was only with the murder of the third Caliph that Ali was made Caliph, but Ali in turn was murdered and the Caliphate passed on to Yazid, and subsequently to his Yazid’s son, Muawiya.

Hassan and Hussein were the sons of Ali. Hassan was murdered in 670 CE, allegedly at the instance of Yazid, and Hussein was martyred at the famous battle of Karbala against the forces of Muawiya in 680 CE. It is these events that consolidate what is perhaps the most famous of differences among Muslims, that between the Sunni, and the Shi’i, the latter being

regarded as the party of Ali. What is most common to Shi'i practice is the commemoration of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein and his companions at the battle of Karbala. Imam Hussein was martyred on the tenth day of the month of Muharram. As such, the first ten days of the month of Muharram feature a number of ceremonies that include ritual mourning, and different kinds of processions. The image on the screen points to these main features - the parading of Duldul, processional standards called *alam*, replicas of the graves of the imams called *tazia*.

There is another link to Yellamma and Shi'i imagery and the image of the goddess before us. In his study of the Deccan region where the worship of Yellamma predominates, Jackie Assayag indicates that the offerings to another deity, RajabaugSavar, or to a third entity, the Sufi saint Bar Shah are tiny silver horses called *duldul* (2004:159, 168). Once again, those familiar with the practice of Shi'i will know that Duldul, or Duljinah is the name of the horse gifted by the Prophet to his grandson Hussein, and is the feature of many Moharram processions. In these processions, a white riderless horse, with arrows sticking out of its saddle is paraded to represent Duljinah after the battle of Karbala. What is interesting is that such a silver horse should also find its place among the items in the Kwok On Collection associated with the cult of Yellamma.

Another interesting fact is the palms that our deity of Yellamma has. As is obvious these are palms that are raised in blessing. What I find interesting, however, as these images illustrate, is that these palms also resemble the *panjaalam* that are carried in Shia processions. *Panja* which translates from Persian to five, and to hand, represents the 'five pure souls' of the Prophet's family, viz., Muhammad, Fatima, Ali, Hassan, and Hussein. I have also noticed that similar palms are also used in temple ceremonies in Goa, where Shi'ism was also influential thanks to its falling within the sphere of the Bijapuri Sultanate.

Shi'ism has had a profound impact on the subcontinent, especially in the Deccan, thanks to the Bahmani Sultans (1347-1527), and subsequently the Adil Shahi Sultans (1490 to 1686) confessing Shi'ism (the next couple of slides demonstrate the extent of the Bahmani empire, the successor states, and finally the Bijapuri state). It was the influence of these two dynasties that would have had a significant impact on introducing the figure of the Imam's Hassan and Hussein into the mythology and worship of local goddesses such as Yellamma. What I would like to underline at this point, is that while the so-called Hinduism is often seen

as exerting an influence on so-called foreign religions like Islam or Christianity, what is not so often recognized is that Islam and Christianity have had equally important influences on the many faith practices of the sub-continent.

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The influence of Islam, and Muslims, however, goes beyond merely an influence on faith practices and beliefs. It influences even the material and profane. To capture the breadth of this influence in 1974 the famed scholar of Islamic studies Marshal Hodgson introduced the term 'Islamicate' in his book *The Venture of Islam* (1974). In this work he suggested that 'Islamicate' would refer not directly to the religion, Islam, itself, but to the social and cultural complex historically associated with Islam and the Muslims, both among Muslims themselves and even when found among non-Muslims.

This concept can be illustrated with the image of this dress from the famous production of Peter Brook *Mahabharata*. Often understood as Indian dress, and it is, what most people do not know is that this dress is directly inspired by the Persian *jama*. The use of Persian, or Arab inspired clothes by subcontinental peoples would be a perfect example of Hodgson's concept of the Islamicate. To understand this concept, and the dress better, we should perhaps make reference to Philip Wagoner's celebrated article (1996) on the dress options of the Vijayanagara kings. As many of you would know, Vijayanagar is often represented as the last Hindu kingdom, which was a bulwark against the Muslim states surrounding it. And yet, what Wagoner's work goes to demonstrate, is that the apparently "Hindu" princes of Vijayanagar actively took on not only Islamicate dress for court purposes, but also Islamicate titles. Thus, they styled themselves as "Sultan among Hindu kings". This title demonstrates how much the practices of Islamic kings who were dominant in the subcontinent were imitated by non-Muslims as well, and perhaps may have encouraged the conversion of non-Muslims to Islam, or the inclusion of Islamic practices in addition to those that they already practiced. The image here is a mural from a temple in Lepakshi, contemporary Andhra Pradesh which depicts courtiers in the Vijayanagar court.

What is also interesting is that some Dhangars seem to have used the *jama* on ceremonial occasions. Take, for example, this image of Dhangars dancing in a tableaux circa 1954 in the former Estado da India. That they are wearing *jamias* is quite obvious from this image.

I would like to end this presentation by reference to one last practice which will demonstrate

the importance, not just of Islam, or the Islamicate, but the importance of Shi'i Islam to the Islamicate in south Asia. It is to this Shi'i influence that the Imam in the title of the presentation alludes to.



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I have already indicated that the commemoration of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein marks the first ten days of the Islamic month of Muharram. In North India, in the kingdom of the Nawab of Awadh, i.e. contemporary Lucknow, Moharram was marked by sessions of *rauzakhawni*, or mourning, where laments were recited in public ceremonies. I would like you to regard this image of one such *rauzakhawni* and in particular focus on the lamps in this image. The image is an Opaque watercolour on mica from the Anglo-Indian school at Patna, circa mid-19th century.

What is interesting about these lamps is that similar, if not the very same design, are today used by Hindus in Goa and Maharashtra during the feast of Diwali. Popularly imagined to be indigenous, native expressions, the fact is that these lamps are demonstrative of the impress of the Islamicate on the most intimate of Hindu lives.

How did these lamps get from landlocked Lucknow to coastal Goa? One possible answer is through the agency of the Marathas, who as they grew to dominate the subcontinent became carriers of the Islamicate, or Persianate tradition of the various Muslim princes they either took over from or shared power with. One can refer to this image that contains the portraits of the Maratha king Shivaji (1627/1630[1] -1680) and the Bijapuri Sultan Muhammad Adil Shah (r.1627-1657) to see how both these men participated in a similar Islamicate or Persianate culture. One will notice how they are both also wearing jamas, just as is the last Peshwa Madhav Rao Narayan, his minister Nana Fadnavis and the attendants in this portrait.

It is perhaps not surprising then that the commemoration of Moharram was one of the bigger festivals in places like Poona, and Bombay, the former city being actively associated with Maratha power. As Shubnam Tejani points out

Muharram, the Shia commemoration of the Martyrdom of the Prophet's grandsons, was traditionally a cross-community festival in Poona. Although it was an occasion marked only in the Shia ritual calendar, it was popular among many communities. Hindu musicians would be hired to play, dancing (nautch) girls performed [by singing *marsias*], Hindu labourers' bullock carts were hired to carry the symbolic biers (*tazias*) of the Imams Hasan[sic] and Hussain. Indeed, sections of the Hindu population regularly made their own *tazias*, which would be paraded and then immersed along with those of Muslims. (2007: 56)



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Tejani and other scholars, point out that it was in fact to counteract the convivial spirit of the
Muharram processions that the Hindu nationalist leader, Tilak began to organise the public
Ganesh festival. This image shows Bal Gangadhar Lokmanya Tilak at the first Sarvajanic
Ganeshotsav in Poona.

My final image is that of the Ganesh processions in the city of Bombay today, which have an epic character, drawing members of various neighbourhood associations into huge processions that end with the immersion of the deities of the elephant god in the sea. What is interesting is that these processions seem uncannily similar to those of the Muharram processions in the city from the late 19th and early twentieth century where once again the processions of the tazias were a neighbourhood affair, drawing together not only the faithful, but gang leaders, ruffians and all manner of peaceable and curious people.

I would like to conclude by suggesting that India or South Asia is much more complex than we imagine it to be. It is definitely more than a Hindu locale and my presentation today has sought to draw attention to the way in which this complexity is often ignored and negated. An openness to what regional and local practices tell us would demonstrate how Islam, and in particular Shia Islam, has been critical to the formation not merely of secular culture in the subcontinent, but also religious culture of groups that are today not Muslim or Christian, but seen as Hindu.

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