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Afterword

An Eiffel Tower at Nagore: Material Religion and Spectacular Assemblages at a South Indian Sufi Shrine

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Sometime in the mid-nineties, when I was a nine-year-old girl, my mother took me to the 'Hindu Hall', a Hindu temple in Gaborone, Botswana (where we then lived) to witness a miracle: the idol of Ganesha, the elephant-faced god, was drinking milk. What I did not know then, was that Hindus all over the world were also rushing to their local temples to witness this miracle. When we reached the temple premises, I was shoved to the front with all the other children. Soon enough, the head priest's wife handed me a spoonful of milk and gripped my hand steadily under the trunk of the Ganesha idol as I watched the liquid disappear slowly. I don't remember much else except for the cacophony and crowds that day. My atheist father later joked that the priest's wife probably tilted my hand at a particular angle so that the milk would dribble off the spoon, giving the illusion that the idol was *actually* drinking milk. "Ingenious!" he guffawed.

Almost twenty years later, as I gravitated toward the study of religion as a graduate student, I came to realise that not only were there varying explanations given for this particular event, including analyses of the political and ideological actors purportedly orchestrating this 'miracle' behind the scenes, but scholars from different fields more broadly were asking ontological and epistemological questions about reality, rationality, the imagination, human-nonhuman relations, materiality, and the agency of nonhuman things in the world as they relate to religion. Indeed, the agency of idols (*murti*s) and other religious objects have been topics of study within Hinduism (Flueckiger 2020). A more productive question, then, is not whether Ganesha idols across the world *actually* drank milk. Rather, in asking how and why sacred objects come to have agency (or are imbued with agency), and why the materiality of the sacred and the mundane come to matter for people, we open ourselves up to a much broader field of questions about material culture, assemblages, relations between humans, objects, and gods, and the political and ideological stakes attached to them.

The articles in this special issue populate the study of material religion from four distinct empirical contexts within South Asia: the intermingling of different materialities at a Sufi *dargah* in Pune, Maharashtra; multispecies marriage rituals between non-humans; a form of worship—"bhakti assemblage"—that harnesses the capacities of imagination and visualisation; and a procession of deities and things in a south Indian beach festival. They take seriously the analytical and conceptual promise of "assemblage" through an attention to the efficacy and agentive capacity of material objects in devotional contexts. In turn, they push the limits of material agency, that is, they each ponder, among other questions, *where* agency is located and what the intermingling of various ritual and non-ritual objects can tell us about materiality more broadly. To attribute agency to things other than the human (the divine, sacred geographies, objects, supernatural beings) is not to completely displace the human, but as Leah Comeau (this issue) puts it, "to shift away from human-centred theories of action." Such an argument speaks to scholarship in recent decades that have sought to de-centre the human and the fixation on belief in the study of religion.

For example, anthropologist Mayanthi Fernando has recently argued for an anthropology of "nonsecular, multispecies worlds," especially given urgent conversations around the Anthropocene and the inherent secularity in the artificial separation between humanity and nature: "Posthumanist scholarship—multispecies studies, the ontological turn, new animism studies, and certain trends in science and technology studies—now understands humans as always already in relation to nonhumans" (2022: 568). Although such scholarship recognises the agency of nonhumans, Fernando argues that it is still reluctant to extend that recognition to "gods, spirits, and other supernatural entities" (ibid).

In the field of religious studies, scholarship stemming from the 'material turn' has paid close attention to the life of things: "The artifacts, spaces, foods, drinks, sounds, images, smells, tools, infrastructure, plants, animals, insects, bacteria, rivers, oceans, geology, and weather that form the natural and social worlds in which humans exist are teeming sources of agency" (Morgan 2022). Specifically, scholars of South Asian material culture have explored the communicative and haptic potentials of inscriptions, architecture, and objects, providing new theorisations of sensory life in the region (Flood 2009, Elias 2012, Comeau 2019, Venkatesan 2019). In her edited volume on Islamic materiality, Anna Bigelow further suggests that "humans and things are assemblages comprised of physical matter, sensory experiences, and spiritual sensibilities situated within sympathetic alliances of political, economic, and social structures" (2021: 9).

As a conceptual framework for my own research on everyday Islam in Tamil-speaking south India, 'assemblage' deprivileges binary oppositions between Hindu and Muslim, sacred and profane, religious and secular, and Islamic and un-Islamic. I also find it a useful alternative to 'syncretism', 'hybridity', and 'pluralism', concepts that have often been used to describe Muslim shrines in India but are beset by various theoretical impasses.[1] Such concepts also do not address the co-mingling of overtly sacred and decidedly non-sacred things within a shared space. At the same time, as Leah Comeau (this issue) rightly points out, "…the characteristic eclecticism and unevenness of assemblages, however, run the risk of including anything or everything—a conceptual death by diffusion." While there is no perfect conceptual solution, I find particularly helpful queer theorist Jasbir Puar's explication of an assemblage as that which "allow us to attune to movements, intensities, emotions, energies, affectivities, and textures as they inhabit events, spatiality, and corporealities" (Puar 2005: 128). Following Puar, by asking what assemblages *do* and not simply what they *are*, we begin to see their capacious quality.

Let us take the example of wish-threads that Deepra Dandekar (this issue) analyses as an assemblage of power. Tied to the grill gates of Pune's Sadal Baba *dargah* by ardent devotees seeking the saint's blessings, these wish-threads "acquired an agentive lifeforce" brimming with unrealised potential, a liveliness and 'wriggliness', until a wish was fulfilled (or not). Dandekar's analysis makes clear that agency is not unique to humans alone.[2] Objects like wish-threads too have a life of their own as they move in and out of everyday spaces of commerce and ritual, and jostle with *dargah* noticeboards, the marketplace, and the grave-shrine of the saint. Taken together, it is this assemblage (and not any one individual component) that enables Dandekar's interlocutors to experience Pune's Islamic prehistory that is hidden in plain sight.

Leah Comeau's paper too is attentive to the liveliness of material objects through the author's ethnographic witnessing of the Masi Magam festival in Pondicherry, south India. The sheer

[1] Not least the persistence of the age-old trope of traditions as static and unchanging over time until they encounter one another.
[2] See Hazard (2013) for a discussion of how agency, new materialism, and assemblage are connected concepts.

eclecticism of overlapping assemblages takes centre stage: it is not just the goddess who is a member-actant, but also the electric parasol, and together they thrive in this symbiotic relationship. Comeau ultimately turns the gaze upon her writerly persona as she is herself doing assemblage work in parsing through the diversity of things that she has observed. What is exciting about Comeau's autoethnographic flashes is that the writing seems to mimic the very concept that she harnesses for her analysis.

Anne Mocko's exploration of *tulsi vivaha*, a folk wedding ritual not between two humans but between non-human brides and grooms, considers the more-than-symbolic work that such weddings do in Hindu communities. Sacred basil plants (and in other instances, fruits, trees, and animals) participate in interspecies meaning-making practices as they are married to the divine groom (Vishnu or Krishna physically represented in the form of a statue). The Tulsi plant is also an agent here, "not entirely a bride" but "not merely a plant." These ritual assemblages of divine grooms, sacred plants, and astrological justifications take us beyond simplistic understandings of human-nonhuman relations and toward what Mayanthi Fernando refers to as "nonsecular multispecies worlds where humans, animals, and gods co-constitute mutual webs of care and commitment" (Fernando 2022: 569).

While the three articles discussed so far explore material agency directly, we learn from Iva Patel that agency need not be tied to material objects at all. By employing the innovative concept of "bhakti assemblage," Patel shows how "materials pulsate with meanings even in their non-material existence." Such an assemblage pulls together material objects, non-physical existence, the devotee, and the invisible to achieve a cognitive union with the divine through the devotional notion of *manasi.* At the same time, it is also the case that imaginative capacities can affect the material world, including one's own body and how one is changed by a devotional encounter.

In addition to these insightful provocations, I add my own in the spirit of addressing what work assemblages do for social, religious, and political life. I consider two related assemblages: first, the spectacular tableaux that are part of an annual procession at the south Indian saint-shrine of Shahul Hamid, and second, an idol of Shahul Hamid (also known as Naguran Swami to his Hindu devotees) located in a Hindu temple in Brooklyn, New York. Much like Leah Comeau's exploration of the decorated procession where "things that are not overtly or exclusively sacred materials" can rub shoulders with deities, my two examples attend to the co-mingling of various human, saintly, non-human, and material things across time and space, each with their own agentive possibilities.

The Nagore *dargah* is a Sufi shrine located in the coastal southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. The shrine contains the tomb of the 16th century Muslim saint, Shahul Hamid, and attracts millions of visitors annually from across the world. Although supplicants visit the shrine throughout the year, they are especially keen to witness the *urs* or *kanturi*, a fourteen-day festival marking the death anniversary of the saint. The procession of a decorated chariot (*kudu* in Tamil, meaning nest or cocoon) is an important aspect of such shrine festivals in southern India and across the subcontinent and the diaspora. Typically, the chariot is taken on parade through the streets of a town but for the Nagore festival, the chariot travels from the neighbouring town of Nagapattinam, taking several hours to make the 7-kilometre journey. Wooden planks form the skeleton of the multi-tiered chariot, designed in the shape of pyramid, and the whole structure sits on four iron wheels that are used to propel the chariot through the streets on the ninth night of the festival.[3] The chariot is referred to as the *santhanakudu* since

[3] It is generally acknowledged that the shrine chariot bears resemblance to the chariot in south Indian temple festivals known as the 'car festival' or *ter* in Tamil. One key difference is that the temple chariot contains a deity, while a *dargah* chariot does not. The chariot festival is also common among Roman

its primary ritual function is to carry a vessel of sandalwood paste (*santhanam*) to the Nagore *dargah* so that the tomb of Shahul Hamid can be anointed with the paste as per the age-old custom.

While the chariot is the ritual focal point and leads the procession, several other tableaux follow behind. Every year, different groups of adolescent boys gather funds to create new tableaux for the procession.[4] In addition, drummers and other musicians (such as *shehnai* players) provide the traveling sonic atmosphere for these floats.[5] These numerous and sensational art, light, and sound displays aptly characterise the heterogenous and fragmented nature of an assemblage. While some objects in the procession are recognisable, such as a miniature Nagore *dargah*, others are more abstract and not directly tied to the ritual life of the shrine (image 5.1). Throughout this nighttime procession, the viewer is confronted with an assemblage of dazzling visual, textual, and cultural referents that are open to interpretation. In their material abstraction (of form and content), they produce a spectacle of mobile objects competing against each other in size, design, and innovative graphics as they amble down the street toward Nagore.

Image 5.1: Abstract assemblages in procession towards Nagore from Nagapattinam. Image source: author

Such assemblages compel us to ask different questions of sites that have been studied primarily through the lens of ritual, supplication, and religious economy. This is not an argument for reinscribing the sacred-secular dualism, but an invitation to consider the how the assemblages I have just described disrupt, co-exist, or sit in uneasy tension with the more familiar “aesthetic formations” (Meyer 2009) in the Nagore shrine. Each year, the tableaux are grander, and infused with the latest technologies such as LED lights, graphic displays, and

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Catholic communities in Tamil Nadu, where carved images of Mary and Christ are the focal point. *Kudus* in Tamil shrines are similar to the *ta’ziyah* or *taboot* in Muhurram festivals across the world, particularly in Southeast Asia and the Caribbean (Sohoni and Tschacher 2021).

[4] That these are adolescent boys is evident from the names of some of the tableaux: ‘Youngster Boys’, ‘Stunner Guyz’, ‘Handsome Guyz’, and ‘Junior Guyz’. I was also told by the chariot builder that the new creations that year were the work of young boys from the community.

[5] Traditionally, it is the *parai* drum and drummers from the *paraiyar* caste (formerly ‘untouchables’ now known as Dalits) who accompanies the *kudu*.

new designs. Many regular supplicants complain that the addition of new objects to the procession that have nothing to do with the devotional and ritual aspects of the *dargah* is a form of degradation. Some people have stopped going to Nagore for the *urs* due to this reason as well as what they perceive to be the over-commercialisation of the shrine. Nonetheless, such tableaux are here to stay and provide an alternate mode of engagement with the *urs*. Their unpredictability (in contrast to long-standing rituals that take place each year) is aptly captured in Kajri Jain's explication of what assemblages do: "Assemblages are not reducible to the properties of their individual components or to any particular level or scale at which these parts are specified…They are decomposable, available for redistributions and interactions with other assemblages that might activate capacities and tendencies in these parts that have not yet been exercised…" (Jain 2021: 11-12).

For example, in image 5.2, we encounter a recognisable object, the Eiffel Tower, in scintillating gold LED lights. To the right of the Eiffel tower is another recognisable visual for those familiar with South Asian history: a profile of Tipu Sultan, an 18th Indian Muslim ruler who in recent years has been a target of India's ruling party. This tableaux is built in the shape of a mosque or shrine, with a bulbous dome flanked by two crescent shaped moons and three-tiered minarets, all in continuously changing psychedelic colours. The image on the LED screen rapidly alternates between Tipu Sultan, the Ka'ba, a minaret from the Nagore *dargah*, and a running text: "King of Nagoor." As these two assemblages (the Eiffel tower and Tipu Sultan) spontaneously emerge side by side during the procession, they form yet another assemblage: "they are ad hoc, open-ended, and processual, always bearing the potential to disassemble and reassemble in different formations with different neighboring elements" (Hazard 2013: 65).

Image 5.2: Eiffel Tower assemblage in procession towards Nagore from Nagapattinam. Image source: author.

By briefly plugging into one another, this new assemblage of visuality, kingship, Islamic motifs, translocal and global invocations might lead us to ask: what is an Eiffel tower replica doing at South Indian shrine festival? What is the significance of Tipu Sultan and why has he been given

the title “King of Nagoor” when he is usually referred to as “Tiger of Mysore?”[6] Is he present at the procession as a figure of resistance for a younger generation of Muslims? Are the different elements of the procession a way for different groups to lay claim on the festival?

My purpose in thinking through these questions is not to ascertain intent, but I see such assemblages as having three closely related effects: first, they stand alongside and in contrast to the hierarchical structure of the Nagore *dargah* where lineage, descent, and tradition matter a great deal; second, these new aesthetic forms call upon the viewer to respond to them within the same time-space of the chariot and *santhankudu* ritual. While the *santhankudu* chariot is ritually important for the *urs*, the other tableaux present a spectacle of alternative intensities that are interspersed with the more familiar and coherent tradition of the *urs*; and third, these assemblages mediate one’s sensory experience of the *urs* in unexpected ways. By evoking awe and intrigue usually reserved for moments of ritual excess within the *dargah*, the Eiffel Tower-Tipu Sultan assemblage provides a different space for viewers to direct their gaze and energies.[7] Such an assemblage, to borrow from Tapati Guha-Thakurta’s analysis of Durga Puja *pandals* in Kolkata, does not erase or supersede the religious but “reinvents it within new frames of spectatorship and pitches it into a new zone of wonder and reverence” (2015: 217). While long-standing rituals such as the *santhanakudu* continue to remain central to the *urs*, they take place amidst an annually shifting terrain of public performance and displays of creative energies.

Image 5.3: Tableaux enroute to Nagore during the annual *urs* celebrations. Image source: author

Let us now move from the shores of south India to northeastern United States. The second assemblage I would like to consider is an idol of the Nagore saint, Shahul Hamid, found in a

[6] The makers of these tableaux might be drawing upon Tipu Sultan’s documented connections to France (see Martin 2014 and Simmons 2019), or perhaps the coming together of these two particular tableaux was an unexpected encounter.

[7] The Khalifa (spiritual head) of Nagore, akin to a head priest, performs the sandalwood anointment ceremony inside the room containing the tomb of Shahul Hamid. It is said that he momentarily loses his ability to walk because of a spiritual experience he has in the room and therefore has to be carried out.

Hindu temple in Brooklyn, New York. The Shri Maha Kali Devi Mandir, established by the Indo-Guyanese immigrant community in 1998, is primarily a temple dedicated to goddesses Kali (worshipped in north India) and Mariamman (worshipped in south India). At this temple, Shahul Hamid, alias Naguran Swami, is worshipped alongside other Hindu deities (image 5.4) primarily by Indo-Guyanese people who have Indian, and specifically Tamil heritage.[8] I will focus here only on the images available on the temple's website.

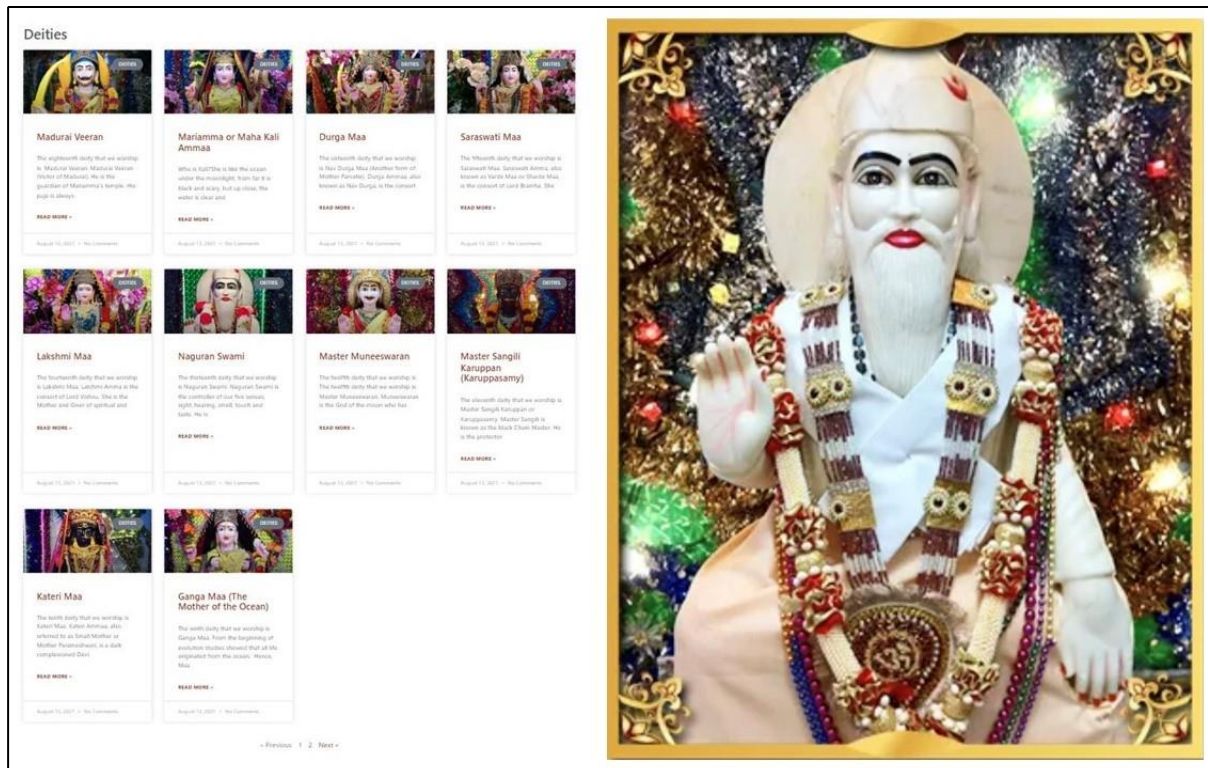

Image 5.4: Image of Naguran Swami on the Shri Maha Kali Devi Mandir website along with other Hindu deities. Image source: author.

In image 5.4, we see Naguran Swami alongside a range of subaltern Tamil deities such as Madurai Veeran and Master Sangili Karuppan, as well as Hindu deities that are more familiar to diasporic Hindus, namely Lakshmi *maa* and Saraswati *maa*. Each image is accompanied by a description on the website. Although Muslim saints are found in paintings and photographs, it is unusual for a Muslim saint in South Asia to be given a physical, sculptural form. Further, he is emplaced within a self-described Hindu temple. The image itself is an arresting assemblage. The figure of Naguran Swami seems to have the likeness of Guru Nanak (founder of the Sikh tradition) or Shirdi Sai Baba (an early 20th century saint with ambiguous religious origins). Crafted in an off-white colour (it is unclear whether the material is stone, plaster, or something else), he sits with his legs folded, his right arm sculpted in a 'blessing' pose while his left arm rests on his knee. He wears several garlands, with the most prominent one attached to an *Om* pendant, indicating his importance for Hindu worshippers. His fingernails and lips are painted red, and he sports a long white beard typical of saints, fakirs, and godmen. The background is a colourful cacophony of shiny streamers, the light bouncing off four distinct points in the photograph. Below the photograph is the following text:

[8] Shahul Hamid's transoceanic mobility is directly tied to the 19th century wherein laborers from various parts of India were brought by British colonial officials in to work on sugar plantations in the Caribbean. Practices at the Brooklyn temple are therefore deeply intertwined with histories of indenture, colonialism, and migration.

> The thirteenth deity that we worship is Naguran Swami. Naguran Swami is the controller of our five senses, sight, hearing, smell, touch and taste. He is the remover of sickness and the Giver of inner strength. Naguran Swami also brought peace between Hindus and Muslims in India. Legends says – He fought alongside Mother Kali in the war against the demons. For this reason, whenever Mariamma's poosai is performed obeisance is paid on to Him as well.

How do we understand this assemblage of image, text, Hindu-Muslim referents, the transoceanic mobility of Shahul Hamid/ Naguran Swami, and the longer histories of indenture and mobility? I hesitate to read this idol of Naguran Swami as the 'hinduization' of Shahul Hamid since he has always existed in relation to Hindu kings, patrons, and devotees (Saheb 2014), and is clearly recognised as a Muslim saint in the above text that describes his efficacy and import for worshippers. Giving him a physical form and embedding the idol among other Hindu idols is less a move toward hinduizing Shahul Hamid, and more to do with legibility for Hindu devotees who are familiar with the practice of *darshan*, of seeing and being seen by the deity (Eck 1985).

In her study of monumental statues in India, Kajri Jain argues that "The assemblage is a powerful concept for thinking about images because of its open-ended capacity to work historically across multiple registers of analysis that are not ultimately or exclusively a matter of human culture, spirit, or will, even as human intent remains crucial" (2021: 12). The "open-ended capacity" of Naguran Swami's image is one that is not simply about a Muslim saint *becoming* a Hindu deity, but its potential to speak to multiple subjects and histories at once. Such assemblages complicate dominant discourses around Sufi ritual, Hindu deities, and shared Hindu-Muslim customs, revealing a far more heterogenous and overlapping terrain of religious patronage, place-making, and material culture. One could say that Shahul Hamid's transoceanic fame has been kept alive and honoured for centuries in part due to the changing material culture at different sites where he is venerated. Such practices of material religion can expand and contract, bring in new objects, introduce elements of play and performance, and bolster the religious efficacy of a festival or an idol.

As all the papers in this special issue show us, the study of material religion continues to be a vital arena to explore the interplay of humans, things, animals, gods, saints, nature, and more. To be sure, such assemblages were always in place, but have often taken a backseat in human-centric analyses of religious life. To decentre the human is also a lesson in intellectual humility, to acknowledge our limitations to completely 'know' the efficacy of objects and the unknown, while keeping our curiosity alive. At the same time, any exploration of power should seriously consider the role of human actors in order to avoid the all-too-easy displacement of human intent (especially that which disables plural and egalitarian approaches) onto the invisible, the divine, or objects. This cautionary note notwithstanding, the agentive capacities of more-than-human things deserve our attention, not least because they provide a window into new religious formations and practices, and in turn, enable us, scholars, to innovate robust conceptual tools to apprehend such phenomena.

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