

Objects Across Borders: Conversations on South Asian Materialities

Thursdays, April – May 2021

Session 1: Of Matchbooks and Gold Jewellery
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Mythri Jegathesan, Chinara Shah

**Session 2:
Of Fezzes and China Root**
6th May: 15.00–16.30 GMT
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Session 5: Of Hooks and Handkerchiefs
27th May: 15.00–16.30 GMT
Luke Heslop, Adhitya Dhanapal

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The Program in South Asian Studies
at Princeton University



Fung Global
Fellows Program

P R I N C E T O N



Can a matchbook contain and displace known histories of worker struggles in the Sri Lankan hill country? What might the traces of the china root in Persian pharmacopeia suggest to us about 18th century patients across the Indian Ocean? How does a butter yellow can of milk powder illuminate mobilities between the southern Indian state of Kerala and the Arabian Gulf? What does the journey of an audio cassette of popular music from north-western Pakistan tell us about practices of preservation and networks of trade? How might remembering and forgetting among the inner London Bangladeshi diaspora be examined through a 500 taka note from East Pakistan?

Objects Across Borders brings together scholars and creative practitioners working in and on South Asia to reflect on the stories embedded in visual and material artefacts. Through these conversations, we hope to foreground new or overlooked connections, contradictions and solidarities across disciplinary and geographic boundaries. This series is organised by Vindhya Buthpitiya (UCL) and Mallika Leuzinger (Princeton) and hosted by the UCL Centre for the Study of South Asia and the Indian Ocean World, and The Fung Global Fellows Program and Program in South Asian Studies at Princeton University.

Session 1: Of Matchbooks and Gold Jewellery

Thursday, 29th April
16.00–17.30 GMT

Register here:
[Zoom-Link](#)

Mythri Jegathesan

Object
Matchbook

This talk is about an election campaign matchbook that a Tamil tea estate woman worker gave me ahead of Sri Lanka's August 2015 Parliamentary Elections. I take this matchbook as an entry point to "watch" (Camp 2017) how a sensorium of *plantation paternalisms* nests in the materialities of Sri Lanka's South-Central tea plantations. From generations of Indo-Lankan diplomatic encounters to ongoing struggles for labor justice, I consider how objects in Sri Lanka's Hill Country such as this matchbook contain but also displace known histories of workers' struggles and demands for dignity. By presenting the paternalisms that nest in these objects, I ask how, if at all, watching them more closely might open us up to envisioning a politics of potentiality on Sri Lanka's plantations.

Bio
Mythri Jegathesan is Associate Professor of Anthropology at Santa Clara University. She has been conducting ethnographic research on plantation economies and gender and labor dynamics with Malaiyaka Tamil communities in Sri Lanka since 2008. She has published in anthropological journals such as *Cultural Anthropology*, *Feminist Anthropology*, *Commoning Ethnography*, and *Anthropological Quarterly*, and she is the author of *Tea and Solidarity: Tamil Women and Work in Postwar Sri Lanka* (University of Washington Press, 2019), winner of the 2020 Diana Forsythe Prize for the best book or series of articles on feminist anthropological research on work, science, and technology.

Chinar Shah

Object
Gold Jewellery

Through a photographic practice, Shah engages in questions of ownership and divestment of gold jewellery at the intersections of gendered financial inclusion policies, patriarchal social norms of inheritance and female debt by looking at a few case studies from rural Tamil Nadu. Gold as an object chronicles memory of financial situations of a household in ownership and in loss. It is also an object of aspirations, desires and financial empowerment for women who bear a huge burden of debt without having any claim to other forms of assets. Through photographic explorations, Shah attempts to tell a complex tale of debt, micro credit and gold in rural India.

Bio
Chinar Shah is an artist, writer, and occasional curator. Her work deals with photography and its implications in moments of violence and conflict. She is the founder of Home Sweet Home – an exhibition series that uses domestic spaces to show works of art – and she taught at the Srishti Institute for Art, Design and Technology between 2014–2020 (Bangalore). She is also co-editor of *Photography in India: From Archives to Contemporary Practice* (Bloomsbury, 2018). She is currently working as an artist on a UKRI project on Debt in Rural Tamil Nadu.

Session 2: Of Fezzes and China Root

Thursday, 6th May
15.00–16.30 GMT

Register here:
[Zoom-Link](#)

Shamara Wettimuny

Object
Fez cap

In December 1905, around 30,000 Muslims gathered in the grounds of the Maradana mosque in Colombo in the most significant episode of pan-Islamic solidarity during British rule in Ceylon. What had triggered this ‘monster meeting’ as it was dubbed in the press? In this talk, I analyse a British colonial decision that threatened Muslim identity in Ceylon: the prohibition of the ‘fez cap’ in Courts in 1905. The fez cap had only been introduced to Ceylon as a symbol of Islamic religiosity as recently as 1883. How and why had it come to be termed the Muslims’ ‘national headgear’ in just two decades? I investigate the value placed on material, bodily markers of identity in the context of an Islamic revival, and explore the relationship between the Ottoman Sultan, who was considered by many Sunni Muslims the ‘Caliph of Islam’, and the Muslims of Ceylon.

Bio

Shamara Wettimuny is a doctoral candidate in History at the University of Oxford, researching identity formation and religious conflict in British colonial Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). She has a MSc and a BSc in International Relations and History from the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Shireen Hamza

Object
chūb chīnī, China root

The seventeenth century explosion of commodified materia medica has been studied by historians of European empire – including china root, known as a treatment for syphilis. But how were these medical commodities understood by practitioners of non-European medicine? I followed the traces of chūb chīnī, or china root, across Persian medical treatises and pharmacopeia, and found a keen interest in the origin, properties and applications of this root among practitioners of “Islamic medicine”, or tibb. Their interest manifested differently than those of their European contemporaries, though they mostly shared a Galenic medical paradigm. Decentering the (European-language) documents that attest to the purchase, cultivation or circulation of concrete quantities of china root, I highlight the affective and epistemic aspects of chūb chīnī’s histories in Persianate contexts. Through video and prose, I hope to share these resonances, for a hakim in eighteenth-century Murshidabad, patients across the Indian Ocean ecumene, and for researchers today.

Bio

Shireen Hamza is a doctoral student at Harvard University researching the history of science and medicine in the medieval Islamic world, with a focus on the Indian Ocean littoral. She is also managing editor of the Ottoman History Podcast.

Session 3: Of Master-copies and Video CDs

Thursday, 13th May
15.00 – 16.30 GMT

Register here:
[Zoom-Link](#)

Timothy Cooper

Object
Master-copy

The object examined is an audiocassette of popular music from north-western Pakistan whose circuitous routes took it from Afghanistan to the United Arab Emirates. No longer sold to the public, the cassette is now used as a *master-copy* by an Afghan store-holder in the Emirate of Sharjah who has traded in Pashto-language film and music for the last three decades. A *master-copy* is a print made in close proximity to a particular carrier— such as a celluloid film, an audiocassette, or a vinyl record – considered to be the earliest or most unblemished recording extant. It plays a central role in the preservation of audio-visual media through its dispersal across platforms and carriers. By building a repertoire of *master-copies* traders also established successful businesses in the Gulf, selling copied material to the large community of expatriate labourers residing there. I also consider some of its interfaces, from a photocopied cover of a CD, itself a copy of the audiocassette from which it is transferred, to glitch-ridden VCD copies of Pashto films.

Bio
Dr. Timothy Cooper is an anthropologist of religion, media, and the moving image, with a regional focus on contemporary Pakistan. Cooper is currently a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge and a research associate at the Max Planck Cambridge Centre for Ethics, Economy, and Social Change. He has disseminated his research in numerous publications and impact projects, including the organisation of a major international retrospective on Pakistani film at the British Film Institute and the production of four ethnographic films screened at international festivals. He is currently working on a book manuscript, titled *By Popular Demand: Moral Atmosphere in a Pakistani Marketplace*.

Wazhmah Osman

Object
Video CD

Based on my ethnographic research in Afghanistan and its neighboring countries, the object I examine is the Video CD, and more broadly, the circulation of South Asian dramatic serials and female driven B-movies that feature strong villainesses and heroines. During my fieldwork I discovered that women media makers and audiences were challenging the prevailing white savior lexicon by producing and viewing dramatic serials and B-movies produced in India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. While the genres of dramatic serials or soap operas and B-movies have been critiqued by some for perpetuating regressive gender and sexuality roles, in this presentation I highlight the ways that new productions of them offer a subversive space.

Bio
Wazhmah Osman is an Afghan-American academic and filmmaker. She is an assistant professor in Media Studies and Production at Temple University. Her research and teaching are rooted in feminist media ethnographies that focus on the political economy of global media industries and the regimes of representation and visual culture they produce. In her recent work she extends these critical inquiries to the politics of representation and visual culture of „The War On Terror“ including gender/sexuality discourses and how they reverberate globally and locally. In *Television and the Afghan Culture Wars: Brought to You by Foreigners, Warlords, and Activists* (2020), she analyzes the impact of international funding and cross-border media flows on the national politics of Afghanistan, the region, and beyond. Wazhmah also has over a decade in television and film production for major American and international media institutions. Her critically acclaimed documentary films have screened in diverse venues, ranging from human rights organizations to national and international film festivals.

Session 4: Of Nido Cans and Taka Notes

Thursday, 20th May
15.00 – 16.30 GMT

Register here:
[Zoom-Link](#)

Mohamed Shafeeq Karinkurayil

Object
Nido can

The butter-yellow Nido can of powdered milk is one of the ubiquitous signs of the Arabian Gulf in the households of the south Indian state of Kerala. Its content, the powdered milk, signifies the giant leaps of technology while the end product of the milk powder – milk – also transcodes itself into local significations of material prosperity and respectability. A metal can with a plastic lid, the Nido can far outlive its original use and continues in the household as a container for various other materials, and as a signifier of the foreign. This talk will look at the instance of a singular Nido can as it tells us of the migrant lives of the late 1970s in the Arabian Gulf.

Bio
Mohamed Shafeeq Karinkurayil works at Manipal Centre for Humanities, Manipal Academy of Higher Education (MAHE), Karnataka, India. His current research looks at the cultural dimensions of migration from Kerala to the Arabian Gulf.

Saif Osmani

Object
500 taka note from East Pakistan

In marking a 50 year milestone for Bangladesh, Saif presents an account of receiving a 500 taka note from East Pakistan (1947 – 1971) that contains both Urdu and Bengali script. Saif speaks about gaps in remembering, on forgetting and the complexities faced by the Bangladeshi diaspora in inner London and their shifting relationship with their home country as told through the objects that hold personal memories. He asks: what is remembered and what falls from collective memory?

50 years of Bangladesh through 50 objects forms part of the wider Migrant Memory and the Post-colonial Imagination research project (MMPI) funded by the Leverhulme Trust at Loughborough University (www.memoriesofpartition.co.uk). Using arts-based ethnographic methods, MMPI explores memories of the Partition of India and wider processes of decolonisation, and examines their role in contemporary British Asian identities and communities.

Bio
Saif is a visual artist and spatial designer of Sylheti-Bengali background who works as a Researcher on the MMPI project. He has a socially-engaged arts practice and was recently a visiting fellow/artist-in-residence at Loughborough University's new campus in East London.

Session 5: Of Hooks and Handkerchiefs

Thursday, 27th May
15.00 – 16.30 GMT

Register here:
[Zoom-Link](#)

Luke Heslop

Object
Longshoreman's Hook

A cylindrical piece of wood is cut to measure almost perfectly the width of a man's hand across the knuckle. When placed in a labourer's hand with his fist clenched, his fingers will envelop it tightly, and satisfyingly, save for a length of steel protruding from the wood between the middle and index finger. This steel will travel straight for a few inches before curling into a hook forming a near perfect extension of the carriers' body. With this hook a labourer can almost double the load he might ordinarily be able to carry. This simple tool of wood and steel is a material object ubiquitous across South Asian geographies of labour. Attached to the hands stevedores, emancipated slaves, and 'coolies' in ports and labour sites across the subcontinent, the longshoreman's hook, has had an historical hand in the movement of goods and the extraction of value from labour under capital. The hook has also played an informal role in the physical protection of workers. Though at one level a commonplace tool, it has been personalised by labourers. As a specific regional contribution to the workshop, this presentation explores the social life of the hook in a world of labour in Sri Lanka's wholesale markets.

Bio

Luke Heslop trained in anthropology at the University of Edinburgh (Ph.D 2015) and was a Fellow at the London School of Economics prior to joining Brunel as a Lecturer in Anthropology. He has worked for many years in Sri Lanka and the Maldives and his research is centred on current trends in development and anthropology around markets, infrastructure, work and labour. He specialises in trade, mobility, and the social life of work in South Asia.

Adhitya Dhanapal

Object
"Real Madras Handkerchief"

In this talk, I will look at the history of the "Real Madras Handkerchief", a popular item of export to West Africa in the 19th century and later on, the United States in the 1950s to highlight how consumer preferences and increasing demand for vegetable dyes and the handmade, "artisanal" process of production continued to shape the market in a world saturated with mass produced, mill-made cloth.

Bio

Adhitya Dhanapal is currently a Ph.D candidate in Modern Indian History at Princeton University. Earlier, he graduated in Art History and got an M.Phil in History from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. His research studies the political economy of household-based handloom production in 20th century India at the intersection of Caste associations and the Cooperative movement.