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Introduction: Heritage and Religion in South Asia and its Diasporas

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Vera Lazzaretti is a Senior Researcher at the Centre for Research in Anthropology (CRIA) in Lisbon, currently working on the politics of heritage and security in urban South Asia and southern Europe. She studied Philosophy and Cultural Anthropology in Italy and holds a Ph.D. in Indian and Tibetan Studies from the University of Turin (2013). Before joining CRIA, she worked at the University of Milan, the University of Oslo and the South Asia Institute at Heidelberg University.

José Mapril is a PhD in Anthropology from the ICS, University of Lisbon, with a thesis on Transnationalism and Islam among the Bangladeshis in Lisbon. Currently, he is an associate professor in the Department of Anthropology at the Universidade Nova de Lisboa and a senior researcher at CRIA NOVA. Between 2018 and 2021, José was the coordinator of the executive committee of CRIA. His main research interests are transnationalism, migrations, subjectivities, cultural citizenship, Islam, Islamofobia and secularism, through multisited ethnographies in Portugal, Bangladesh and the UK. Currently he develops research on two projects: the first on processes of home making among Bangladeshis in Portugal and the second on the place of Islam, urban regeneration and the politics of production of places in Lisbon.

Inês Lourenço, Ph.D., Anthropology (Iscte - University Institute of Lisbon), is a senior researcher at Centre for Research in Anthropology (CRIA-Iscte). She is an invited assistant professor at the Department of Anthropology at Iscte - University Institute of Lisbon. Her main research is focused on the Indian Diaspora in Portugal, its processes of reproduction and cultural negotiation, of religious, social and gender adaptation. This research resulted from long-term fieldwork conducted in Portugal, complemented in India and in the UK. Other topics of interest are the consumption of Indian cultural commodities, such as Bollywood cinema and dance, and its related social uses in the Portuguese society. Her current research addresses the migrant heritage of communities of Indian origin in Portugal (Gujarati-Hindus and Muslims, Goan-Catholics and Punjabi –Sikhs), in articulation between museology and anthropology.

Overview of the thematic issue

This thematic issue stems from an international workshop we organised as part of the activities of the South Asian Studies Circle at the Centre for Research in Anthropology (Lisbon) in June 2023. It examines the complex relationship between heritage and religion in global South Asia, highlighting their frictions, entanglements and reconfigurations. It draws on empirical material from across South Asia and its understudied diasporas, illustrating how these processes unfold in multiple local and transnational contexts. The contributions cover a broad empirical field, which we term global South Asia: South Asian countries alongside understudied diasporas in non-Anglophone contexts such as China, Mozambique, Portugal and Italy. Together, the articles explore how heritage and religion are mobilised, contested and reconfigured in everyday life, public spaces and transnational networks, pointing to under-explored sites of the cross-fertilisation between heritage and religion. The section also offers a set of new analytical terms and categories: these emerged either emically from the actors our authors engage with, or from a grounded redefinition of known categories and processes based on close empirical observations.

In the introductory article (Lazzaretti, Mapril and Lourenço 2026) we foreground the debates and paradigms around the heritage and religion nexus which we draw on and extend,

proposing a new analytical framework centred on frictions, entanglements and reconfigurations. The articulations between heritage and religion observed in global South Asia that the collection teases out are complex and contradictory, but we believe that it is only by attending to the messiness of ground reality and remaining open to understanding apparently contrasting uses, spin-offs and variations of both religion and heritage that we can picture and knit together novel reconfigurations of both. We also reflect and think productively about concepts emerged in the collection and their potential in travelling and understanding the heritage and religion nexus beyond global South Asia.

In the article, titled *Archaeological Intimacy and Heritage Publics: Domesticating Buddhism in Sarnath*, Ruthika Gandhi and David Geary focus on the modern construction of Sarnath (Uttar Pradesh, India) as the place where the Buddha pronounced his first sermon. While attending to the range of motivations and complex interests that animate a variety of stakeholders around Buddhist heritage, Gandhi and Geary introduce the concept of ‘archaeological intimacy’ to analyse the underexplored but meaningful ways in which Sarnath (and more generally Buddhist heritage) figures into the social lives of various Indian publics. These extend beyond the ‘canonical’ uses of heritage—as prescribed by signs about right and wrong behaviours at the archaeological park—while remaining deeply entangled with the religious narratives and practices that continue to sacralise the site and attract Buddhist pilgrims. While heritage and tourist spaces are often presented and regulated in hegemonic ways, the authors show that places such as Sarnath, where heritage, religion, and leisure intersect, allow for critical and alternative representations. They are particularly concerned with how young couples (both Hindu and Muslim) live and develop a specific attachment to Buddhist heritage remnants and religious narratives, cultivating an archaeological intimacy with this religious and heritage other. In sum, the article argues that the case of Sarnath shows how Buddhist heritage (and the Buddha more broadly as a

benevolent but alternative/non-Hindu religious figure) plays for young Indians the role of mediator between the particularity of local and national cultures on the one hand and aspirations for the global on the other — raising broader comparative questions for the study of religious heritage sites across South Asia, where similar entanglements of state authority, religious difference, and everyday social life are at stake.

The contribution by Amen Jaffer takes us to Lahore, Pakistan. Titled *Making Sufi Heritage in Pakistan: The Reconstruction of Bibi Pak Daman's Shrine*, the article addresses the enmeshments of heritage and Sufism in Pakistan by examining the contestations surrounding the reconstruction of the Bibi Pak Daman shrine, which was carried out by NADA, a leading architecture firm in Pakistan, from 2020 to 2024. This project sparked sustained public debates and legal cases that repeatedly threatened to undermine it. As a result, the reconstruction was not only a matter of architectural embellishment but also required the articulation of a coherent and compelling discourse to justify its design and aesthetic choices. Drawing on interviews with architects, state officials, shrine visitors, and heritage experts, as well as newspaper reports and social media content, the article pieces together the elements of this discourse and critically examines how the concept of heritage is interpreted and mobilized to give new meaning to a popular Islamic institution and appeal to diverse publics. Jaffer shows that heritage here performs a delicate and unstable balancing act: on the one hand, it speaks to a small cultural elite versed in the secular language of global cultural institutions, while on the other, it seeks to remain relevant to the devotional sentiments and practices of the shrine's communities. At the same time, the article highlights the tensions and exclusions generated by this process, showing how professionalized reconstruction and state oversight may constrain devotees' ability to materially shape the shrine, raising questions about whether heritagization ultimately protects, redirects, or diminishes the sacred relations it seeks to preserve.

The article *In the Name of Heritage: The Quiet Encroachment of Hindutva in Janakpurdham, Nepal* by Sabin Ninglekhu draws on ethnographic research among municipal authorities, urban planners, activists, journalists and residents to examine how heritage discourses and urban planning projects have contributed to the contemporary reconfiguration of Janakpurdham as a Hindu sacred city. The southern Nepali city is considered the birthplace of Sita, the spouse of the Hindu god Ram, and was incorporated into the Ramayana Circuit, an infrastructural and pilgrimage initiative promoted by the Indian government. During his 2014 visit to Nepal, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared Janakpurdham and Ayodhya ‘sister cities’ and launched a series of projects aimed at enhancing the city’s appeal to Hindu pilgrims. The article discusses the implementation and contestations surrounding one such initiative, the Mithila Heritage Preservation Project, which followed large-scale demolitions of private houses carried out under an Integrated Urban Development Project. Ninglekhu shows how this process of urban redevelopment and heritage preservation contributed to the heritagization of houses, religious spaces and practices. While not reducible to the more explicit forms of Hindutva politics visible in India, the article argues that these urban and heritage interventions contribute to the gradual consolidation of Hindu majoritarian aesthetics and sensibilities in the city while reshaping Muslim experiences of urban space. In doing so, the article contributes to emerging scholarship on the diffuse and ‘soft’ forms of Hindutva beyond India.

The next article takes us back to India, but this time to the south. “*If Baba Calls You, No One Can Stop You*”: *Affective Storytelling and the Resacralization of Heritage in Golconda Fort* by Eda Kandiyil Ahmad Faseeh and Mahammad Ali Jauhar expand a growing body of scholarship on the place and uses of Indo-Islamic heritage in postcolonial India. Drawing on extensive fieldwork in Golconda, a fortified citadel on the outskirts of contemporary Hyderabad originally constructed by the Kakatiya dynasty in the eleventh

century and later expanded by the Qutb Shahis before Mughal annexation, the authors examine a site that is both an ASI-protected Monument of National Importance and a lived religious landscape. While a Hindu temple remains in use and several mosques have been heritagised and rendered inactive, a Sufi *dargah* continues to attract devotees, whose access is facilitated by local Muslim residents acting as unofficial guides, or “storytellers.” The article explores how these storytellers mediate, embody, and narrate Golconda to visitors through what the authors conceptualize as an *affective storytelling* or *affective historiography*: a ‘sitational’, intimate mode of historical engagement grounded in emotional bonds to the site, kinship with past Muslim rulers, and carefully cultivated relationships with tourists. Through this practice, the authors argue, heritage is resacralised, as ‘dead’ monumental spaces are temporarily reclaimed for lived religion, challenging the citational authority of state heritage management and revealing how marginalized actors sustain sacred connections to Indo-Islamic pasts in contemporary India.

In *A ‘Secret Heritage’ in Chattogram? The tensions between Sufi and reformist Islam in Southern Bangladesh*, Abdul Wohab focuses on two prominent shrines (*mazar* or *dargah*) in Chattogram, the Bayezid Bostami Shrine and Maizbhandari Darbar Sharif, and the ways these are perceived by his interlocutors to be ‘hidden places’ (*lukkayito jayga*) and constitute a secret heritage. The ideas of secrecy and the hidden reveal several frictions, tensions, and ambiguities. These shrines are lived in secrecy, at the margins of normative discourses about Islam, while being seen as symbols of tolerance, inclusion, and pluralism. They are increasingly contested by several Islamic movements and positions in Chattogram, that question the legitimacy of Sufi inspired practices. Despite such marginality, these *mazars* and the religious and ritual practices therein, continue to occupy a prominent position and play a vital role in shaping the socio-religious landscape in the region, attracting both Muslims and non-Muslims, and revealing their resilience and resistance in the face of projects that seek to

homogenize religion. The mobilization of a discourse about a secret heritage, as Wohab's interlocutors do, reveals the centers and the margins of contemporary discussions on Islamic normative ideals and orthodoxy in the south of Bangladesh.

The article “‘*The Great Heroes’ Day is Much Holier for Us than Religion*’: *The Commemoration of Martyrs in Post-war Tamil Communities*” by Giacomo Mantovan is based on an analysis of Great Heroes’ Day (Maaveerar Naal), established and celebrated by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to commemorate martyrs of the Sri Lankan civil war (1983–2009) in Sri Lanka and across the diaspora. Although these are not conceived by participants as religious events, the ceremonies are articulated through a distinctly religious idiom. The author shows how Maaveerar Naal commemorates fallen fighters by appealing to collective emotion and shared experiences of suffering among Tamil communities. In these performances, cemeteries destroyed by the Sri Lankan government are symbolically reconstructed: in Sri Lanka through the gathering of remains from demolished graves on former cemetery grounds, and in the diaspora through makeshift memorials displaying photographs of the martyrs, taking the form of funerary rites and memorial practices. Drawing on the concept of ‘heritage function’ (Heinich 2009), the author analyses how martyrs, objects, and commemorative sites are treated as sacred and become heritage, not merely as acts of remembrance but as a foundational cultural process through which memories, values, and identities are transmitted. Although the martyrs belonged to different religious traditions—primarily Hinduism and Christianity—these distinctions become secondary in commemoration, as sacrifice is reworked through idioms drawn largely from Hindu ritual and Tamil cultural traditions. The article argues that this produces an overlap between the secular and the sacred, in which martyrdom and the struggle for independence are articulated as a form of civil religion. In this process, the sacralization of heritage emerges

as a key mechanism through which secular nationalism is rendered credible, affective, and enduring.

In Pascale Bugnon's article, *Between Preserving Pakistani 'Traditions' and Creative Adaptation: Barelyvi Brotherhoods and Heritagisation of Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas Mausoleum in Guangzhou*, the author examines the entanglements of heritage and religion in contemporary China through the case of the Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas Mausoleum, recognized as a cultural heritage site in 2013. This site, commemorating the historical introduction of Islam to China, exemplifies the evolving role of cultural heritage in Chinese political discourse, which has shifted from socialist-revolutionary narratives to the promotion of minority cultural contributions and national unity, often emphasizing secularized and culturalized interpretations of religious sites. Focusing on Pakistani migrants affiliated with the Barelyvi Sufi brotherhood, Bugnon explores how transnational actors have revitalized local religious practices and reasserted the mausoleum's religious significance. The article highlights the interplay between state-led heritagization and bottom-up agency, showing how migrants appropriate heritage discourse to negotiate legitimacy, perform place-making, and assert their presence within the local religious landscape. At the same time, rituals and communal practices remain fragmented, reflecting the contingent and unstable nature of collective Muslim identity in Guangzhou. By tracing these dynamics, the study illustrates how heritage can simultaneously enable, mediate, and constrain religious revitalization, offering insights into the negotiations of belonging, authority, and transnational community. It contributes to the special issue by demonstrating how heritage functions as both a political tool and a site of creative adaptation in diasporic religious life.

In *Menace and perseverance at the dargah of Sofala: the transnational afterlife of a Mozambican saint's tomb*, Pedro Soares explores the role of South Asian diasporas in the construction of a religious heritage on the coast of Mozambique, maintained through

transnational ties. Based on ethnographic and historiographic research on Indo-Mozambican Sunni Muslim communities, the author presents the process of building a tomb of a Muslim saint (*dargah*) in Sofala and its role in maintaining religious practices such as transnational pilgrimage. This analysis reveals tensions between 'traditional'/Sufi Muslimness and the growing Islamic reformism in Portugal. In this process, heritage and religion are at the basis of debates between orthodoxy and heterodoxy. Since the 1980s, the spread of reformism, particularly of the Deobandi school, among Indo-Mozambican Muslims in Portugal has led to the eradication of the long-standing religious practices of this community. This phenomenon led to tensions and schisms in the mosques of Greater Lisbon, due to the traditionalist orientation, guided by devotional practices associated with Sufism, including the pilgrimage to Sofala's tomb of this community. What the author shows in this article is that the peripheral status of these religious traditions and of the community itself in relation to the major transnational Islamic circuits has contributed to the maintenance of Sofala's *dargah*, which was revitalized in the second half of the 1990s. This resulted in a process of re-sacralization and simultaneous heritagization of this place as a pilgrimage destination, fueled by the circulation of charismatic power, memories and mythical narratives which, through the overlap between religion and heritage, allowed for the revival and maintenance of these minority traditions.

In the last article, *The Church and the Temple: Catholic Sinhalese and heritage crossings in Sicily (Southern Italy)*, Giovanni Cordova examines how Sinhala Catholics in Messina engage with the entanglements of religion and heritage in diasporic settings. Drawing on ethnographic research, the article focuses on two cases: the community's use of the church of Sant'Elia, with its 17th-century frescoes, and their participation in public festivals where Sinhalese cultural and religious markers are performed. The study shows how religious practices and heritage are recast and aestheticized: elements rooted in Buddhist

rituals are re-signified as markers of Sinhalese cultural identity within a Catholic framework. These processes occur within a transnational social field shaped by migration, the local Catholic Church and postcolonial Sri Lankan politics, highlighting the fluidity and contested meanings of “religion” and “heritage.” Cordova further demonstrates the Catholic Church’s role in framing and facilitating such multicultural expressions, revealing how diasporic communities negotiate identity, recognition and belonging while navigating inter-confessional and institutional boundaries. By tracing these dynamics, the article shows how diasporic practices simultaneously preserve, transform and politicize cultural and religious heritage, and how religion and heritage operate as intertwined tools for community building, social positioning, and transnational connection.

Collectively, the contributions underscore the importance of ethnography for capturing the shifting and often contradictory articulations of religion and heritage. By remaining attentive to everyday practices, emic categories and situated negotiations, ethnographic approaches reveal dynamics that remain obscured in policy-oriented or monument-centred analyses.

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