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The Narrative Prayers (*kahani*) of the African Khōjā¹

Khoja, Shia, kahani, woodcutter, Ismaili, Ithna Asheri

The Khōjā are an Indic Muslim caste whose origins lie in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Punjab and Kashmir. Over the following centuries a section of the community began a migration down the Indus valley and eastward into Kutch and Kathiawar, located in present-day Gujarat. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century the community began to migrate as traders throughout the western Indian Ocean littoral, establishing trading networks from Zanzibar to China (Nānjiānī 1–40, 256).

A dominant ancestral tradition of the Khōjā people was the worship of the goddess (*mātāpanth*) (Nānjiānī 1–40). By the mid-eighteenth century, the Khōjā were an Indic caste community engaged in many local religious philosophies in Kutch and Kathiawar that spanned both civilizational traditions. The nineteenth century was transformational for the Khōjā, as migration to urban areas during the Raj, particularly the entrepôts of Bombay and Zanzibar, challenged their religious and cultural traditions, forcing the community members to locate themselves, vis-à-vis identity, as either “Hindu” or “Muslim.” This process trifurcated the Khōjā by Islamic creed, resulting in three distinct communities—Ismā‘īli,² Ithnā ‘Asharī,³

and Sunni (Amiji 1971). The first two communities retained much of the caste's early modern traditions until the twentieth century, including the narrative⁴ prayer (*kahaṇī*).

The *kahaṇī*

The *kahaṇī* (pl. *kahaṇīṭō*) is a genre of vernacular literature that functions as a narrative prayer among various Indic Muslim, particularly Shi'ī, communities (Narasamamba, “Kahani”). Although the genre has meanwhile been published, its origins lie in oral performance. The narrative prayers are meant to be performed annually in a series of esoteric rituals that are exclusive to women, although the final sacrament is distributed to the community at large. The core of the *kahaṇī* tradition is a tale that is performed, preceded, and followed by supplications (*du'ā/āṃāl*), praise (*tasbīh*), hymns (*munājāt*), dirges (*navhā*), pilgrimages (*jhiyārat*), and supererogatory ritual prayers (*namājh*). The Khōjā *kahaṇī* fits within this larger genre of literature but is linguistically and thematically distinct. Whereas the majority of extant *kahaṇī* literature is in the Urdu language, the Khōjā narratives remain in their original Gujarati and/or Kacchī, classified as an eastern dialect of Sindhi.

The compendium I used as the basis of this study is an approximately mid-twentieth-century compilation of interrelated religious texts titled *The Gift of Jhaynab: A Collection of Narratives, Hymns, Prayers, Praise, etc. . . .* (*Tōhpha'ē Jhaynab: kahānīṭō, munājāt, du'ā, āṃāl, tasbīh, viḡērēnō, majamu'ō*). This 112-page book is published in the Gujarati script so that the narratives and poetry that are in Urdu also appear in this script rather than in their native Devanagari or Arabic script as traditionally associated with Hindi and Urdu respectively. The compendium is a representative example of the vernacular Khōjā *kahaṇī* tradition, which has survived in the subcontinent while disappearing almost entirely in East, Central, and Southern Africa in deference to “orthodox” Imami texts in Persian and Arabic from the Near East.

Origins of the *kahaṇī*

The Khōjā *kahaṇī* developed as a result of its geographic and cultural location—the lower Indus basin in the Perso-Indian corridor. The genre is a vernacular tradition.

While the earliest manuscripts date to late nineteenth-century Kacch, many themes and details suggest older origins. The Hindu influence of the Khōjā text can be seen from a similar genre known as the *vratkathā* (Jain; Menzies, “Of Myth”; Wadley). In the Khōjā woodcutter (*kāṭhiyārō*)⁵ tales, the misfortune of the woodcutter and his family comes from forgetting the *māntā* (vow), and their difficulties are eased by its observance. The pivotal role of the wife and daughter in observing the rites and thus alleviating the misfortune of the family is reminiscent of the Jain tradition of *Śrīpāl Rās* (Kapadia 2011) read as a *śīlkathā*.⁶ There are further Indic similarities in the foods prepared in the Khōjā rituals that accompany the recitation of these narratives. For example, the Kāṭhiyāvāḍī Hindu observance of Gaṇēścōth⁷ includes a special preparation of *laddu*⁸ in similar fashion to the Khōjā observance of the narrative prayer for Hajhrat Abbās.⁹ The Khōjā *kahaṇī*’ō differ from the Indic *kathā*’ō in that referents to Indic philosophies and cosmologies, such as *jñāti* (caste), karma, and dharma are absent. According to Mohammad, in South India:

Goldsmiths or woodcutters are commonly conceived as stock foolish characters in most of the stories told by local Muslims domestically and publicly. Typically, these woodcutters or goldsmiths are depicted as having a selfish or greedy motive that usually drives them to a point of destruction. (Mohammad 164)

In this respect, the *kahaṇī* more closely resemble Near Eastern traditions.

The Parsi *muškilāsān* (alleviation of difficulties) rite of Behrām Yazad employs a tale of a woodcutter (Phalippou; Russell) very similar to the Khōjā tradition, except that all Islamic referents in the Khōjā tradition appear as Zoroastrian. The tales are so similar to one another in narrative structure that within the Parsi community this tradition is controversial, seen by some as a Muslim import rather than “authentically” Zoroastrian.

This begs the further question of origin. From where does the Khōjā *kahaṇī* tradition derive? *Kahaṇī* traditions, also known as *mōjijhā* (miracles), are employed by Muslim communities throughout the subcontinent from Sindh to Bengal, generally in Urdu. Derivative *muškilāsān* tales can be found throughout the Persianate world. In *The Fast of the Seventh Day* (*Sata’imājē rōjē*), the oldest woodcutter tradition of the Khōjā, names such as Surbhāṇ describe Indic characters within idealized Near Eastern geographies. Much of the Kacchī and Gujarati vocabulary is etymologically Perso-Arabic, such as the use of the word *almās* (diamond) instead of the Gujarati and Sindhi *hīrō*. The most likely explanation of the development and popularity

of the *kahaṇī* is that it engaged female domestic spirituality through the introduction of new narratives and spiritual power in the vast religious economy of this interspace among Iran, India, and the wider western Indian Ocean world. It is possible that while the frame of the narrative was imported from the Near East or Central Asia, it was popularized and indigenized in local vernaculars to be integrated into existing religious spaces and practices. Normative Near Eastern Islam, which became more prevalent in the postcolonial period, devalued these narrative prayers by dismissing them at best as fictional and at worst as “un-Islamic,” leading to their abandonment by the East African Khōjā communities by the late twentieth century.

Dating the corpora is difficult with such wide dispersal of vernacular traditions across the breadth of the subcontinent. By looking at internal references and examining the language of texts in the compendium, the general time period for all of the corpora could be argued as originating as early as the eighteenth and as late as the twentieth century. The first corpus is the *majlis*, which is similar in subject and presumably also in language to *Karbala Kathā* by Saiyid Faẓl ‘Alī Faẓlī (b. 1710–11), which was written in 1145/1732–33 and revised in 1748 in north India (Rahman 88). The following two corpora provide details regarding a maximum time period and geography. Regarding religious practice, the description of veneration at the mausoleum in Medina must have occurred before its destruction by Ibn Saud in 1925. The location of Balkh provided in the miracle narrative intimates at the spiritual significance of the city, particularly the rise to prominence of the shrine complex of Ali at Mazār-i Sharif in the nineteenth century. The reference to the *dastarkhān* tradition and detailed instructions on its precise rituals indicates that the origins of the Urdu *kahaṇī* must be expanded beyond the Indo-Persian corridor to South Asia more broadly and, perhaps, the larger geography of Central Asia.

Whereas the Urdu narratives provide general indications of time and place of origin, the Gujarati narratives coupled with knowledge of nineteenth-century Khōjā economic and social history provide a more specified time period for the Khōjā Gujarati corpus. In *The Ritual Spread of the Venerable Lady (Fatima) (Dastarkhān janābē saiyadā sa. a. kā)*, one anna of cotton wool is necessary to complete the ritual. The copper anna was already being minted by the Dutch East India Company in Surat by the beginning of the eighteenth century (Nadri 113). By cross-referencing the amount of cotton necessary as employed in Khōjā ritual practice in twentieth-century Dar es Salaam to cotton prices in the eighteenth century, the maximum amount that could be obtained for an anna would have to have been purchased during the bearish market years of 1762–86 (Nadri 179).

A crucial detail in dating the Gujarati traditions can be found in *The Narrative of the Lady Fatima* (*Janābē phātēmāsa. a. nī kahānī*). The narrative begins with the birth of two daughters to a rich and poor neighbor on the same day, respectively. The father of the poor girl dies when she is young so that the poor girl is reduced to a life of servitude, while the daughter of the rich girl gets married and has children. Both girls were lifelong friends. When reflecting on her life and without money to get married, the poor girl decides to commit suicide by drowning herself in the river. Being a devout girl, before the act she wants to complete her ritual prayers. When she closes her eyes in supplication after performing her ritual prayers, the Lady Fatima appears to her in a vision comforting her and prescribing a series of prayers, supplications, and chapters of the Qur'an to recite as well as to perform the rituals of sacrament. She returns home and does so. Thereafter the rich girl is visited by a rich young male relative who is looking to get married. The rich girl thinks of her poor friend. The rich girl tells her poor friend of the suitor and also offers to pay her dowry. The poor girl agrees and is elated to be married. Crucially for the understanding of the narrative, after eight days of marriage she is to go to Africa to live with her husband and his in-laws. The poor girl is inconsolable. Sharing her worries with her mother, her mother responds by telling her to have the courage to meet her destiny. The poor girl's husband tells his new wife that he will make sure that her mother is well cared for. He even promises to purchase a bungalow for her mother, which will remain in her family for perpetuity.

By 1811 there was already an established merchant class in Zanzibar from Kathiawar, Sind, and Kutch (Sheriff 82–86). The Khōjā practice of bringing Asian wives to East Africa was established by the early nineteenth century, so that by 1837 there were already twenty Khōjā women in Zanzibar (Akhtar, "Negotiating"). In compiling and cross-referencing the various texts to primary and secondary research on Asian economic and mercantile history of western India and eastern Africa, the time period of the early nineteenth century as the genesis point of the Gujarati narratives in their contemporary form is plausible.

Categorization of the *kahaṇī*

Of the ten *kahaṇī* included in the compendium, six are in Urdu and the remaining ones in Gujarati.¹⁰ Each *kahaṇī* is attributed to a particular Imam or saint(s) from Shi'i tradition, such as the sixth Ithnā'Ashari Imam¹¹ and the universally venerated

daughter of the prophet.¹² The six *kahañīō* can be classified into four corpora based on content, narrative structure, and language.

The first corpus includes narratives related to the passion of Karbala.¹³ For example, in *The Tale of the Lady Ummē Kulsum* (*Janābē um'mēkulsum sa. a. nī kahāñī*), an emotive *majlis* records the travails of the daughter of Ali¹⁴ after being captured and being taken to Damascus in chains and displayed before the Umayyad court (Ramjhān 8–18).

The second corpus encompasses narratives that involve an interaction with a perceived historical character or their shrine. For example, in *The Tale of the Lady Jhaynab* (*Janābē jhaynab sa. a. nī kahāñī*), a blind woman hears a Karbala *majlis* on the travails of Husain's sister, Jhaynab,¹⁵ and becomes entranced by the saint's fortitude and grace. She resolves to become a devotee of Jhaynab and takes a vow to live in a state of penitent mourning until she is able to embark on pilgrimage to Jhaynab's shrine in Damascus; this includes the adoption of the veil. The veil, as symbol and object, is crucial, for once she embarks on the pilgrimage, the devotee wishes to place her veil on the shrine and take one from the shrine with its blessings. She is, however, prevented from doing so by the custodian of the shrine. At night, the Lady Jhaynab visits both the devotee and the custodian in their dreams, ensuring the next day that the veil is given to the devotee and with it, she can return home, releasing her from her years-long vow of penitent mourning (Rijhvī 20–22).

The third corpus includes narratives of Persianate origin that have been preserved in the *kahañī* tradition. Near Eastern and Central Asian traditions, such as the ritual spread (*dastarkhān*), are employed in service of the Lady Fatima (Rijhvī 88–91). For example, in *Miracle*, the fourth Imam¹⁶ performs miracles for a devotee of Balkh.¹⁷ This narrative is particularly significant as it records a probable source of origin as well as being the only *kahañī* that features a male protagonist. The narrative begins with a man who routinely performs the hajj (the pilgrimage to Mecca) and brings back gifts for people in Balkh on behalf of the Imam, for which his wife would chastise him. One year after completing the hajj, he goes to serve pilgrims at the shrine of the Imam in Medina.¹⁸ There he serves a pilgrim, the Imam in disguise, who tells him to get a pitcher and basin so he could wash his hands after eating. As the water from the man's hands drops onto the floor, the drops of water are instantly transformed into red rubies. This is repeated two additional times, producing ambrosia (*amṛta*) and white pearls. The Imam then gives him these boons to take to his wife in Balkh. Upon his return, he finds his wife has just died after becoming ill. Her body is in a tent awaiting burial. Distraught and weeping,

MAP OF UGANDA, KENYA, AND TANGANYIKA.

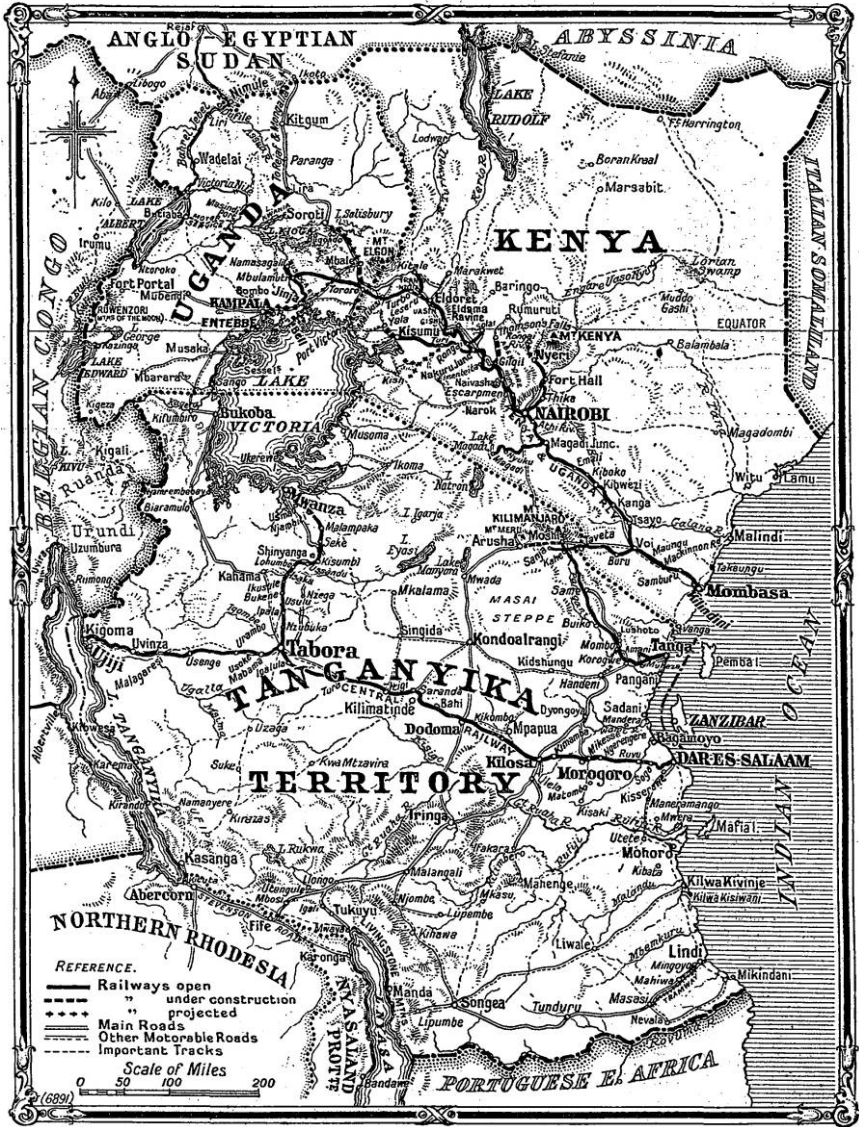


FIGURE 1. British colonial East Africa in the early 20th century, the heyday of the kahani among the African Khojā (Harrison 1928).

the man prays to the Imam and performs ritual prayers that miraculously bring her back to life. Thereafter, she too becomes a true devotee of the Imam.

The fourth corpus encompasses narratives that are originally of Khōjā origin in Gujarati. Two of these tales are included in the compendium. Both of them are divided into two parts. The first is a narrative of Imam Ali titled *The Thursday Sacrament of the Master Ali* (*Jumērātnā h. alī a. nō phātēhō*) (Rijhvī 100–104). The second is a narrative of the sixth Imam titled *The Gift of Sādik* (*Najharē Sādik*)¹⁹ (Rijhvī 79–87). The oldest extant theme that ties these Gujarati/Kacchī narratives together is the character of the woodcutter and his wife. For example, *The Thursday Sacrament of the Master Ali* begins with a woodcutter in the bazaar unsuccessfully trying to sell wood. Despondent and unable to feed his family, he goes back into the forest where he meets a veiled horseman who inquires as to his troubles. After telling the horseman his travails, the horseman gives him five paisa. For one paisa each, he is told to buy sugar, grapes, flowers, gram, and incense. With these materials he is to observe the sacrament (*phātēhō*) of Imam Ali and thus receive his blessings to attain success in his livelihood. His wife observes the appropriate rituals and the family consumes the sacrament. The next day when the woodcutter goes into the forest to cut a tree, his ax hits a tree and then falls from his hand. When he goes to retrieve the ax, he realizes it has landed on a buried treasure. With the treasure he and his family are saved from poverty and vow to give thanks to the Imam and annually observe the annual rites of the sacrament.

The second part of this narrative begins with a king and his soldiers who come into the same forest for a hunt. The king is thirsty and asks a soldier to find water. The soldier comes upon a grand house in the forest that happens to be the house of the woodcutter and his family. They provide the king with ample water, and in return he invites the woodcutter and his wife to be guests at the palace. While in the palace as guests, as the women of the king's household go to the baths, and before doing so they place their jewelry on hooks in the antechamber. The woodcutter's wife happens to see the jewelry vanish before her eyes. The woodcutter and his wife are accused of stealing it and are placed in jail, despite their protestations to the contrary. A year passes, after which the woodcutter's wife has a dream in which a veiled horseman appears and says that they are in this situation because she was heedless and forgot their vow to perform the rites each year. She asks the horseman how they can correct this. He says that she can find five paisa under her mattress to perform the sacrament. Since they are in jail and unable to go to market, an old woman visiting her son who has just died in jail agrees to help them.

The old woman, the woodcutter, and his wife then perform the ritual sacrament that brings the old woman's son back to life and makes the lost jewelry of the king's household reappear in the antechamber of the baths. The woodcutter and his wife are then freed and are asked by the king upon leaving if they are actually magicians, as he had heard about the miraculous awakening of the old woman's dead son. The woodcutter replies that they are not magicians, rather devotees of the master Ali and that performing his ritual sacrament unveiled reality. The woodcutter and his wife return home to their children, and the king resolves to observe the sacrament each year, which results in victorious campaigns and the expansion of his kingdom.

The Gift of Sādik

The themes of the Khōjā woodcutter narratives in Gujarati are mirrored in similar Kacchī (Sindhi) narratives. Of particular interest is the narrative and associated rituals in *The Gift of Sādik*. This section will delve into underlying geographic and socioeconomic themes in the narrative. While analysis will primarily focus on *The Gift of Sādik*, references to other narratives in the compendium will be highlighted as necessary to further illustrate thematic variation.

The Gift of Sādik begins, "It has been recorded that in the city of Medina there once lived a woodcutter, his wife, and small children . . . daily he would go into the forest" (Rījhvī 79). Other Gujarati narratives in the compendium begin similarly. Of course, there is no jungle or forest in the Arabian Desert city of Medina. The introduction illustrates the need to place Indic particularities and reality into an Islamic geography. It is attributed to a preeminent saint, who later makes an appearance in the tale. Other woodcutter narratives are more general in referring to a forest in *Arabastān* (literally the "land of the Arabs") (Rījhvī 100). The forest is an important place in the Indic narrative tradition as it symbolizes both a foreign wilderness and the space for spiritual enlightenment in which the divine power is potent (Kent; Menzies, "Forest"). Within the *kahaṇī* tradition, the woodcutter's home is presumably at the forest's edge. It is in the concealment of the forest that the spiritual masters, such as Maulā Alī, appear to the woodcutter. Esoteric rites, such as initiation into discipleship, take place there. The forest is the source of the woodcutter's livelihood. It represents the natural world that is more directly affected by divine intercession than the urban economy, which is fickle to the woodcutter's

honest labor. The prevalence and antiquity of the woodcutter theme in the Khōjā *kahaṇī* could also suggest an origin of at least one scion of what later emerged as the Khōjā caste, that they were forest dwellers or untouchables as suggested by Michel Boivin's thesis on one point of origin of the Sindhi Khōjā.

The narrative is divided into two sections, as are similar Khōjā tales. The first section continues with the woodcutter who is despondent at not being able to sell his wood at the market. He decides to leave his wife and children and set off to a city to look for new work. Once he arrives in the city, he is questioned as to his family trade and experience. Being a woodcutter, he has no particular skills except woodcutting, so he continues to work as a woodcutter in the forest adjacent to the new city. More than a year passes and his wife hears nothing from him. The economic situation of the wife and children becomes dire. The wife of the old vizier hears of their plight and gives the woman a job as a servant, paying her with food and necessities. One day, as the woodcutter's wife is crying while cleaning the doorpost of the old vizier's house, the Imam passes by and sees her. He counsels her to observe his sacrament on the twenty-second of Rajab and pray for the safe return of her husband, then disappears. The woodcutter's wife observes the sacrament and on that same day her husband, in a distant forest, hits a hollow tree and his ax falls into a ravine with a clang. When the woodcutter goes to retrieve it, he realizes the ax has hit a buried treasure. With the treasure in hand, he returns home to his family and they live happily ever after. The family vows to observe the sacrament of the Imam each year as a thanksgiving on the twenty-second of Rajab.

The second section picks up with the old vizier's wife who, upon seeing the new house of woodcutter's wife, does not believe that this is a miracle of the Imam. The old vizier's wife believes the woodcutter's wife has deceived her into helping her. The old vizier's wife refuses the sacrament that is offered the following year by the woodcutter's wife. Thereafter, in the royal court the new vizier accuses the old vizier of having embezzled royal funds. The old vizier and his wife are then exiled to the forest with only a few coins, which they spend on a melon their first night. That same night, the prince, who had gone hunting in the forest, does not return home to the palace. The new vizier suggests to the king that it might have been the plan of the old vizier all along to kill the prince in the forest. The king has the old vizier and his wife brought to the palace. Once in court, the king asks the old vizier what he knows about the disappearance of his son. When the old vizier protests no knowledge, the king asks him about the contents of his basket.

The old vizier replies that there is a melon inside. When the old vizier lifts the cover of the basket, instead of a melon there appears the head of the prince, and the king sentences the old vizier and his wife to be killed the next day. While the old vizier and his wife spend the night in jail, the wife reflects on how this chain of events began. She realizes that she mocked the miracle of the Imam and refused his sacrament, which precipitated their crisis. She begins to weep and perform penances and supplications all night. Early the next morning the prince returns to the court to an astonished king. The king goes to the jail to look into the old vizier's basket once more and is stunned to see a melon within. The new vizier is expelled, the old vizier is reinstated, and the wife returns home a true believer in the power of the Imam and his sacrament.

The narrative's two parts serve as a confirmation of the power located within this narrative tradition (first part) and the pitfall of mocking, rejecting, or neglecting observance of the annual rites (second part). Both salvation and sanction come at the impetus of the female character. The figure of the Imam in *The Gift of Sādik* functions solely to instruct the protagonist and establish a divine authority regarding the observance of the sacrament. Consequently, the somewhat enigmatic twenty-second of Rajab is not an established date on the orthodox Imami liturgical calendar. The mysterious figure of the Imam as presented in the narrative and the assigning of a particular auspicious date appear to be echoes of an older tradition, common elements of which can be seen in other Gujarati folktales (Christian).

Migration and poverty are consistent themes throughout the *kahaṇī* tradition. In particular, the Gujarati stories deal with a rural urban divide in which the woodcutter and his family live either in the forest or at the edge of a forest in a hut. The woodcutter, as householder, is unable to provide for the family and must migrate to the city in search of employment. Once he arrives, he realizes that his caste and skills are useless in the urban economy and again resorts to woodcutting. It is divine intervention in the form of the miracles of the saints in response to persistent ritual observance and obeisance to their authority that save the family from crushing poverty. Such dire economic conditions are basic themes in such folklore, as seen in Hindu *vratkathā* and Persian *nazr* ritual narratives. In both these forms of narrative prayer, a vow is taken and an offering provided by a female for a specific purpose in the name of a saint who is believed to have intercessory powers. Routinely, often yearly, the prayer is offered and food distributed until the prayer is answered or the vow is completed (Mills).

Female Spiritual Authority

Female religious authority, power, and agency undergird this entire genre of orally performed narratives. Historically, goddess worship was one of many traditions observed by the early modern Khōjā. It only becomes muted in the nineteenth century with the new Iranian leadership of the Ismā'īli Khōjā and the assumption of Near Eastern Imami authority among the Ithnā 'Asharī Khōjā. In the early twenty-first century among the African communities, the last vestiges of these traditions remain as echoes in declining observance of the *kahaṇī* among the Ithnā 'Asharī Khōjā and the muted *ghaṭpāṭ* ritual among the Ismā'īli Khōjā (Nānjiānī 18–40).

In many of the Gujarati *kahaṇī*ō, the wife plays a critical role in securing the livelihood of the family through divine intervention. It is also the wife who, through neglect or disbelief, can bring about the ruin of the family. In *The Gift of Sādik*, the woodcutter's wife changes her husband's fate through meticulous observance of the rites of the *kahaṇī*, whereas the wife of the old vizier invites the ruin of her husband through a rejection and mocking of the rites. The men in these narratives are unable to affect their own fate and secure their livelihood by virtue of their own efforts. Their initiative is ancillary to their decreed fate, which can only be affected by their wives or daughters meticulously observing the rites, annually, in honor of the particular saint. So critical and restricted is this tradition to women that in the instructions regarding the preparations of the *dastarkhān*, the purchase, preparation, and presentation of the sacrament can only be done by women (Rījhvī 89). Here the male presence is spiritually polluting in the preparation of the sacrament and observance of the rites, whereas it is necessary in its final consumption.

While each Gujarati narrative is titled and attributed to a particular saint who reveals him/herself, such as Ali or Fatima, these names rarely appear in the text. Although the narratives bear specific titles, the names are interchangeable, as the saint is portrayed as an archetype rather than as a historical figure. For both female and male saints, there is no physical description except that they are veiled, *burkhāpōś* (Rījhvī 23) or *nakābpōś* (100), and wearing robes, *abāpēhnē* (105). The imagery of veiling could refer to both a spiritual veiling of their being to the devotee as well as trading on the Near Eastern image of the veiled figure that lends Islamic credibility to the saint in his or her appearance. The female saints are referred to as "The Lady," using the interchangeable terms *bibī* or *saiyadā* (23–28) throughout the

narrative in describing a dominant female spiritual presence that is both imminent and transcendent for the female devotee.

These ethereal figures of the veiled saint appear in the direst of times to the devotee in encounters, dreams, or visions. The vision allows the devotee a personal interaction with a historical “Near Eastern” saint who has the ability to remove obstacles from life, such as alleviating crushing poverty or giving hope to a girl about to commit suicide because her poverty prevents her from being able to afford the dowry for marriage (Rījhvī 20–22). In the narratives, the female protagonist comes to a point in her predicament where there appears to be no hope or clear answer. The night dream or vision, which entails a meeting with the saint corporeal, then, reveals the solution. The vision allows a direct interaction with a Near Eastern saint to whose shrine the Asian laity would be unlikely to make pilgrimage. Physical, cultural, and spiritual distance of the Asian devotee to the Near Eastern saint is overcome in the vision or dream where there is a commonality of language and cultural referents. The Near Eastern saint meets the Asian devotee on his/her cultural landscape and observance of the tradition, which does not necessitate a denial of the Indic narrative tradition in lieu of Near Eastern forms of authority. In a tangible culinary form, this can be seen in *The Gift of Sādik*, in which the Imam prescribes a particular sacrament (*suphphrō*) of *kheer*²⁰ and *puri*,²¹ rich desserts typically used in Indic religious offerings and foods not commonly consumed on a daily basis.

Praxis

The *kahaṇīō* are in their essence a genre of orally performed literature that can only be fully understood through its performance. Appendixes or inserts in a particular *kahaṇī* can provide detailed instructions on how to properly perform it. But the social complexity of its performance can be best understood through ethnographic inquiry. One of these remaining traditions among the Khōjā of Dar es Salaam is the *suphphrō* sacrament detailed in the *The Gift of Sādik*. While the *kheer* and *puri* are communally distributed on the twenty-second of Rajab, the tale itself is not known to those under middle age. This loss is most pronounced in the Western diaspora of the African Khōjā, for in Europe and North America the tales have been lost altogether as a result of the loss of Gujarati and Kacchī to Western vernaculars and

the primacy given to the instruction of Arabic and Persian over the community's ancestral Indic tongues.

The Khōjā *suphphrō* is a ritual of communal sacrament that must be performed and produced privately. Its function is not exclusivist; rather, its contemporary function is the establishment of communal solidarity and perpetuation of social hierarchy. It is a ritual internal to the community that draws upon an Indo-European heritage through *The Gift of Sādik*.

The Gujarati term *suphphrō* is derived from the Persian word for “tablecloth” (*sofreh*). For the Khōjā of Dar es Salaam and Zanzibar, the *suphphrō* was historically performed each year on the twenty-second of Rajab in honor of the Imam. An appendix to *The Gift of Sādik* instructs the devotee as to the proper method for preparing and sanctifying the sacrament.

Preparing and Sanctifying the Sacrament

Wherever you decide to prepare the sacrament, clean and purify the space beforehand. On a table, place a cloth and upon it four bowls. Fill two of the bowls with *kheer* and the other two with *puri*. In the early morning after dawn prayers, begin by burning frankincense. Read the entire tale; recite the name of Hajarat Īmām Jāpharē Sādik (A.) over the offering and his blessings upon your family and progeny. Make supplications and after this make a vow upon any need you might have, supplicate to God for his blessings through Hajarat Īmām Jāpharē Sādik (A.). God willing all your hopes will be realized.

The oblations should be kept far from anyone who is ritually impure. And anyone in the family who is ritually impure should not come near this area.

If the sacrament is not sufficient, then make additional *puri* with one and a quarter pound²² of flour and *kheer* with one and a quarter pound of milk. Place these into four earthenware bowls, light frankincense, place flowers, etc. Again complete the aforementioned steps to sanctify the sacrament. (Jāpharalī Raīṭar 13)

The historical observance of the *suphphrō* in Dar es Salaam was once a year on the twenty-second of Rajab when congregants, after attending the *majlis*, would receive the sacrament in the caste hall (*imāmvāḍō*) or main shrine (*mēhphīl*). While not recorded in published narrative manuals, the African Khōjā have family traditions of placing a silver ring in the *kheer* of sacrament given to close friends and family.

The silver ring is removed before consumption and worn, mainly by women, as a symbol of protection by and vow of the Imam.

In contemporary Dar es Salaam, segregated Khōjā *suphphrō* commemorations in the main shrine and caste hall are filled annually to capacity. Upon completion of the evening *majlis*, congregants collect their individually packaged sacrament from community volunteers for rapid distribution. There is always a rush to the two tables on either side of the main entrances for them. According to a middle-aged volunteer,²³ for the approximately five thousand congregants who gathered, an estimated twenty thousand food portions were prepared. That amounts to an average of four portions per individual in attendance, and still there was a shortage toward the end of the queue.

What accounts for this tremendous demand for the mosque or shrine sacrament? It can be attributed to a multiplying of sacrality contained within this particular sacrament. The sacrament is prepared in the permanently ritually pure environment of the mosque kitchen with funds donated explicitly for the *suphphrō* enhancing the positive and directed intentionality of the anonymous patron, thereby enhancing the sacrament's spiritual merit. In addition, the spiritual merits of prayers from the entire congregation multiply the sacrality of the communal sacrament, thus producing a spiritually superior *suphphrō*, which creates an insatiable demand for a ritual food believed to possess preventative or curative characteristics.

Richa Nagar has highlighted the change in social practices among the Ithnā 'Asharī Khōjā with the introduction of capitalism in the 1990s and the creation of immense wealth among some in the Khōjā community (Nagar). Accordingly, the *suphphrō* has changed with the arrival of the free market to Dar es Salaam. The *suphphrō* has been transformed from a relatively simple ritual on the twenty-second of Rajab into a seasonal social ritual for the two months preceding Ramadan. Various private *suphphrō* ceremonies are held with restricted guest lists to bestow auspicious tidings on various occasions, such as the return of a loved one from pilgrimage or in honor of a visiting reciter from South Asia.

Displays of wealth can be seen in the number and quality of courses served in the dinner following the *suphphrō majlis* as well as presents offered to guests in gift bags upon departing. The private *suphphrō* sacrament differs from the communal ceremony in that there is no communal right (*jamātīā'i*) to an individual Khōjā on the remaining sacrament. One is prohibited by Khōjā etiquette from requesting of the host additional sacrament to be consumed at home or taken for another, as is possible to do in the caste hall. The morning following a private *suphphrō*,

the remaining sacrament is apportioned and distributed to family members and close friends, reinforcing the social bonds of inclusion and fraternity between the recipient and the family of the host. Those community members of lower social strata who are invited to these elaborate ceremonies later regale their friends and family in social networks, such as the *baraza*,²⁴ of their host's generosity, thereby enhancing the host's communal reputation. This once particular annual Indic rite for auspicious tidings and succor has become, in the context of East Africa among the Khōjā, a semiprivate ceremony to display wealth, reinforce reciprocal communal obligations, and demonstrate social hierarchy.

With the increasing Iranian influence on the developing Khōjā clergy in Dar es Salaam (Akhtar, "Oriental" 125–43), the date of the *suphphrō* no longer appears on the Dar es Salaam Khōjā community's liturgical calendar, as it is not an "orthodox" Imami holiday, despite it being a historical tradition among the Khōjā that is immensely popular in Dar es Salaam. This new clergy see it as a vestige of "un-Islamic" Hindu traditions. Ironically, the same religious leaders promote the observance of Nouruz as "Islamic," despite its Zoroastrian origins. Similar issues are confronted with vernacular traditions in Iran, which are rejected by the clergy because they involve "bargaining for blessings" (Bynum, Richman, and Harrell 37).

Conclusion

The *kahaṇīṭō* represent a genre of Indic Muslim religious literature borne out of the economic and political changes in the subcontinent beginning in the late eighteenth century. The arrival of the printing press in the nineteenth century allowed these narratives to be further distributed in local vernaculars, Urdu being the preeminent North Indian Islamic language. The development of the *kahaṇī* allowed the preservation of indigenous pre-Islamic rites and narratives into the Muslim present. Suffused within this tradition is the concept that ultimate religious power in the family lay with its female members. It is by virtue of their observances of these rites that the family prospers or is brought to ruin.

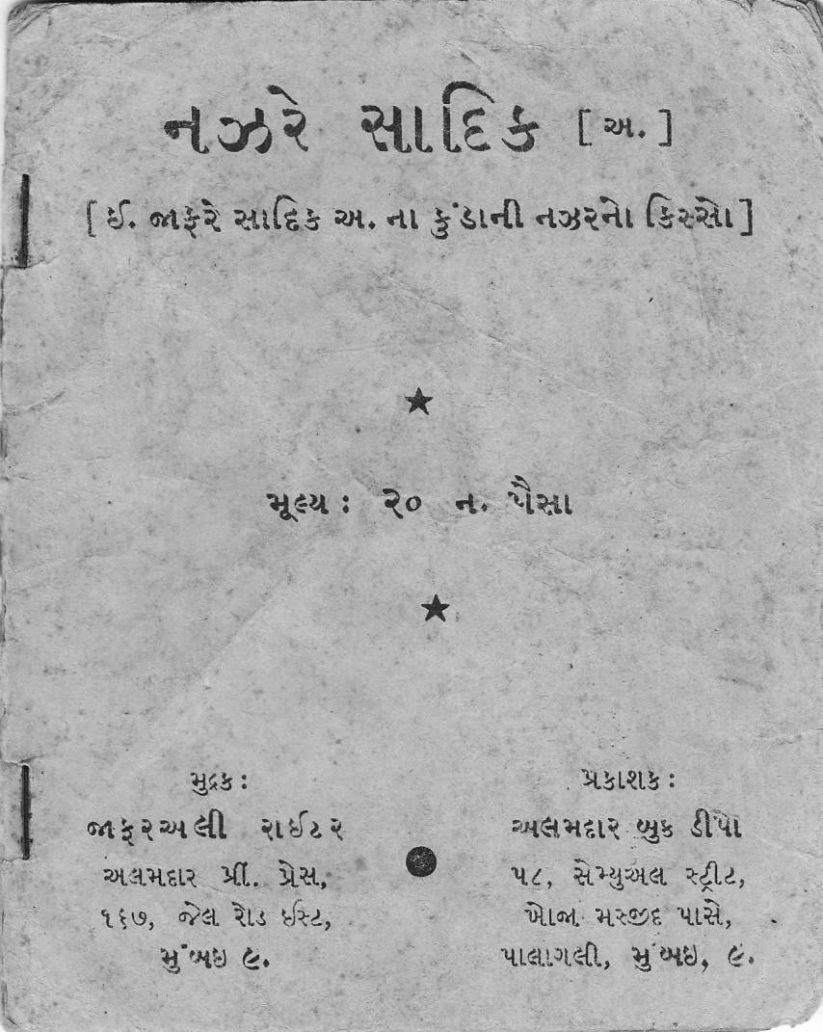
If we are to group the disparate *kahaṇīṭō* traditions from Afghanistan to Tamil Nadu (Narasamamba, "Voiced"), a distinct pattern emerges—the cult of the *bībī-saiyadā*. This movement represents an indigenous Indic expression of Muslim female religious authority and agency, independent of and indifferent to exclusive Near Eastern male religious authority or local religious leadership. In fact, men

accede to this female spiritual authority by virtue of consuming the sacrament, created exclusively by women in these esoteric rites.

The cult of the *bībī-saiyadā* was presumably appealing to Khōjā women of the early nineteenth century because of the historical background of goddess worship in the Khōjā tradition as well as the strong Shi'ī themes within the *kahaṇī* corpus, which include referents to Fatima, personalities from the passion of Karbala, and the household of the Prophet. The solidification of religious identities in the colonial period forced a redefinition of traditional Khōjā religion (*khōjāpanth*) to one cursorily Islamic in narrative (Masselos). It was into this extant Indic narrative tradition that the Khōjā brought these local vernacular tales, such as that of the woodcutter, and amalgamated their rites with those extant within tradition, such as the *suphphrō*, thereby expanding the diversity and observance of the *kahaṇī* to East, Central, and Southern Africa.

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Appendix I: Front Cover of *The Gift of Sādik* (*Najharē Sādik*)



■ NOTES

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2. See Green 155–78.
3. In contrast to other Shi’i denominations, the Ithnā ‘Asharī, or Twelver Shi’a, recognize a series of twelve imams as leaders of the community.
4. In reference to the *kahaṇī* tradition, the term *narrative* is used in discussing the structure of these stories and their religious function. The term *tale* is used in discussing the application in popular performance, memory, and aspects of the storyline.
5. The oldest publicly accessible reference to a Khōjā story of a woodcutter and Imam Ali is in a late nineteenth-century manuscript from Kera (MS Ism K 5, 14r–18v) (Asani 73). It begins, *hekaḍō hu’ō kāṭhīārō sē hu’ō dhann vant . . .* (Once upon a time there was a wealthy woodcutter . . .) The term *woodcutter* is used as a translation of the original *kāṭhīārō*. An alternative translation for the term could be *woodsman*, alluding to other activities in the forest in addition to woodcutting, such as hunting.
6. A *śīlkathā* is a narrative tradition that focuses on culturally normative female conduct and character as societal virtues.
7. Gaṇēścōth is the birth celebration of the Hindu deity Ganesh.
8. “A type of Indian sweetmeat, usu. made from a dough of flour, sugar, shortening, etc., which is fried and then shaped into balls; a ball of this” (laddu, n. 1997).
9. Husain’s brother who died at the battle of Karbala.
10. Within the collection of Gujarati narratives, there is a further subdivision between those tales that are cohesively Gujarati both in grammar and vocabulary and those that appear to have translated from the original Urdu that contain vocabulary and phrases from Urdu within a very loose Gujarati grammatical construct.
11. Ja’far al-Ṣādiq (d. 765 CE/148 AH).

12. Fāṭima, daughter of Muḥammad and Khadija, wife of ‘Alī b. Abi Ṭālib, mother of al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn (d. 633 CE/11 AH).
13. The Battle of Karbala, Iraq (October 680 CE/10 Muharram 61 AH).
14. Umm Kulthūm, daughter of ‘Alī and Fāṭima.
15. Zaynab, daughter of ‘Alī, sister of al-Ḥusayn (d. 682 CE/62 AH).
16. Zayn al-‘Ābidīn (d. 712/13 CE, 94/95 AH).
17. Located in contemporary Afghanistan, it is the main city adjacent to the shrine complex of Mazār-i Sharīf in which some believe the tomb of Ali is located.
18. Prior to its demolition in 1925, the mausoleum was located in al-Baqī‘ cemetery in Medina.
19. Two publications of the *The Gift of Sādik* will be used in this essay. Both narratives are nearly identical. The first is only the narrative that is included in the compendium text. The second is an individual publication of the narrative that includes more detailed instructions on preparation of the sacrament and performance of its rites, the front cover of which can be found in Appendix I.
20. “An Indian dessert consisting of rice (or a similar ingredient) and sugar boiled in milk or coconut milk, and often flavoured with cardamom and ground nuts” (kheer, n. 2006).
21. “A small round cake of unleavened wheat flour, deep-fried in ghee or oil” (puri, n.2 2007).
22. The measure of weight is the Gujarātī *śēr*, which is equivalent to a weight of approximately one pound (lb.) in the mid-eighteenth century (Franks 1999).
23. Brief oral interview taken on the evening of July 25, 2008, twenty-two hours after the congregation cleared the main Khōjā mosque complex in Dar es Salaam.
24. In Swahili, this term originates in reference to the “stone benches” in the old city of Zanzibar where men would congregate in communal gatherings in the evening. In modern standard Swahili, the term has a multiplicity of meanings, including “council,” “cabinet,” and “assembly.”

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