

## MATERIAL TEXTS: RELIGION, MOBILITY, RESPONSIBILITY

Organized by Elizabeth Cecil and Sonia Hazard

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Leiden University, October 5–7, 2023

How do material texts – e.g. manuscripts, maps, inscribed objects, printed books, newspapers, ephemera, and forms of handwork – shape the communities in which they circulate? In what ways are texts' meanings conditioned by the material assemblages and social infrastructures in which they are encountered and used? How do the lives of material texts become enmeshed with those of their makers and keepers over time?

This material texts workshop features research talks as well as hands-on sessions with curators from Universiteit Leiden's Special Collections, the Museum Volkenkunde, and Amsterdam's Black Archives. It focuses on the lives and uses of material texts from a range of periods, regional contexts, religious traditions, and disciplinary perspectives. The aim is to initiate new conversations around the analysis of these primary sources that are receptive to the following set of questions:

**Religion:** Many religious traditions produce, venerate, and care for texts. How have religions engaged with texts in ways beyond their semantic content alone? How does the history of ritual engagement with religious texts condition their status as archival sources? What are the resources within religious traditions that suggest methods and forms of analysis for scholarly interpretation and archival practice?

**Mobility:** Material texts were often on the move, whether as representatives of transregional traditions, the works of itinerant makers and diaspora communities, or valuable commodities in colonial economies. How do these sources record histories of mobility and the critical reception of global publics? How did a text change when it was mediated through networks of distribution and entered new contexts of reception?

**Responsibility:** Scholars may encounter significant and sometimes sacred texts in their research, which may be of questionable provenance or acquired by colonial or imperial regimes and their agents. What are the responsibilities of scholars and archivists to the texts that they study and preserve? Can care for these materials and concerns for their preservation intersect productively with care for communities and calls for repatriation?

## THURSDAY – OCTOBER 5<sup>TH</sup>

- Afternoon** Participant arrivals and check-in at Golden Tulip Hotel (Schipholweg 3, Leiden)
- 6:00 pm** Dinner for speakers and guests at Het Prentenkabinet (Kloksteeg 25, Leiden)

## FRIDAY – OCTOBER 6<sup>TH</sup>

- 8:30** Coffee & Welcome
- 9:00 – 10:30** Morning Session: Vossius Zaal, Leiden University Library (Witte Singel 27, Leiden)
- Peter Bisschop (Leiden University)  
*Material Texts from South & Southeast Asia in the Leiden Collections*
- Mitchell Esajas (Black Archives Amsterdam)  
*Making Hidden Histories Visible*
- 10:30 – 11:00** Coffee Break
- 11:00 – 12:30** Berthe Jansen (Leiden University)  
*Himalayan Ritual Texts and Artefacts in Context: The Materiality of the Van Manen Collection*
- Annachiara Raia (Leiden University)  
*Portable Islam: The Circulation of People, Booklets and Ideas in 20<sup>th</sup>-century East Africa*
- 12:30 – 1:30** Lunch at Leiden University Faculty Club
- 1:30 – 3:00** Afternoon Session: Vossius Zaal, Leiden University Library
- Elizabeth Cecil (Florida State University & Leiden University)  
*Pūrṇavarman's Prints: Territory and Inscription in Early West Java*
- Martijn Storms (Curator of Maps and Atlases, Leiden University Library)  
*Exhibition and Discussion of Maps from Leiden's Special Collections*
- 3:15** Walk to Museum Volkenkunde (Steenstraat 1, Leiden)

3:30 – 5:00 Guided viewing with Martijn Storms of Volkenkunde Exhibition, *Maps: Navigating and Manipulating* (with time to visit other collections at the museum)

5:00 – 6:30 Discussion & Drinks: Café Abel, Museum Volkenkunde

### SATURDAY – OCTOBER 7<sup>TH</sup>

8:30 Coffee

9:00 – 10:30 Morning Session: Kammerlingh Onnes Gebouw (Steenschuur 25, Leiden)

Sonia Hazard (Florida State University)

*Printing is a Land-Relation: Christianity and Cherokee Media Theory in Nineteenth-Century Cherokee Nation*

Pranav Prakash (Oxford University)

*A Reckoning with Persian Purāṇas: Exploring the Ethos of Textual Production in Early Modern and Colonial South Asia*

10:30 – 11:00 Coffee Break

11:00 – 12:30 Martin Tsang (Independent Scholar)

*Texting Afro-Atlantic Religion: The Production and Circulation of Ritual Knowledge in Afro-Cuban Libretas*

Sanjukta Poddar (Leiden University)

*Texts and Textual Strategies: Vanguard of Caste Advocacy in Colonial-Era North India*

12:30 – 1:30 Catered Lunch

1:30 – 5:00 Afternoon Session: Kammerlingh Onnes Gebouw

Solimar Otero (Indiana University)

*Juramentos and Firmas: Narrating Assemblages in Afro-Cuban Material Religious Culture*

Aaron Hyman (Johns Hopkins University)

*Seville Papered Over, or The Culture of Religious Debate in early Seventeenth-Century Spain*

3:00 – 3:30 Coffee Break

- 3:30 – 5:30** Laxshmi Greaves (Cardiff University)  
*Why Label them? Inscribed Visual Rāmāyaṇa Narratives on Early South Asian Temples*
- Olli-Pekka Littunen (Leiden University)  
*The Life of a Material Text – How a Palm-Leaf Manuscript Traveled from Varanasi to Nepal and Beyond*
- Hedi Hinzler, (Leiden University)  
*The Balinese Manuscript Project*
- 6:30** Dinner for speakers and guests at Sumatra House (Nieuwe Beestenmarkt 3a)

PETER BISSCHOP (Leiden University)

Material Texts from South & Southeast Asia in the Leiden Collections

In this presentation, I will introduce and highlight the broad range of South and Southeast Asian material texts in the rich collections of Leiden University Library in the light of the ERC PURANA project, which considers the Purāṇa tradition as a way of anchoring the present in the continuing ancient past. I will do so through a small sample of diverse objects which will be on display at the symposium: an eighteenth-century Sanskrit Purāṇa manuscript; the spectacular Larger Leiden Cola Copper Plates; illustrations of the *Rāmāyaṇa* epic from India and Bali; two dissimilar manuscripts of the Buginese *La Galigo* epic; a letter written in Sanskrit by the Kashmiri Pandit Nityanand Shastri to Jean Philippe Vogel in 1921. Each object will be briefly introduced and considered from the perspective of the symposium's three themes: religion, mobility, and responsibility.

ELIZABETH CECIL (Florida State University & Leiden University)

Pūrṇavarman's Prints: Environment and Inscription in Early West Java

In 5<sup>th</sup> century West Java, the ruler Pūrṇavarman sponsored the creation of a group of inscriptions to praise his virtues and achievements. Engraved on prominent natural rock surfaces at river confluences and high places throughout his polity these works juxtapose poetic texts in Sanskrit with calligraphic signatures, and carved images of human and animal footprints. The rock inscriptions, I argue, served a specific set of functions related to Pūrṇavarman's kingship and his identity as an *īśvara*— a divine lord able to control and shape the natural environment through acts of thaumaturgy. Pūrṇavarman's records also bear witness to formative political and religious events in the premodern archipelago. As the earliest surviving examples of writing in the region, they are critical evidence of the harnessing of a new power technology in the service of political spectacle. Previous studies have presented the poetic elements in isolation from the accompanying images and signatures, and from their environmental settings. Through a new contextual analysis, my presentation examines the design and siting of these multimedia works within the environments that made them efficacious.

MITCHELL ESAJAS (Black Archives)

Making Hidden Histories Visible

The Black Archives (Amsterdam) is a cultural center and community archive based on a unique collection of books, documents, and artefacts documenting the histories of Surinamese and Black people in the Dutch context. The Black Archives develops exhibitions and public programs based on the collections and urgent societal issues. In 2021 they developed the installation "Interwoven Histories of Solidarity: Documenting Black Pasts & Presents" as part of the Lumbung in collaboration with ruangrupa and other collectives. TBA will share theory and practice-based lessons and insights on making 'hidden histories' visible through the work of TBA on the intersection of archives, (visual) arts, education, and activism.

LAXSHMI GREAVES ANDRADE (Cardiff University)

Why label them? Inscribed Visual *Rāmāyaṇa* Narratives on Early South Asian Temples

This paper will attempt to identify the functions and impacts of inscriptions on *Rāmāyaṇa* images from early temples in South Asia, using as its main case study, a group of understudied terracotta relief panels from Palashbari in Bangladesh, dating to the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE and displayed in the Bangladesh National Museum.

The Hindu epic *Rāmāyaṇa* entered the repertoire of temple sculptors in northwest and central north India in the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE and gained favour with sculptors in other parts of the Indian subcontinent from the late 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries CE. Most commonly the narrative is presented unfolding along friezes on the bases or walls of temples or displayed in registers on temple pillars. Between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries these images sometimes bear short inscriptions, usually of the names of the characters represented.

The inscribing of narrative images on religious monuments dates to the inception of Buddhist art in South Asia in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE but thereafter this practice was only adopted very sporadically. Despite their brevity, the inscriptions accompanying *Rāmāyaṇa* images are invaluable in aiding identification of both the characters and episodes depicted, but their significance transcends their utility. They inform us that the visual narratives were intended to be ‘read’ systematically and understood – a deceptively obvious observation given that as the medieval period progresses the emphasis on ‘readability’ is frequently significantly reduced. The labels could have also acted as aide-memoires for story-telling performances as happened at early Buddhist stupas. Moreover, labels are often found on the earliest extant *Rāmāyaṇa* images from a particular region or temple site suggesting that local visitors to these temples may not yet have been cognisant of the fairly standardised visual vocabulary of the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

Despite helpful iconographic tropes, however, visual *Rāmāyaṇas* are challenging to interpret because from the outset, the story has been constantly subject to re-telling. Tellings are conditioned by the social, religious, and cultural milieus within which they were produced and vary tremendously. Given the central place of temples in their communities, it might also be proposed that visual *Rāmāyaṇas* could have in turn, influenced or shaped subsequent local tellings to varying degrees. In the case of inscribed images, the artist’s telling has a greater ‘fixedness’ than pictorial-only tellings, where for example, one monkey might easily be mis-identified as another, and over time, divergent readings more readily made.

This paper hopes to contribute to an understanding of temple *Rāmāyaṇa* inscriptions that moves beyond their basic role as labels, and to test the hypotheses presented via an examination of the symbiotic relationship between the *Rāmāyaṇa* iconography on the Palashbari panels and their accompanying inscriptions. It will also consider the question of responsibility towards these important inscribed panels.

SONIA HAZARD (Florida State University)

Printing is a Land-Relation: Christianity and Cherokee Media Theory in Nineteenth-Century Cherokee Nation

Nineteenth-century Cherokee printers were media theorists who made political arguments through the materiality of Christian tracts. This article turns to the tract *Poor Sarah* as an illuminating example, especially because Cherokees published it in two editions in 1833 and 1843, affording a comparative analysis from before and after the tribe’s forced removal from Cherokee Nation

to Indian Territory. The material qualities of the two editions were strikingly different. Before removal, Cherokee printers emulated Anglo-Protestant prototypes in terms of dimensions, layout, and typography. The goal was to increase the likelihood of staying on their lands by winning white patrons and nudging Cherokee readers to see themselves as acculturated reading subjects. After removal, Cherokee printers rethought acculturation as a strategy. They redesigned *Poor Sarah* to turn away from white audiences and instead address the Cherokee community and its needs. Attention to the evolving materialities of *Poor Sarah* reveals Cherokee Christian printing as a key site of Indigenous media theory and part of Cherokee Nation's repertory of political action in response to US imperialism and settler colonialism.

AARON HYMAN (Johns Hopkins University)

Seville Papered Over, or The Culture of Religious Debate in early Seventeenth-Century Spain

In 1615, Seville erupted with debates about the question of the Virgin's Immaculacy. Clergymen hoping to sway the hearts and minds of both everyday supplicants and the religious powers that be took to the streets. The main mode by which clerics tested and contested ideas about Immaculacy was through the written word. "No plaza, no fortification, no street," as one period source describes, was free from pamphlets and broadsheets that alternatively lambasted or defended this theological tenet. Amid this turmoil, the Spanish-Flemish cleric and painter Juan de Roelas produced a massive painting covered in texts of all sorts. This talk coordinates the picture's many inscriptions against campaigns of the written word that were staged across the city's surfaces. Doing so reveals the painting to be a carefully constructed message about the potentials and the power of particular types of textual objects and of the city itself—its very stones—to serve as a substrate capable of receiving inscription.

BERTHE JANSEN (Leiden University)

Himalayan Ritual Texts and Artefacts in Context: The Materiality of the Van Manen Collection

When examining a collection that contains both ritual texts and ritual objects collected by one single collector, how do we determine the ways in which they interconnect? Can we re-contextualize such collections, even when they were collected almost a hundred years ago? How should museums, universities and other institutions deal with such collections?

The Van Manen collection, held in the Leiden University Library, contains a large number of Tibetan and Himalayan texts. After the self-made scholar Johan Van Manen (1877-1943) passed away in India a large part of his personal collection also came to be housed at Leiden University. Later, the artefacts he collected were housed in the Ethnographic Museum in Leiden (Museum Volkenkunde) where they remain to this day. In recent years this collection has come to be more or less forgotten.

In this hands-on session, I will briefly present the outline of my 5-year ERC-starting grant project VAN MANEN, which aims to answer questions of provenance research but also of context research regarding ritual texts and artefacts. The working hypothesis is that Van Manen deliberately collected all necessary implements (texts and objects) needed to perform various Buddhist and Bon rituals, in addition to gathering oral information on them from his field assistants. The study of rituals texts, artefacts, his Himalayan assistants' autobiographies, Van Manen's unpublished work, and other ephemera in unison thus hold the potential key to answer above ques-

tions and provide a framework to examine other similar collections. I will further elaborate on what a collaborative study of this multi-media collection as a whole and in its entirety could offer the fields of Buddhist studies, Himalayan studies, colonial history, art history, linguistics, and museum studies.

We will then explore some interesting works, examples from the collection that show how viewing the material aspects of the written word are of key importance to our broader understanding of both written and material culture.

OLLI-PEKKA LITTUNEN (Leiden University)

The Life of a Material Text – How a Palm-Leaf Manuscript Traveled from Varanasi to Nepal and Beyond

In this presentation, I will discuss how a 12th-century CE Sanskrit palm-leaf manuscript traveled from the famous North Indian religious destination Varanasi to Nepal, and how it has changed in the process. Although it is currently in the Kaiser Library in Kathmandu, microfilms of the manuscript have ended up also beyond Nepal in Germany, through joint Nepalese-German initiatives.

The manuscript in question transmits a collection of anonymous praise texts about Varanasi. No authors or scribes are mentioned by name, although most likely the manuscript was created by local scribes living in Varanasi. Furthermore, at least two Nepalese individuals have corrected and added to the texts after they were written on these palm-leaves. For this reason, I also discuss how and by whom the manuscript may have been used throughout its lifespan. In addition to the work of the two Nepalese correctors, perhaps the manuscript was used in public recitations in a ritual or teaching context, or privately in someone's home.

I inspect various stages in the life of the manuscript, from the present time all the way back to the 12th century CE when the manuscript was created. Perhaps obviously, the further back in time I go, the more speculative any clear conclusions about the manuscript and its contents become.

This palm-leaf manuscript serves as an example of how manuscripts and the information contained in them can travel. It is part of two wider phenomena: 1) manuscripts originally produced in Varanasi travelling to Nepal, and 2) microfilms of manuscripts housed in various places in Nepal ending up in Germany for academic purposes. Such vast spatial and temporal distances raise questions regarding the reasons the manuscript has been transported, and the various contexts it has been used in. How have the manuscript and the texts contained in it changed in these contexts? Why did it end up in Nepal? How has the manuscript been used, by whom, and why? What can we do, or what should we do with such a manuscript in the present time?

SOLIMAR OTERO (Indiana University)

*Juramentos* and *Firmas*: Narrating Assemblages in Afro-Cuban Material Religious Culture

Afro-Cuban religious narratives are interwoven with ritual practice and material culture. This presentation examines narratives produced with entities in Palo traditions for the purposes of invoking co-presences through the assemblage of images, words, and bodies in the archive. The dead, *nkisi*, tell coded stories of strife and affliction in ways that weaponize practitioners and objects with discursive accretion. This layering is deeply connected to an Afro-Atlantic poetics born of slavery, migration, and colonialism. Bringing together primary sources from the Lydia Cabrera



Papers, alongside ethnographic encounters in Cuba with Congo-inspired material culture and spiritual elders, this work fleshes out the afterlives of narrating assemblages. In particular, activated archival remains, such as *juramentos* and *firmas*, (written oaths and magical traces), provide touch points for understanding how entities and practitioners engage in co-constructing story worlds.

SANJUKTA PODDAR (Leiden University)

Texts and Textual Strategies: Vanguard of Caste Advocacy in Colonial-Era North India

In 1868–69, Munshi Din Dayal, a thirty-one-year-old Kayastha scribe from Agra published a slim, illustrated text titled *Kāyastha Dharma Pothī* (1868), or *The Treatise of Dharma of the Kayasthas*. Printed in the Perso-Arabic script, the language used by Din Dayal is best described as a combination of versified Awadhi and Braj Bhasha and presents an interesting example of Hindustani from the period prior to the Hindi-Urdu divide. While it is titled “dharma pothī,” the work is a peculiar combination of the ‘history,’ genealogy, and mythology of the Kayasthas masquerading as religious discourse. In addition to these striking features, the main significance of this little-known text lies in the fact that it is possibly one of the earliest works that takes up the topic of caste in the public sphere of north India, and perhaps the only one extant from before 1870.

Over the next few decades, the Kayasthas of north India—a *jāti* traditionally associated with paperwork, bureaucracy, and administration—went on to publish at least fifty similar works. If reports of annual meetings of the community, journals, and occasional pamphlets are included in this count, the number rises significantly. This print storm unleashed by the highly literate Kayasthas was soon emulated by many other *jātis* and flagged off an era of “caste advocacy,” a socio-cultural wave of writing, publishing, and mobilizing around caste identity in north India in which texts played a leading role. For instance, in 1912, the Kalwars—an artisanal *jāti* associated with the distillation and sale of alcohol, and hence, low in the *varṇa* hierarchy—published *Kalwār Saṃhitā*, another striking work in this genre.

Taking *Kāyastha Dharma Pothī* and *Kalwār Saṃhitā* as case studies, my presentation examines how and why the various *jātis* of north India turned to print culture to vehemently express and reinforce their caste identities, often for the purpose of lobbying for a higher position in the Hindu ritual hierarchy. I analyze how the textual strategies used by *jātis* in different positions in the caste hierarchy overlapped or differed. At first glance it might seem that “Sanskritization,” to use sociologist M. N. Srinivas’s term, might have been the main goal here, but my analysis points to a host of other, more ‘modern’ objectives—such as the desire for educational and professional mobility.

Scholars have demonstrated that the colonial codification of indigenous customs and practices—including in the domain of religion—rendered caste boundaries more rigid; however, the indigenous response to colonial modernity remains underexamined. I argue that local caste groups were not merely reacting but rather, actively using modern facilities offered by provincial cities like Agra, Allahabad, and Banaras such as the printing press, civic associations, and educational institutions to address a dual audience—first, their own communities and other caste publics, and second, the colonial administration.

What were effects of such caste advocacy on the general public sphere, and specifically, on the “Hindu public sphere”? How did these texts shape the emerging discourse on caste and to what end? I will attempt to answer these questions by drawing on my research on identities in

colonial-era north India that were expressed at this key intersection of print cultures and provincial urban modernities.

PRANAV PRAKASH (Oxford University)

A Reckoning with Persian Purāṇas: Exploring the Ethos of Textual Production in Early Modern and Colonial South Asia

A surprisingly large collection of Persian manuscripts based on Purāṇa narratives has survived to-day. Efforts to render Purāṇas into Persian literary genres date back to the heydays of the Delhi Sultanate (1206–1526), if not before, and continued as recently as the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in colonial South Asia. Although this rich archive of Persian manuscripts attracted the attention of a few erudite archivists, catalogers and specialists of Persian and South Asian cultures, there has never been a sustained attempt to grapple with their provenance, materiality and transmission history in a way that would allow us to fathom the *raison d'être* of this archive at different points in history. Part of the reason why this archive constitutes—in the words of Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi—the “homeless texts of Persianate modernity” can be gauged from how they breach a range of religious, political, cultural and disciplinary boundaries. In response to the cultural amnesia that has afflicted the study of religions and material texts on either side of the Indus River, my research examines the history of Persian Purāṇas with the aim of identifying some key factors and agents responsible for the production, transmission and preservation of these manuscripts. My presentation will elaborate upon the issues of patronage, scribal subjectivity, authorial intention and reception contexts of these manuscripts. I will compare, wherever possible, the arguments proffered by the patrons of Persian manuscripts on Purāṇic themes with those elucidated by literary and scribal communities involved in the actual production of those manuscripts. In light of their diverse views on religious boundaries and manuscript cultures, I will deliberate upon the ethos of textual production that underscored their engagement with Purāṇas in early modern and colonial South Asia.

ANNACHIARA RAIA (Leiden University)

Portable Islam: The circulation of people, booklets and ideas in 20<sup>th</sup>-century East Africa

In this presentation, an overview of African textual traditions will be offered through manuscript-to-print examples from the 20<sup>th</sup>-century East Africa Indian Ocean. Attention will be paid to a corpus of booklets in Swahili language, printed in Roman typescript on cheap paper from India that became very popular on the western coast of the Indian Ocean: these booklets made new notions of Islamic knowledge accessible beyond an Arabic-speaking elite. These portable forms of print Islam were very much the product of transcontinental connections between Swahili authors and booksellers who belonged to an Islamic *cosmopolis* concerned with educating wider audiences. While locating the intellectual inquiry of this paper in literary forms, their affordances and networks, I am proposing to look at vernacular Muslim texts that transcend the 'nation', in which religious identities are negotiated and transnational communities of belonging are created. How do Muslims who define themselves within the Swahili language imagine their local and global belongings? How, then, may one understand Islam as a living tradition underpinned by circulation of people, texts, ideas and ideologies? And, does a language and/or format shape how one may understand Islam?

MARTIN A. TSANG (Independent Scholar)

Texting Afro-Atlantic Religion: The Production and Circulation of Ritual Knowledge in Afro-Cuban Libretas

Lucumí, the Afro-Atlantic Yoruba religion, is organized, recorded, and learned through ritual notebooks or “libretas” in Spanish. While occupying a central role and physical record, scholarship has primarily focused on other aspects of Lucumí practice. The libreta represents an international writing convention and material product authored, edited, and disseminated by and for practitioners. The libretas afford self-inscribed insight into how divergent enslaved groups oriented themselves, collaborated, and negotiated their religious practices in Cuba's cultural milieu. Libretas combine and blend languages – including Spanish, Yorùbá, Fon, Efik, and Bakongo dialects in lexicons to advance religious understanding and affirm and orient the practitioner's place in spiritual and physical geographies. Their proliferation amount to a specialist manuscript collection that is generated and circulated among adherents and often shared with academics. Scholars of Afro-Cuban religions have quietly consulted these notebooks, which are often uncited and rendered invisible, instead framing Lucumí as an oral tradition without texts. In this presentation, I offer examples of libretas and describe how Afro-Cuban practitioners write their own religious and cultural histories that are mobile, moving, and circulating among practitioners as physical texts and, more recently electronically.