

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

SONGS TO THE AFRICAN SAINTS OF INDIA:
THE VENERATION OF MAI MISRA IN THE SIDI SUFI DEVOTIONAL TRADITION OF
GUJARAT AND MUMBAI

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE HUMANITIES
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF SOUTH ASIAN LANGUAGES AND CIVILIZATIONS

BY

JAZMIN GRAVES

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

JUNE 2021

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Acknowledgements

This dissertation is dedicated to the late Rumanaben Sidi, a beloved community leader and boundless source of ritual, historical, and cultural knowledge. Her sudden passing coincided with the completion of this dissertation, produced under her guidance. While it is true that with the passing of an elder, a library burns, it is my hope that this dissertation preserves some portion of her wisdom for posterity.

With immense gratitude I thank every person who had a hand in guiding me and helping me to grow and expand enough to carry the weight of this work as far as I have. I thank faculty, staff, friends, and dearest cohort-mates at SALC for ‘fostering’ my intellectual development. I thank my committee for their sharp insights, enthusiastic support, and for patiently reading the unbearably long chapter that became the bulk of this dissertation. I thank my dear colleagues with whom it has been an honor and a delight to produce three edited volumes that make such a substantial contribution to the field. I thank the Sidi community members who accepted me as their own and guided my research, and my host family in Ahmedabad, who all kept me safe. I thank AIIS, COSAS, my language professors and instructors at Columbia, the University of Chicago, and AIIS, and AAAS faculty and staff at Dartmouth, without whose support this dissertation would not have come to be. I thank AADS faculty and staff at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro for warmly welcoming me into their ranks. I thank my family, sisterhood of friends, my beloved partner and our diligent mentor for their insights, encouragement, prayers, and jokes that have kept me buoyant and motivated over the past eight years. I thank my higher power, my ancestors, and the saints whose shrines I have been blessed to visit.

Abstract¹

This dissertation centers on the Sufi devotional tradition of Sidis, Indians of East African ancestry, in western India. It is the product of ethnographic field research conducted in Gujarat and Mumbai from 2016 to 2019 and archival research conducted at the Archives and Research Center for Ethnomusicology in Haryana in 2017. The dissertation identifies the “Sidi Sufi devotional tradition” as Muslim Sidis’ veneration of three African Rifai Sufis (Bava Gor, Bava Habash, and Mai Misra) and African Muslim elites of the Gujarat Sultanate as ancestor-saints, along with other individuals associated with them, who are entombed or otherwise enshrined throughout Gujarat and Mumbai. The dissertation also considers devotional relationships cultivated with the Sidi ancestor-saints at a memorial shrine of Bava Gor in Mumbai, constructed and patronized primarily by Parsi Zoroastrians, within the scope of the Sidi Sufi devotional tradition.

The first book-length exposition in English on the Sidi Sufi tradition, the dissertation’s primary contributions to the field of South Asian Studies include its representation of the oral corpus of Sidi devotional songs called *jikar* or *jikrī*, composed in Hindi-Urdu, Deccani, Gujarati, and Swahili, as a genre of vernacular Indian Sufi poetry, and its demonstration of the enrooting of this tradition in the ideological framework and material culture of Hindu goddess worship and of Sufi devotional and healing practices in India. The dissertation contributes to the fields of Islamic Studies, Indian Ocean Studies, Africana Studies, Ethnomusicology, and Women’s

¹The title of this dissertation is a tribute to John Stratton Hawley’s and Mark Juergensmeyer’s *Songs of the Saints of India* (1988), one of my first introductions to vernacular devotional (*bhaktī*) poetry and its composers in India. This dissertation follows the orthographic conventions of McGregor’s *Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary*; where necessary, Perso-Arabic terms and phrases are transliterated according to the conventions of Platts’ *Dictionary of Urdu, Classical Hindi, and English*.

Studies with its multidisciplinary approach to analyzing the devotional songs and rituals of Sidis, an Indian Muslim community defined by its East African heritage and by its positionality as inheritors and brokers of ritual relationships with its Sidi ancestor-saints, especially the woman saint Mai Misra, in Gujarat.

Scholars such as Basu (2000, 2003, 2004), Edward Alpers (2004), Kuldeep Bhan and Mark Kenoyer (2004), Abdulaziz Lodhi (2008), and the late Lotika Varadarajan (2020) have worked toward historicizing Sidis' and Bhil agate miners' memories of Bava Gor as a military slave, Sufi saint, and successful agate merchant from Ethiopia or Nubia, whose travels and trade relationships throughout the northwestern Indian Ocean locate his influence in Sindh, Iraq, and even as far west as Nigeria. Comparatively little work has been done to consider Mai Misra as a historical figure, beyond Basu's valuable analysis of the name 'Misra' identifying Egypt as the saint's potential place of origin.

The dissertation thus analyzes primary and secondary source texts, Sidi oral histories, the lyrics of Sidi devotional songs, and the structure and materiality of Sidi veneratory rituals to unpack the various layers surrounding the identity of Mai Misra. Asking the simple question, "Who is Mai Misra as a historical figure?," the first chapter of the dissertation scrutinizes documentary sources found at Sidi ancestor-saint shrines and the headquarters (*khānqāh*) of the Rifai Sufi order in Baroda, Gujarat for information concerning Mai Misra as a black African, Rifai Sufi woman saint. These sources establish the backdrop for the chapter's analysis of Mai Misra's ritual representation during spirit mediumship, as the chapter asks what Sidi women's performed embodiment of Mai Misra's "presence" (*hāzirī*) in a particular ritual context in Ahmedabad, Gujarat illuminates about the saint's historical role as one of three sibling-saints

heading the “Sidi Rifai lineage (*silsilā*),” and about the ways in which Afrodescendant women dispersed in Gujarat may have integrated into the Sidi community by forging devotional relationships with Mai Misra.

The concept of ‘lineage’ redirects the discussion of Mai Misra’s identity as a Rifai Sufi, revered as a “lineage saint” (*kulpīr*) of the Muslim Sidi community of Gujarat, to her tacit conceptualization in terms of a “lineage goddess” (*kuldevī*). The second chapter of the dissertation consults Sidi community leaders’ petitions to the Office of the Charity Commissioner of Gujarat in the 1980s, published by Helene Basu (2003), for control of the governing trust of Bava Gor’s tomb-shrine (*dargāh*) in Ratanpur. These petitions represent Bava Gor as both a Muslim saint and a “lineage deity” (*kuldevtā*) to whom Sidis are generationally bound in devotion and describes Sidis’ veneration of Bava Gor in terms of Hindu modes of “worship” (“*pūjā/pūjāvidhi*”). This chapter asks how the veneration of Mai Misra may also be construed in terms of worship of a Hindu deity, particularly a lineage goddess, with reference to one of the most ubiquitous items employed in the veneration of Mai Misra: Mai Misra’s *kalas* or *ghaṭ* (water-pot). The chapter analyzes the use of this item in a devotional ritual performed in Ahmedabad before a Muslim Sidi bride’s wedding, underscoring the ways in which the veneration of Mai Misra in the Sidi Sufi devotional tradition is enrooted in the material culture of Hindu goddess worship in Gujarat.

The first and second chapters of the dissertation dissect two layers of identity surrounding Mai Misra. At the heart of her representation during rituals of spirit mediumship is the historical figure of a black African Rifai Sufi woman saint; simultaneously, the material culture of her veneration and her representation in Sidi oral narratives suggests her conceptualization in terms

of a Hindu lineage goddess. The third chapter of the dissertation parses the gendered, nuptial symbolism of Mai Misra's death anniversary (*urs*) rituals in tandem with Sidi devotional songs, especially those with distinctive Swahili lyrics, to suggest how newcomers from Africa may have interpreted and appealed to the spiritual authority (*vilāyat*) of benevolent African saints entombed in the land of dispersal. The chapter analyzes the appearance of the term "*malungu*" in one devotional song to demonstrate Mai Misra's conceptualization in terms of both a Sufi saint and an ancestral spirit of the land, a concept associated with the Bantu reconstructed linguistic form, *mulungu*. Women's veneration of Mai Misra as such would have created space for social integration via the creation of family and perpetuation of community amongst dispersed Africans and their descendants in Gujarat.

Yet a black African Rifai Sufi saint and ancestral spirit of the land venerated with a distinct material medium that suggests the worship of goddess, the final chapter of the dissertation asks how non-Sidi devotees and spirit mediums of Mai Misra construe the saint's identity. This chapter reflects on the interrelated themes of diaspora and kinship that informed the organization of dispersed Africans and their descendants into a cohesive community in Gujarat around the shrines of the Sidi ancestor-saints. This chapter suggests that spirit mediumship, construed in terms of the positively evaluated embodied experience of the Sidi ancestor-saints' "presence" (*hāzirī*) and the mediation of their "blessings" (*barkat*) and "miracle healing presence/assistance" (*karāmat*) at the Sufi saint shrine, engenders devotional relationships with the Sidi ancestor-saints at a memorial shrine of Bava Gor in Mumbai patronized primarily by Parsis and managed by a non-Sidi, Sunni Muslim caretaker.

The ritual leadership of spirit mediums at “the Parsi *cillā* (memorial shrine)” facilitates devotional relationships with the Sidi ancestor-saints among devotees. Spirit mediumship in this context is characterized by formalized bonds of ritual kinship with the Sidi ancestor-saints and informal bonds of ritual kinship evidenced by the natural presence of this spiritual “gift” (*bakhśiś*). The terms of ‘ritual’ and ‘natural’ kinship evident amongst the Sidi community merge in this context, where devotional relationships with the saints position devotees as “children” of the saints, Mai Misra as a “mother figure,” and the non-Sidi, Sunni Muslim ritual specialist of the shrine as a member of the Sidi community; in two distinct cases, skin color and heritage play a role in the conceptualization of natural and ritual kinship ties with the Sidi ancestor-saints. The last chapter of the dissertation positions devotional life at the Parsi memorial shrine of Bava Gor in Mumbai as an instance of another diasporan community’s ritual organization around the Sidi ancestor-saints. This in turn illuminates the process by which African diasporans and their descendants in nineteenth century Gujarat fashioned community centered on concepts of natural and ritual kinship with Bava Gor and Mai Misra.

With this, the primary aims of the dissertation are to shed light on Mai Misra as a historical figure, and to approach the devotional songs, rituals, and oral histories of the Sidi Sufi tradition as a lens through which to study the history of the African diaspora in Gujarat. This history includes the acculturation of Africans and their descendants to the religious cultures of the region, including the veneration of Sufi saints and Hindu practices of lineage deity worship, as well as the social organization of dispersed Africans into a Muslim “caste” (*jamāt*) of African ancestry protected and perpetuated by its devotional relationship with African Rifai Sufi saints entombed in Gujarat.

Introduction

My initial visit to a memorial shrine (*cillā*) of Bava Gor in Dongri, Mumbai in July 2016 raised the questions which this dissertation aims to answer.² Amidst a crowd of bystanders milling outside the shrine at nightfall, a lone black rooster singled me out, determinedly chasing and pecking me until I entered the shrine. The shrine's caretaker (*mujāwar*), a Sidi man, made his rounds therein, filling the shrine with thick clouds of frankincense smoke (*lobān*). People standing in front of Bava Gor's memorial tomb began writhing and rolling their heads, their hair fanning about, as the caretaker thunderously beat a tall, standing drum. After this scene was over, the caretaker treated me to chai and a Thumbs Up soda. He gave me a tour of the shrine, introducing the saints Bava Gor and Mai Misra at their memorial tombs, and displayed several instruments of African origin including four towering Nubian bowl-lyres (*nangās*), the tall drum (*mugarmān*), and smaller drums. He interpreted my peculiar experience before entering the shrine as Bava Gor's paternal prodding so that I, an African American woman, would finally enter the space and find my way 'home.'

Gesturing toward his sister, the caretaker of Mai Misra's memorial tomb, and another Sidi woman present, he beckoned me to observe the similarities between my face and the faces of my "sisters." He highlighted Mai Misra's legendary powers, including the potency of her prayers in vanquishing demons and the miraculous way in which she transformed her veil into a boat so that she could cross the sea. He noted that people from Africa had come to this shrine before, one even directed there by a dream, and explained that Africans have been dispersed

² I am grateful to Dr. Amy Catlin-Jairazbhoy for directing me to this shrine and for guiding me to the study of the Sidi *jikars*.

throughout the world. During my second visit to this shrine in August 2017, the caretaker listed four characteristics that distinguish black Africans, whom he called the “*Habshī khāndān* (Abyssinian family),” from other peoples, and named Hazrat Bilal, the companion of the Prophet and the first muezzin of Islam, who exemplifies the traits he noted. As I took my leave, the shrine-keeper outlined a suggested itinerary for future travels, highlighting that Jambur village among others in Gujarat was ‘Little Africa’ in India.

This initial site visit illuminated three interconnected categories central to understanding the Sidi devotional tradition of Gujarat and Mumbai: the African ancestor-saints who are the objects of devotion, Muslim Sidis who are generally the agents and facilitators of devotion, and the role of music performed on instruments of African origin in rituals that are the vehicle of devotion. The caretaker’s analysis suggested a distinct identity binding people of black African ancestry dispersed throughout the world as an identifiable community, and that the African saints venerated by Afrodescendants in western India appear to take particular interest in drawing members of this community to their shrines, whether through dreams (a category of communication with saints called *basārat* that includes wakeful visions) or even physical prodding, as in my supposed case.

Subsequent reading of Carla Bellamy’s monograph, *The Powerful Ephemeral: Everyday Healing in an Ambiguously Islamic Place* (2011), revealed that those persons from outside of the Sidi community whom I had observed in the throes of what appeared to be exorcism at Bava Gor’s memorial shrine had come there for “everyday healing.” Bellamy details this process as it occurs at the shrines of the five revered members (*panj-e-pāk*) of the Prophet’s household at Husain Tekri Sharif in Jaora, India. Outside of healing from malevolent entities’ illness-causing

intrusion into one’s physical person (*hāzirī*), Bellamy also highlights certain individuals’ positively-valued embodied experiences of benevolent saints (*sālāmī*) that involves the ability to heal or resolve issues.³ Study of the prolific writings of Helene Basu in conjunction with the publications and documentaries of Beheroze Shroff and Amy Catlin-Jairazbhoy, outlined in the literature review below, illuminate the fact that embodied experiences of the “presence” (the literal definition of the term *hāzirī*) of incorporeal entities may be negatively-valued in the case of non-Sidi supplicants seeking healing at Sidi saint shrines as they might do at other Muslim saint shrines, and may be positively-valued in the case of Sidis and other devotees of the Sidi ancestor-saints.

Sidis’ performance of devotional music and dance called Sidi *dhammāl* or *gomā*, using mainly percussion instruments of African origin, prompt such positively-valued embodied experiences of the ancestor-saints’ “presence.” Sidis use the terms *hāzirī* (“presence”), *hāl* (“ecstasy; religious transport”), and *sawārī* (“riding; vehicle”) variably to describe this benevolent mode of embodiment.⁴ Shroff identifies this as spirit mediumship, and observes that individuals embodying the presence of Bava Gor, Bava Habash, and Mai Misra during veneratory rituals transmit these saints’ “*barkat*/blessings” and “*karāmat*/miracle healing presence” or “miracle healing assistance” to devotees who approach them.⁵ Subsequent dissertation field research revealed that spirit mediumship in the Sidi devotional tradition

³ Carla Bellamy, *The Powerful Ephemeral: Everyday Healing in an Ambiguously Islamic Place*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 89, 91.

⁴ R. S. McGregor, *The Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary*. (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 995, 1067. John T. Platts, *A Dictionary of Urdu, Classical Hindi, and English*. (London: W. H. Allen & Co., 1884), 473.

⁵ Beheroze Shroff, “Goma is Going On: Sidis of Gujarat,” *African Arts* 46:1 (Spring 2013): 21, 22. I have added diacritics to the italicized terms. I am grateful to Beheroze Shroff for her guidance and generosity as she introduced me to ritual life at the Parsi memorial shrine of Bava Gor in Mumbai.

commonly involves women's embodiment of the presence of Mai Misra or her companion/'sister' saints (*sahelīyām*).

My observations at the Dongri shrine, considered in tandem with the caretaker's reflections and the works of Bellamy, Basu, Shroff, and Catlin-Jairazbhoy, led to the central question this dissertation seeks to answer concerning the identities of the saints at the center of the Sidi Sufi devotional tradition. Scholars such as Basu (2000, 2003, 2004a), Edward Alpers (2004), Kuldeep Bhan and Mark Kenoyer (2004), Abdulaziz Lodhi (2008), and the late Lotika Varadarajan (2020) have worked toward historicizing Sidis' and Bhil agate miners' memories of Bava Gor as a military slave, Sufi saint, and successful agate merchant from Ethiopia or Nubia, whose travels and trade relationships throughout the northwestern Indian Ocean locate his influence in Sindh, Iraq, and even as far west as Nigeria. Comparatively little work has been done to consider Mai Misra as a historical figure, beyond Basu's valuable analysis of the name 'Misra' identifying Egypt as the saint's potential place of origin.⁶

The dissertation thus analyzes primary and secondary source texts, Sidi oral histories, the lyrics of Sidi devotional songs, and the structure and materiality of Sidi veneratory rituals to unpack the various layers surrounding the identity of Mai Misra. Each chapter of the dissertation engages with a different aspect of Mai Misra's identity as preserved, remembered, and reconceptualized in these sources. In so doing, the dissertation culls evidence for the process by which eastern Africans dispersed in Gujarat established collectively established the Sidi community on the basis of shared African heritage and devotional relationships with enshrined

⁶ Helene Basu, "Theatre of Memory: Ritual Kinship Performances of the African Diaspora in Pakistan." In *Culture, Creation, and Procreation: Concepts of Kinship in South Asian Practice*, eds. Monika Bock and Aparna Rao, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2000), 260.

African Rifai Sufi ‘ancestor’-saints. This analysis of the Sidi Sufi devotional tradition illuminates its multivocality as an African-Indian Islamic tradition that is the product of diverse waves of migration and interreligious exchange in Gujarat.

Theoretical Orientation: Defining Diaspora, Multivocality, and Mediumship

The African heritage of the Sidi ancestor-saints and their community of Sidi devotees suggests the need to frame this Indian Islamic devotional tradition in the context of the African diaspora in India. While this dissertation is not the space for a detailed exposition of African cultural retentions in the Sidi devotional tradition, the dissertation delves into the concept of shared African heritage as a factor that binds Sidis in devotional relationships with African ancestor-saints. This analysis is invaluable to the study of the African diaspora in India because the adoption of African Rifai Sufis as “ancestor” saints provided the foundation for community formation amongst Africans of diverse ethnicities dispersed in the locations of these saints’ tomb-shrines in nineteenth-century Gujarat.⁷ The dissertation thus examines the historiographic potential of the Sidi devotional tradition, viewing its devotional songs and veneratory rituals as windows onto the history of the African diaspora in India.

The devotional relationships linking African ancestor-saints with Africans and their descendants in nineteenth century Gujarat inscribed the contours and structured the internal organization of what is now the contemporary Muslim Sidi community of Gujarat and Mumbai. Notions of natural and ritual kinship with the ancestor-saints based on common African ancestry is the primary organizing principle of the community and of its devotional tradition. As

⁷ Helene Basu, “Redefining Boundaries: Twenty Years at the Shrine of Gori Pir,” in *Sidis and Scholars: Essays on African Indians*, eds. Amy Catlin-Jairazbhoy and Edward Alpers (Noida, UP: Rainbow Publishers, 2004), 62-63.

mentioned above, the last chapter of the dissertation demonstrates how this organizing principle characterizes devotional relationships with the Sidi ancestor-saints amongst non-Sidi devotees in the context of a different diasporan community of Gujarat and Mumbai. The dissertation foregrounds the ways in which this Indian Islamic tradition performed at African Rifai Sufi saint shrines perpetuates a distinct ritual lineage – “the Sidi Rifai Lineage” – within the larger framework of the Rifai Sufi order in Gujarat.⁸

Diaspora

Various scholars have theorized the application of African diasporan identity to African-heritage communities in the Indian Ocean world, as the scholarly study and popular awareness of the African diaspora are generally anchored in the Atlantic Ocean world.⁹ This debate over what constitutes the global African diaspora centers on the fact that a definition of diaspora which views the original homeland as the axis of diasporic consciousness excludes several dispersed communities for whom the former homeland is not central to identity or experience. Thus, in his comparative study of Islam in the global African diaspora, Edward E. Curtis IV defines diaspora as “a physical scattering of human beings across time and space that has political, economic, social, cultural, psychological, religious and emotional meanings.”¹⁰ Curtis suggests the concept

⁸ Babubhai Sidi, the late shrine-keeper (*mujāwar*) of the Gabban Shah Bava shrine in Kurla, Mumbai, refers to the tradition as the “Sidi Rifai *Silsilā*” in Beheroze Shroff, *Voices of the Sidis: Two Documentaries* (Irvine, California: 2005).

⁹ Edward Alpers, “The African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean: A Comparative Perspective,” in *The African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean*, eds. Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya and Richard Pankhurst (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2003), 19-50. Gwyn Campbell, “The African Diaspora in Asia,” in *TADIA, the African Diaspora in Asia: Explorations On a Less Known Fact*, eds. Fitzroy André Baptiste, Kiran Kamal Prasad, and Jean-Pierre Angenot (Bangalore: Jana Jagrati Prakashana, 2008), 43-82. Joseph E. Harris, *Global Dimensions of the African Diaspora*. Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1993.

¹⁰ Edward E. Curtis IV, *The Call of Bilal: Islam in the African Diaspora* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 8-9.

of an “Africana Muslim diaspora” as the frame for the comparative study of Islam in the African diaspora, allowing for the consideration of both linkages and ruptures between the populations it concerns.¹¹

This dissertation considers the Sidi Muslim community of Gujarat and Mumbai as Afro-diasporan not only because some members express awareness and positive valuation of their African heritage, but because the social, cultural, religious and emotional meanings of ancestral dispersals from Africa surface in the Sidi Sufi devotional tradition.¹² Situating this tradition within the context of the Africana Muslim diaspora posited by Curtis IV necessitates an understanding of the “linkages and ruptures between the populations it concerns” to afford deeper knowledge of this tradition and its custodians. One population marking an important linkage, or rupture, in the history of the African diaspora in India is the African Sufi saints at the center of the Sidi devotional tradition.

Anthropologist Helene Basu, premiere scholar of the Sidi devotional tradition of Gujarat, distinguishes between contemporary Sidis, whose ancestors largely arrived in Gujarat from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, and the Abyssinian (Habshi) political and military elites whose factions, thousands strong, significantly impacted the Deccan and Gujarat sultanates among other regional polities in India from the twelfth through eighteenth centuries.¹³ Basu observes that the

¹¹ Curtis IV, *The Call of Bilal*, 7.

¹² Beheroze Shroff and Sofia Péquignot (2020) have analyzed pan-African perspectives on identity amongst Sidis in Gujarat, Mumbai, and Karnataka. Beheroze Shroff, “Juliana Siddi: Imaging and Imagining Africa India Connections,” in *Afro-South Asia in the Global African Diaspora: Black Ambassadors of Politics, Religion, and Jazz in India*, eds. Omar H. Ali et al. (Greensboro: University of North Carolina at Greensboro Ethiopian and East African Studies Project, 2020), 25-46. Sofia Péquignot, “Re-shaping Siddi Communities: Indian Pan-Siddism and Global Pan-Africanism,” in *Afro-South Asia in the Global African Diaspora: Black Ambassadors of Politics, Religion, and Jazz in India*, eds. Omar H. Ali et al. (Greensboro: University of North Carolina at Greensboro Ethiopian and East African Studies Project, 2020), 57-76.

¹³ Pedro Machado, “A Forgotten Corner of the Indian Ocean: Gujarati Merchants, Portuguese India

Sidi ancestor-saints belong to the wave of African dispersals in India associated with the Habshi elites, and hypothesizes that the Sidi devotional tradition fosters symbolic rather than historical continuity between these two distinct waves.¹⁴

Basu posits that the tomb-shrine of Bava Gor became a safe haven for fugitive, freed and enslaved Africans in nineteenth-century Gujarat, who established an organization of ritual specialists (*faqīrs*) within a larger community of Afro-descendants, all based on notions of ritual and natural kinship with Bava Gor.¹⁵ In this context, the term “ancestor-saint” does not convey genealogical kinship with the saints; natural kinship simply refers to common African heritage shared by the saints and their Sidi devotees. Initiatory rites positioning Sidi devotees as ritual children (*bālkā/bālkī*) of the Sidi ancestor-saints establish symbolic continuity between African Sufi saints of pre-modern Gujarat and an Indian Muslim community descending from Africans who arrived in the subcontinent centuries after the entombment of the saints.¹⁶

However, dissertation field research conducted in Ahmedabad troubles the waters of the perceived gulf between the Habshi elites of premodern India and the contemporary Sidi community.¹⁷ The matriarch of Ahmedabad’s Sidi community claims that Sidis have lived in a

and the Mozambique Slave-Trade, c. 1730-1830,” in *The Structure of Slavery in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia*, ed. Gwyn Campbell (London; Portland: Frank Cass Publishers, 2004), 17-32. Richard Eaton, “Malik Ambar and Elite Slavery in the Deccan, 1400-1650,” in *African Elites in India: Habshi Amarat*, eds. Kenneth X. Robbins and John McLeod (Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing, 2006), 60-62. Richard Pankhurst, “The Ethiopian Diaspora to India: The Role of Habshis and Sidis from Medieval Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century,” in *The African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean*, eds. Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya and Richard Pankhurst (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2003), 189-222.

¹⁴ Helene Basu, “Slave, Soldier, Trader, Faqir: Fragments of African Histories in Western India (Gujarat),” in *The African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean*, eds. Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya and Richard Pankhurst (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, Inc., 2003), 234.

¹⁵ Basu, “Redefining Boundaries,” 62-63.

¹⁶ Basu, “Theatre of Memory,” 248-249.

¹⁷ See Jazmin Graves, “Filling the Pot: The Remembrance of African Sufi Ancestor-Saints and the Reclamation of African Historical Heritage in Ahmedabad, Gujarat”, *Journal of Africana Religions*, 7(1): 94-104.

residential compound around Bava Gor's memorial shrine (lit. "home" or "seat," "*makān*" or "*baiṭhak*") for centuries, and that this compound was historically the palace of the aristocratic Habshi general Bilal Jhujhair Khan (d. 1558-1559). During the *urs* festivities of Bava Gor and Mai Misra, the Sidis of Ahmedabad have for generations walked the same procession routes to Old City sites associated with Ahmedabad's Habshi soldiers and other elites of the Gujarat Sultanate period.

The *urs* processions annually visit Sidi Bashir's tomb, a fifteenth-century figure remembered as a Sufi and associated with the shaking minarets (Gujarati, "*jhultām minārā*") of an Old City mosque, and the 2018 *urs* featured a visit to Sidi Said's (d. 1576) tomb in the courtyard of a mosque named after him, whose 'Tree of Life' stone window latticework was the unofficial symbol of the city for years.¹⁸ These processions historically included the tombs of Bilal Jhujhair Khan and other Habshi elites buried in Sarkhej Roza, where Mahmud Begra is entombed. Furthermore, the shrine of Bava Gor in Ahmedabad memorializes two other Habshi noblemen of Ahmedabad's sultanate period, Sidi Sahib and Sidi Sultan, as well as to two Habshi figures of Hyderabad, Sidi Sarur and Ma Sadiya; Sidis visit Sidi Sultan's *dargāh* at Shahibag during the *urs*.¹⁹ The Sidi devotional tradition as practiced in Ahmedabad reveals the importance of historical Habshi elites to the community's ritual commemoration of its African heritage.

According to Curtis IV's theorization of the Africana Muslim diaspora, Sidi devotees' spatial navigation of historical sites associated with the Habshi elites of fifteenth and sixteenth century Ahmedabad, spanning outward from their residential complex (which is one such site)

¹⁸ See Beheroze Shroff and Sonal Mehta, "Sidi Voices and the Sidi Sayyid Mosque: Narratives of Space and Belonging," *South Asian History and Culture* 11:4 (2020): 411.

¹⁹ For more about Sidi Sultan's *dargāh* at Shahibag, see Shroff and Mehta, "Sidi Voices," 416-418.

housing a proposed historical “seat” or dwelling place of Bava Gor reflects Sidis’ ritual-based remembrance of ruptured historical linkages to Africans they venerate as ancestor-saints. The dissertation problematizes the lack of historicity presupposed by Basu’s notion of symbolic continuity, underscoring the historiographic potential of the ritual veneration of Mai Misra.

The dissertation thus investigates the historiographic potential of the Sidi Sufi tradition insofar as its rituals and devotional songs illuminate the interface between two waves of the African diaspora in India. The caretaker’s remarks at the Dongri, Mumbai shrine suggest that the saints are believed to influence the lives of Afro-descendants. The caretaker identifies intangible (dream) and physical (pecking rooster) means by which Bava Gor has directed foreigners of African ancestry, including the author of this dissertation, to his memorial shrine. This dynamic between the Sidi saints and people of African heritage, whom Sidis generally welcome as extended ‘family,’ underscores the process by which East Africans of various ethnicities established community around the tomb of Bava Gor in nineteenth century Gujarat.

Interviews with ritual specialists at Bava Gor’s memorial shrine elsewhere in Mumbai and in Ahmedabad suggest that one way in which the saints deliver an invitation to their shrines or another message to a devotee is through a dream or waking vision (*basārat*) which generally involves the saints’ self-disclosure as black Africans.²⁰ From an emic perspective, the *basārat* could partially account for the magnetization of East Africans to the tomb of Bava Gor: a dream or vision by which a beneficent saint discloses common heritage with the viewer and invites the

²⁰ For an example of this, see Beheroze Shroff, “Spiritual Journeys: Parsis and Sidi Saints,” in *Journeys and Dwellings: Indian Ocean Themes in South Asia*, ed. Helene Basu (Hyderabad: Orient Longman Private Limited, 2008), 269-270.

latter to their shrine would appear a welcome intervention in the life of an individual divested of kin through forced, or voluntary, migration.

The present discussion foregrounds emic perspectives on the *baśārat* because they illuminate the inseparability of the history of the African diaspora in India from the development of this regional Sufi tradition centered upon African Muslim saints. The dissertation makes this connection as a contribution to the study of South Asian religions and literatures, particularly Sufism and Sufi vernacular poetry in India. Its historiographic approach elucidates the development of a regional Sufi devotional tradition via the attunement of ethnically diverse East Africans to the religious and cultural idioms of their environment as they created community around the tombs of African Sufi saints. These saints, formerly enslaved yet achieving success as merchants and initiated Sufis in Gujarat, became the focus of devotion for Africans, freed or in servitude themselves, and their descendants in Gujarat. The dissertation positions the devotional songs and rituals of the Sidi Sufi tradition as lenses through which to view glimpses of this process of acculturation and community formation. It parses the songs in tandem with the material culture and rituals of the tradition to illustrate the multivocality of the Sidi Sufi tradition and of the saints at its center.

Multivocality

The dissertation's study of the Sidi Sufi tradition of Gujarat and Mumbai contributes to academic discourse on accommodation and exchange between Hindu and Muslim communities in South Asia.²¹ Departing from the language of 'syncretism' to analyze the agents, products and

²¹ Francesca Orsini, "'Krishna is the Truth of Man:' Mir 'Abdul Wahid Bilgrami's *Haqā'iq-i Hindī (Indian Truths)* and the Circulation of *dhrupad* and *bishnupad*," in *Culture and Circulation*, eds. Allison Busch and Thomas De

motives of such exchange, scholars have applied the concept of ‘liminality’ to illuminate interstitial texts, identities, and devotional practices.²² This dissertation engages “multivocality” as an analytical category by which to parse the multivalent layers of the Sidi devotional tradition.

Orsini (2014) identifies multivocality as a symbol’s accrual of multiple meanings due to its circulation amongst multireligious audiences.²³ Multivocality thus accounts for the polysemy of motifs recurrent in a literary genre that is associated with a particular devotional tradition yet is enjoyed by litterateurs of diverse religious backgrounds. The dissertation applies this concept of multivocality to various aspects of the Sidi Sufi devotional tradition itself. Thus, the water-pot (*ghaṭ* or *kalas*) that Hindus may install during Navratri as a symbolic embodiment of the goddess, and that Muslim Sidis fashion in veneration of Mai Misra during the *urs*, is a multivocal material medium that features in the Sidi devotional tradition.

Orsini’s application of the term might suggest that multivocality in this context refers to multireligious audiences’ interpretation of Sidi ritual events, such as public processions with Mai Misra’s *kalas*, in terms of the valence of such symbols in their own religious contexts. Instead, the dissertation approaches this concept with reference to what the polysemy of devotional song lyrics and the structure and materiality of rituals encodes about the process by which

Bruijn (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2014), 222-246. Aditya Behl, *Love’s Subtle Magic: An Indian Islamic Literary Tradition, 1379-1545*, Ed. Wendy Doniger (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). Carl Ernst, “Being Careful with the Goddess: Yoginis and Persian and Arabic Texts,” in *Performing Ecstasy: The Poetics and Politics of Religion in India*, eds. Pallabi Chakravorty and Scott Kugle (New Delhi: Manohar, 2009), 189-203. Finbarr Flood, *Objects of Translation: Material Culture and Medieval Hindu-Muslim Encounter* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009). Muzaffar Alam, “Assimilation from a Distance: Confrontation and Sufi Accommodation in Awadh Society,” in *Tradition, Dissent, and Ideology: Essays in Honor of Romila Thapar*, eds. R. Champakalakshmi and S. Gopal (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1966), 164-194.

²² A number of contributors to the following edited volume use liminality as an analytical framework in their chapters, including Helene Basu. See Imtiaz Ahmad and Helmut Reifeld, eds. *Lived Islam in South Asia: Adaptations, Accommodation and Conflict* (Delhi: Social Science Press, 2004).

²³ Orsini, “Krishna is the Truth,” 228.

Afrodescendants dispersed in Gujarat established a system of devotion to African Sufi saints entombed there, while acculturating to the motifs and paradigms of a multireligious environment.

The dissertation approaches the figure of Mai Misra herself as a multivocal symbol, analyzing what devotional song lyrics, material media, and veneratory rituals convey about the distinct layers of meaning that have accrued onto her identity as a documented historical figure, simply by virtue of her enshrinement in a multireligious landscape. Each chapter of the dissertation alights upon one of these layers, including Rifai Sufi saint, lineage goddess, ancestral spirit, and “mother” figure, as they index Sufi, Hindu, and eastern African religio-cultural elements at play in the making of a multivocal devotional tradition, and non-Sidi audiences’ relationality to Mai Misra in perpetuation of this devotional tradition.

Mediumship

Embodiment, a term I prefer over ‘possession,’ emerges as one of the most tangible ways by which the Sidi ancestor-saints manifest their miracle healing presence/assistance (*karāmat*) in the lives of devotees. Shroff identifies this practice as spirit mediumship, whereby a Sidi ancestor-saint overtakes the voice and body of a devotee during ritual, whom participants then consult for blessings, prayers, and advice.²⁴ Sidis use the terms *hāzirī* (“presence”), *hāl* (“ecstasy; religious transport”), and *sawārī* (“mounting”) to describe this benevolent mode of embodiment.²⁵

²⁴ Shroff, “Goma is Going On,” 22.

²⁵ Platts, *A Dictionary of Urdu*, 473. See Kathleen Erndl, “Possession by Durga: The Mother Who Possesses,” In *Life of Hinduism*, eds. John Stratton Hawley and Vasudha Narayanan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 164.

As this dissertation concerns spirit mediumship as a ritual practice in the Sidi devotional tradition, it is necessary to address the discourse on trance and possession in Islam and among women in South Asian and Africana Muslim contexts. Joyce Flueckiger, in her study of the spiritual healing practice of a Muslim woman in Hyderabad, notes the interchangeable, “inconsistent and context-specific” usage of the terms *hāl* and *wajd*, which denote trance-states that emerge among men and women during the *qawwālī* performance and are opposed in valuation with *hāzirī*, which denotes possession. Flueckiger warns that, despite the observable similarities between trance (*hāl/wajd*) and possession (*hāzirī*), “Allah and the saints do not possess, though they might be present; only *jinn* and devils possess and take over a person’s body.”²⁶ She thus distinguishes between trance and possession in Muslim devotional contexts, in which the former is positively valued and the latter, negatively. However, the protagonist of her study, Amma, on one occasion conflates *hāl* with *hāzirī*, and opposes this negatively-evaluated *hāl* with *wajd*, reflecting inconsistency in the usage of these terms.

The ‘impossibility’ of possession by Muslim saints and the connotation of *hāl* as trance rather than possession in the context of Flueckiger’s research in Hyderabad is incompatible with the connotation of *hāl* in the Sidi Sufi tradition. Basu identifies a binary valuation of possession in the context of Sidi saint shrines, where *hāl* is the positively-valued embodiment of a benevolent saint and *hāzirī* indicates possession by a malevolent spirit; pilgrims to Sidi saint shrines often appeal to the saints for healing from the latter.²⁷ Peter van der Veer observes this *hāzirī-hāl* distinction in Rifai Sufi practice in Surat, Gujarat, though *hāl* in this context is not

²⁶ Joyce Flueckiger, *In Amma's Healing Room: Gender and Vernacular Islam in South India* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 216-217.

²⁷ Basu, “A Gendered Indian Ocean Site,” 249, 252.

correlated with spirit possession.²⁸ As mentioned above, terminological usage in Sidi devotional contexts complicates this binary. For example, Heena, a Sidi spirit medium of Mai Misra at the Parsi memorial shrine of Bava Gor uses the term *hāzirī* to describe possession by Mai Misra: “*Māī Misrā nī hāzirī āve che / Mai Misra’s presence (hāzirī) comes.*”²⁹ This points to the multivocality of the terms *hāzirī* and *hāl* in Islamic devotional contexts in South Asia.

Just as a *qawwālī* performance may induce ecstatic states, the Sidi *dhammāl* performance generally facilitates devotees’ experience of *hāl*.³⁰ This reflects the role of *jikar* in the *dhammāl* performance as a Sufi practice of remembrance of God, the Prophet, and Sufi saints. Like the terms *hāzirī* and *hāl*, the *dhammāl* performance itself is multivocal, suggesting a genre of Sufi devotional music based on the practice of remembrance and expressing the logic of continental African *ngoma* traditions, as its alternate name *gomā* and instrumentation suggests.

Finally, an acknowledgment of the academic discourse on women’s experiences of possession in Islamic contexts in South Asia and Africa is in order here. Analyses of the predominance of possession experiences among women rather than men often base this predominance on women’s reactions to their subordinate social positions relative to men, and perceive Muslim women’s shrine-based devotional culture as peripheral to Islamic religious orthodoxy, understood as a male sphere of influence, and to men’s participation in official Sufi brotherhoods.³¹ Bellamy underscores the “completely speculative” nature of “psychologically

²⁸ Peter Van der Veer, “Playing or Praying: A Sufi Saint’s Day in Surat.” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 51:3 (August 1992): 555.

²⁹ Interviewed in Gujarati by Beheroze Shroff in her 2005 film, *Voices of the Sidis: Ancestral Links*.

³⁰ Flueckiger, *In Amma’s Healing Room*, 211-221.

³¹ See I.M. Lewis et al. *Women’s Medicine: The Zar-Bori Cult in Africa and Beyond* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press for the International African Institute, 1991), 1-16. See also Basu, “A Gendered Indian Ocean Site,” 238.

driven interpretations” of *hāzirī* among women.³² Rudolph Ware in his groundbreaking monograph, *The Walking Qur’an*, highlights the dichotomous understanding of “embodiment in African Muslim societies,” which contrasts “Islam [as] the realm of the mind (masculine, rational, and Semitic) [with] spirit possession [as] the realm of the body (feminine, emotional, and African).”³³ Ware’s study of traditional Qur’an schools in Senegambia thus seeks to recover the centrality of the embodiment of knowledge to traditional Islamic education.

The dissertation does not offer psychologically-based interpretations of women’s or men’s mediumship of the Sidi ancestor-saints. Instead, the dissertation simply aligns itself with Diane D’Souza’s analysis of the *dastarkhān*, a private ritual among Shia women which, much like the *khicrī* ceremony, honors a revered Muslim figure, here a member of the household of the Prophet (*ahl-e bayt*); marks the fulfilment of a vow; and involves the sharing of consecrated food. D’Souza posits that the *dastarkhān* “establishes or deepens a bond between the woman organizing the ritual and the holy personage in whose honor it is held. ...One effort in the ritual, then, is to cultivate a kind of reciprocal giving that strengthens partnerships with sacred souls of the *Ahl-e-Bayt*.”³⁴ Similarly, this dissertation views the *khicrī* ceremony and other rituals involving mediumship as means by which bonds between Sidi ancestor-saints and devotees, characterized by reciprocal exchanges of offerings and blessings, are forged and strengthened. Assessing the psychological aspects of mediumship is limited only to attempts to convey the emotional valence of the ritual experience among participants.

³² Bellamy, *The Powerful Ephemeral*, 162.

³³ Rudolph Ware, *The Walking Qur’an: Islamic Education, Embodied Knowledge, and History in West Africa* (Chapel Hill [North Carolina]: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 5.

³⁴ Diane D’Souza, *Partners of Zaynab: A Gendered Perspective of Shia Muslim Faith* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2014), 186-187, 194.

Literature Review

Helene Basu, Beheroze Shroff, and Amy Catlin-Jairazbhoy have shaped the academic discourse on the Sidi devotional tradition of western India (Gujarat and Mumbai). This section provides an overview of these scholars' distinct contributions to the interdisciplinary subfield of Sidi Studies and summarize those of their publications that establish the foundation for this dissertation.

Anthropologist Helene Basu has pioneered the study of the Sidis of Gujarat, their devotional tradition, and hierarchies of class, caste and ritual status determining their relationships with the Muslim and non-Muslim communities with whom they interact. For over twenty years, Basu has furnished rigorous analyses developed from extensive ethnographic field research in Gujarat, centering on Ratanpur, as well as in Sindh in Pakistan and Zanzibar in Tanzania. She has spearheaded the study of the Afro-diasporan character of the Sidi Sufi tradition by drawing connections with eastern African healing traditions involving spirit possession, such as *ngoma* and *zar*.

Basu's "Slave, Soldier, Trader, Faqir: Fragments of African Histories in Western India (Gujarat)" (2003) introduces the various capacities in which Africans arrived in Gujarat and traces the origins of the ethnonyms 'Habshi' and 'Sidi'. She identifies a commonly reported origin narrative that suggests that the diffusion of the Sidi community throughout Gujarat reflects the itineraries of the Sidi ancestor-saints: some of them stayed behind at temporary sites of sojourn and became the forebears of contemporary Sidis residing in those locations. She pinpoints Sidi saint shrines as principal features of Sidi dwellings, even if these dwellings comprise only a few doors. She publishes excerpts of legal statements directed by Sidi

community leaders to the Office of the Charity Commissioner of Gujarat in the early 1980s to contest the transfer of management of Bava Gor's *dargāh* to a competing Muslim community. The documents articulate the Sidi leaders' perspectives on their traditions relative to those of other Muslims, and on their unique relationship to Bava Gor as his "descendants". In this edited volume chapter, Basu complicates notions of descent from the "ancestor"-saints, positing historical discontinuity between the saints and their Sidi devotees and contending that bonds of symbolic continuity forged through the Sidi devotional tradition rather than genealogical kinship link the two.

"Hierarchy and Emotion: Love, Joy and Sorrow in a Cult of Black Saints in Gujarat, India" (1998) presents the origin narrative of the three primary Sidi saints' arrival in India, which involves Mai Misra's vanquishing of a demoness. She analyzes the characteristics the saints exude in the narrative, demonstrating their classification relative to one another as hot-minded, cool-minded, or a balance of both. The thermodynamics of the saints' personae determine the kinds of spiritual intervention contemporary supplicants may seek from particular saints. The article introduces Mai Misra's *Khicaṛī* as a ritual by which women request the intervention of Mai Misra, the quintessence of the ideal feminine, in the treatment of infertility: Mai Misra's hot-cold balance restores equilibrium to the overly hot reproductive system of a barren woman. Basu identifies the drumming and singing which follows such rituals as smaller versions of the devotional music (*gomā* or *dhammāl*) performance that takes place during the death anniversary celebrations (*'urs*) of the Sidi saints. These performances generally culminate in the spiritual union of the ancestor-saints with their descendant-devotees, as a state of ecstasy (*majā/mast*)

during which the spirits of Sidi ancestor-saints possess Sidi descendant-devotees in a ritual context which Basu thermodynamically characterizes as “hot”.

Basu provides an ethnographic account of a *Khicaṛī* ritual which includes a thick description of spirit mediumship in “A Gendered Indian Ocean Site: Mai Mishra, African Spirit Possession and Sidi Women in Gujarat” (2008). This chapter in her edited volume juxtaposes Mai Misra’s *Khicaṛī* as a ritual of benevolent spirit possession that contrasts with the cases of malevolent spirit possession treated at the saints’ shrines and completed at Mai Misra’s shrine. Basu records a telling of the saints’ origin narrative that contextualizes Mai Misra’s victory over the demoness as a prelude to her intervention in supplicants’ cases of malevolent spirit possession. Basu describes *zar* and *ngoma*, East African traditions of spirit possession, and compares the characteristics of the three primary Sidi saints with those of the spirit classes of *ngoma* in Zanzibar. She extends this comparative analysis in her 2008 article, “Music and the Formation of Sidi Identity in Western India”.

Basu describes Sidis’ perception of natural (genealogical) kinship with the ancestor-saints and illuminates the formation of ritual kinship ties between them in “Theatre of Memory: Ritual Kinship Performances of the African Diaspora in Pakistan” (2000). The edited volume chapter describes a ceremony held during the *urs* of Mai Misra in Karachi called *Mai jo Bhojā*. Basu glosses this title as “The Weight of the Mother”, associating “weight” with seven women’s carrying three clay pots each atop their heads in a ritual procession through the streets of Karachi. Basu’s identification of seven rhythms which are drummed and seven devotional songs which are performed during the celebrations highlights the deliberateness of the devotional music performance in linking the seven female participants with Mai Misra’s seven companions

(*saheliyām*). Basu's chapter, "Redefining Boundaries: Twenty Years at the Shrine of Gori Pir", in Amy Catlin-Jairazbhoy's and Edward Alpers' 2004 edited volume furthers the discussion of ritual kinship with the ancestor-saints. Basu observes that the initiatory process she outlines in "Theatre of Memory" facilitated the amalgamation of the Sidi community as displaced Africans gathered at the tomb of Bava Gor in the nineteenth century.

Beheroze Shroff in her writings and documentary films explores questions of identity amongst the Sidis of Ratanpur, Bhavnagar and Ahmedabad in Gujarat, and Mumbai in Maharashtra. She complements many decades of participant-observation in devotional rituals honoring the Sidi ancestor-saints in Mumbai with ethnographic interviews through which Sidis provide their own commentaries on their African heritage, Indian nationality and practical concerns as a marginalized Muslim community. She has furthered the analysis of the Afro-diasporan character of the Sidi Sufi tradition by studying spirit mediumship among Parsi devotees of the Sidi saints, a phenomenon which she likens to the expansion of *ngoma* communities in eastern African contexts.

Shroff details the events of the *'urs* of the Sidi saints at a memorial shrine (*cillā*) patronized by Parsi devotees of the saints in the article "Goma is Going On: Sidis of Gujarat" (2013). Here, she describes the relationship between the devotional music performance and spirit mediumship. Devotional songs (*jikar*) of a slower tempo are sung to drummed accompaniment while participants are seated; *baiṭhī* (seated) *dhammāl* progresses to *khaṛī* (standing) *dhammāl* when the speed of the drumming increases, *jikar* of a faster tempo are sung, and dancing begins. *Khaṛī dhammāl* culminates in possession: participants approach the spirit mediums of Bava Gor and Mai Misra to ask questions or to receive blessings, as is often the case during the *Khicaṛī*

ritual. Shroff presents scenes from *urs* rituals and features a Mumbai Sidi woman's account of her experiences as a medium of Mai Misra in her 2005 documentary, *Ancestral Links*, the second film in the two-part series, *Voices of the Sidis: Two Documentaries*.

In "Spiritual Journeys: Parsis and Sidi Saints" (2008), a chapter she contributes to Basu's edited volume, Shroff presents a more detailed picture of spirit mediumship and devotees' relationships with the Sidi saints at "the Parsi *cillā*," as well as a history of this shrine and its founders. Here, we learn that devotees relate to the spirit medium of Bava Gor as an embodiment of the saint himself; love for the medium and for the Sidi ancestor-saint converges, as the former facilitates devotees' relationship with the latter. Shroff also highlights the way in which Parsi devotees' receipt of mediumship as a gift from the Sidi ancestor-saints parallels the development of *ngoma* communities in East Africa. Shroff compares the dynamic between Parsi devotees and the medium of Bava Gor at the Parsi *cillā* to Basu's analysis of the initiatory relationships between a ritual specialist who serves as the teacher (*mur'sid*) of a novice (*bālkā/bālkī*) in the Sidi community. Shroff contextualizes the Sidi ritual initiation (*pyālā pilānā*) ceremony with reference to Sidis' induction into the Rifai Sufi order by the Rifai *pīr* in her unpublished documentary, *Sidis of Gujarat: Maintaining Traditions and Building Community*.

Shroff offers a panoramic view of the veneration of the Sidi ancestor-saints in Mumbai. In addition to her study of devotional life at the Parsi *cillā*, she considers the family histories, socioeconomic status, and pressing concerns of Gujarati Sidis who migrated to Mumbai. In *Ancestral Links* (2005), Shroff interviews the family of the Mumbai Sidi medium of Mai Misra. The medium's late father, a ritual practitioner and respected caretaker of a shrine of Gaibun Shah Bava, names the "Sidi Rifai *Silsilā*" as the Sufi lineage (*silsilā*) in which the Sidi devotional

tradition participates. Shroff expounds his perspectives on Sidi identity and national belonging in “Sidis of Mumbai: Negotiating Identities between Mumbai and Gujarat” (2007), as she considers the perspectives and experiences of the Sidi caretakers of two other Sufi saint in shrines Mumbai. The article introduces the reader to a Mumbai shrine of Bava Gor whose material culture evidences the tradition’s diasporan character as its instruments journey across the sea.

Amy Catlin-Jairazbhoy’s ethnomusicological research centers on the devotional music of the Sidi Sufi tradition. She traces the African origins of its instruments and thoroughly documents its canonical songs and performance tradition in textual, audio and visual format. Like Shroff, Catlin-Jairazbhoy’s methodological approach foregrounds Sidis’ perspectives and expertise: her participatory action research projects have established forums for Sidis from across Gujarat to circulate knowledge of their oral archive of devotional songs and technical skill in instrumental music performance. This has illuminated the internal diversity of Sidi devotional music and has preserved the formerly fading voice of one Sidi instrument as well as of devotional songs which often pass on with the community elders who know them. Catlin-Jairazbhoy has curated international tours of the Ratanpur Sidi performance troupe, has produced and circulated a CD of their music, and has produced two documentary films based on her research.

Catlin-Jairazbhoy’s film *From Africa... to India: Sidi Music in the Indian Ocean Diaspora* (2003) is the first published documentary on Sidi music as an African diasporan art form. The documentary depicts scenes of spirit mediumship, during which participants exchange greetings in Swahili with the possessing saint. Her article, “Sidi Music in Western India: Remembering an African Heritage” (2010), highlights the African origins of the instruments

central to the Sidi devotional music performance. She presents the linguistic origins of the name of the most sacred drum in Sidi *gomā*, the *muggarmān*, and the centrality of this type of drum to African *ngoma* traditions. In so doing, she articulates Sidi *gomā* as an African diasporan musical tradition in India. In “A Sidi CD? Globalisation of Music and the Sacred” (2004), her contribution to the volume she co-edits with Edward Alpers, Catlin-Jairazbhoy presents the first full transliteration and translation of a *baiṭhī dhammāl jikar* to be published in a scholarly work. She turns to linguistic analysis of this *jikars* in “Sacred Pleasure, Pain and Transformation in African Indian Sidi Sufi Ritual and Performance” (2012), noting linguist Zeenathunissa Sajjada’s identification of the language of the *baiṭhī dhammāl jikar* noted above as 19th-century Dakani Urdu and that of another as 14th-century Dakani Urdu. Catlin-Jairazbhoy also observes the presence of Swahili in various *jikars*.

Archives and Research Methods

The dissertation builds on the methodological approaches and analyses of Basu, Shroff, and Catlin-Jairazbhoy. It presents data drawn from ethnographic research methods including participant-observation in ritual events at Sidi saint shrines as well as formal and informal interviews in Hindi-Urdu, Gujarati, and English with ritual specialists and mediums of Sidi saints. Each chapter of the dissertation engages philological analysis of one or more Sidi devotional songs, contextualizing the songs with reference to data gleaned from participant-observation in ritual events. This combined philological and ethnographic approach to the study of the Sidi devotional songs highlights their functional role in ritual and elucidates the mechanics of these rituals as they facilitate devotional relationships with the saints.

The dissertation also consults primary and secondary sources in Hindi-Urdu, Gujarati, and Arabic to historicize the figures of the ancestor-saints at the center of the tradition. This analysis supports the dissertation's aim of parsing the historiographic potential of the Sidi tradition regarding the development of a multivocal religious tradition informed by the African heritage of its practitioners and the material and religious cultures of its environment.

Textual Archive

The textual archive for this study incorporates material media found at the tomb (*mazār*) of Bava Gor in Ratanpur, Bharuch and at memorial shrines of Bava Gor and Mai Misra throughout Gujarat, including Dongri, Mumbai; Gondal, Rajkot; and Ahmedabad. These include plaques in Urdu, written in the Gujarati script, that present Bava Gor's biography and detail his initiation lineage in the Rifai Sufi order. The biography of Bava Gor appears to be an adaptation of a page sourced from the text *Khalif-i Shaikhu'l-Islam* composed by Saiyid Nuruddin Ashrafi.³⁵ Rumanaben Myava, the lead ritual specialist and musician of the memorial shrine of Bava Gor in Ahmedabad, has preserved fragments of an Urdu text that records another biography of Bava Gor; the document originally belonged to her maternal grandfather. The dissertation incorporates a poem (*qasida*) in praise of Mai Sahib Ma (a title of respect generally used for Mai Misra) found at a shrine dedicated to "Ma Saheb Ma" in Gondal, Rajkot. This praise poem is composed in Urdu transliterated in the Gujarati script.

In addition to the lineages engraved on plaques at the Ratanpur and Dongri shrines, the dissertation consults an Arabic genealogy of saints (*shajra*) of the Rifai order from the Rifai

³⁵ I have not been able to identify the publisher of this text. I am grateful to PhD candidate Sofia Péquignot of the University of Toulouse-Jean Jaurès for providing photographs of this biography, the Rifai genealogy, and the engraved plaques at the Ratanpur shrine.

headquarters (*khānaqāh*) in Baroda, Gujarat. The textual archive for this study also includes a Gujarati translation of the eighteenth-century Persian history of Gujarat, *Mirāt-i Ahmadi*, consulted for its entries on Bava Gor and Haji Baba Rajab, a Rifai saint in Bava Gor's initiation lineage whom Sidis also remember as an Afrodescendant. These primary and secondary sources support the dissertation's analysis of the ancestor-saints as historical figures and of the Sidi devotional tradition as it operates within the larger context of the Rifai Sufi order of Gujarat.

Oral and Audio-Visual Archives

Archival research for the dissertation was conducted at the Archives and Research Center for Ethnomusicology (ARCE) in Gurgaon, Haryana on June 12, 2017.³⁶ Amy Catlin-Jairazbhoy granted access to her DVC recording, "Rumanaben DVD 104 Sidi Jikrs Recorded in Ahmedabad Feb. 3, 2004. President Hotel," duplicated and catalogued at ARCE as "NA 2004, DVC 11, 3 Feb. 2004." ARCE staff kindly provided a digital copy of the recording under the title: "Nazir Ali and Amy Catlin Jairazbhoy Collection, 1:388:05." This is a video recording made by Dr. Amy Catlin-Jairazbhoy and the late Dr. Nazir Ali Jairazbhoy of Rumanaben Myava privately performing Sidi devotional songs called *jikar*, *jikrī*, or *jikro* at the President Hotel in Ahmedabad. Rumanaben Myava is the lead ritual specialist and lead ritual musician of the Sidi community of Ahmedabad.

Research at the ARCE produced another video recording made by Drs. Jairazbhoy and Catlin-Jairazbhoy. This recording, titled "Nazir Ali and Amy Catlin Jairazbhoy Collection, 1:386:05 and 1:387:05," features Rumanaben Myava performing and discussing *jikar* in her

³⁶ Heartfelt thanks to Shubha Chaudhuri and Sangeeta ji for their kind assistance during the research process.

home with her late mother of 106 years of age, Sakinaben Myava. With the help of her mother, Rumanaben transcribed more than the legendary 125 songs of the *jikar* oral corpus.³⁷

I titled this dissertation project, “Songs to the African Saints of India,” with a plan to transcribe, translate, and publish the entire 125-*jikar* corpus. Rumanaben Myava firmly objected to this, asserting that a published transcription of the *jikar* corpus should only circulate within the Sidi community.³⁸ Shroff’s interviews with Sidi elders throughout Gujarat reveal that intertwined notions of sacredness, orality, and property curtail the written publication of the *jikar* corpus among Sidis, let alone for an academic audience.³⁹ The elders’ perspectives shed light on the sensitivity required for academic research that is productive yet respects the boundaries of a marginalized community that generously allows ‘outsiders’ access to its cultural heritage.

Honoring Rumanaben’s request, I have recalibrated the weight of the *jikar* in this dissertation. I engage in philological analysis of Sidi devotional songs, including but not limited to the *jikar*, and combine this analysis with data from ethnographic field research to demonstrate the functional role of these songs in select ritual contexts. This approach to the study of the Sidi

³⁷ Amy Catlin-Jairazbhoy, “Sidi Music in Western India: Remembering an African Heritage,” in *Remembered Rhythms: Essays on Diaspora and the Music of India*, eds. Shubha Chaudhuri and Anthony Seeger, (London: Seagull Books, 2010), 146.

³⁸ Rumanaben believes that providing a copy of the *jikar* corpus to each local Sidi community of Gujarat would preserve this oral archive of cultural knowledge. An advocate of participatory action research, Dr. Catlin-Jairazbhoy has already taken steps to support this. Other Sidi ritual musicians have also contributed local variations of Rumanaben’s *jikar* to the compilation. See Amy Catlin-Jairazbhoy, “Sacred Pleasure, Pain and Transformation in African Indian Sidi Sufi Ritual and Performance.” *Performing Islam* 1:1 (2012), 86.

³⁹ Shroff interviews one Sidi elder in Surat who agrees with Rumanaben’s sentiments. Yet his statements imply that the late chief ritual musician of the Sidi community (*naṅāsī*) based at the tomb-shrine of Bava Gor in Ratanpur disagreed with the idea of writing down these orally transmitted songs. The elder laments that knowledge of the songs will disappear after elders like himself pass on, as the late *naṅāsī* already had. Shroff also interviews a Sidi woman who cares for the memorial shrine of Mai Misra in Bhavnagar; this woman also objects to writing down the *jikars*, remarking that they are a “natural gift” (“*qudratī bakhśīs*”) bequeathed to Sidis, and that youths are expected to learn them (aurally). In Shroff’s unpublished documentary, *Sidis of Gujarat: Maintaining Traditions and Building Community*.

devotional songs engages them as an archive preserving knowledge about the ritual practices and material culture of the Sidi devotional tradition and preserving memories of ancestral migration and of the ancestor-saints.

Although the most sacred genre, the *jikars* do not comprise the sole genre of Sidi devotional song with which the dissertation engages. Participant-observation of Mai Misra's *Khicari* ceremonies in Ratanpur on January 25 and 26, 2019 revealed fourteen songs, distinct from the *jikars*, that Sidi women in Ratanpur perform in honor of Mai Misra.⁴⁰ I visited the daughter of Ratanpur's current *naṅgāsī* who led the performance of these songs during the *Khicari* ceremonies. She narrated fourteen songs for me at her conjugal home in Mehsana district of Gujarat on October 14 and October 21, 2019. Rumanaben identifies two of these songs as *garbā*, a Gujarati genre of song and dance performed in honor of a goddess during Navratri, and identifies the other Ratanpur *khicari* songs simply as *gīt* ("song, praise songs").⁴¹

Other oral archives accessed during field research include elders' narratives concerning the origin stories of the Sidi ancestor-saints, and a genre of songs performed during a bride's

⁴⁰ McGregor, *The Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary*, 266. Amy Catlin-Jairazbhoy has kindly shared a video recording of Sidi women singing in Ratanpur on February 13, 2018. This recording features some of the songs that I transcribed in Mehsana. I did not make audio recordings of songs performed during participant-observation of Mai Misra's *khicari* ceremonies, due to the private, exclusive nature of these events. I was also advised by a Sidi ritual specialist in Baroda not to take photographs or video recordings during these ceremonies. The recording of Rumanaben's *jikar* performance accessed at the ARCE features seven songs distinctly associated with Mai Misra that are generally performed during *khicari* ceremonies in Ahmedabad. I made audio recordings of songs chanted during 'urs events in Dongri, Mumbai; Kuda, Bhavnagar; and Vadva, Bhavnagar.

⁴¹ Rumanaben explains that families used to perform Mai Misra's *garbā* songs at wedding parties, a practice that has dwindled with the popularity of hiring disc jockeys for such events. Shroff identifies the woman she interviews about the *jikar*, described above, as a *garbā* composer and performer. The woman describes "*gīt*" as songs Sidis compose as emotional expressions of praise of the ancestor-saints; the woman differentiates these from the orally transmitted *jikar* corpus. For *qawwālī* as a devotional music genre performed by Sidis, see Amy Catlin-Jairazbhoy, "Sacred Pleasure," 83-85.

turmeric application ceremony (*pīṭhī* or *haldī*). Like the devotional songs, *pīṭhī* songs also incorporate motifs associated with Mai Misra.

In the absence of an appended transcription and translation of the *jikars*, I describe below the primary linguistic, structural, and thematic features of the eighty-six *jikars* recorded in the ARCE video “1:388:05.” Rumanaben’s performance of these songs at the President Hotel in “1:388:05” and at her home in “1:386:05” and “1:387:05” attest thirty-three variations. These variations speak to factors such as memory, spontaneity, virtuosity, and the traditional call-and-response performance format (or the absence thereof) as they impact the live *jikar* performance. These variations also point toward the diversity of this oral corpus as it is remembered and performed by the lead ritual musicians of local Sidi communities throughout Gujarat.

The songs are mostly composed in Hindi-Urdu, though two songs performed in the “1:388:05” recording feature Gujarati lyrics, and approximately fifteen songs in this recording feature at least one word or phrase of African origin. One such song features a complete sentence in Swahili, and another repeats Swahili phrases; the third chapter of the dissertation addresses the lyrics and themes of these two songs. Two songs include the Arabic word *marḥabā* (“welcome”), while many of the songs incorporate formulaic Arabic phrases including *al-ḥamdu li’llāh* (“praise be to Allah”), *bismillāh* (“in the name of Allah”), *ar-raḥmān ar-raḥīm* (“the Gracious, the Merciful”), and *lā ilāhā il’allāh* (“there is no god but Allah”). As these expressions suggest, the major unifying theme of the songs is remembrance and praise of Allah, the Prophet, and the Sidi ancestor-saints Bava Gor, Mai Misra, Bava Habash, and Hazrat Bilal. The songs also name the revered household of the Prophet, including Hazrat Ali, Bibi Fatima, Hasan, and Husain; the

saint Lal Shahbaz Qalandar or “Mast Qalandar/Jhulelal” of Sindh; and other Sidi saints, such as Sidi Sahib of Ahmedabad and Ai Mai of Rander, Surat.

The theme of remembrance highlights the ritual purpose of the *jikar* genre, whose name refers to the Sufi practice of remembrance (Arabic, *dhikr*; Urdu, *zīkr*) of Allah, the Prophet, and the Sufi master (*pīr*) that may involve the repetition of Qur’anic verses, names of God, and other formulae.⁴² Catlin-Jairazbhoy observes, “The underlying structure of most of the patterns is the rhythm of the unspoken *jikr Allah hu, Nabi ji* (He is Allah, respected Prophet)... This repetition is the essence of *jikr*...”⁴³ The image of the mad Sufi saint ‘intoxicated’ by the love of Allah appears in songs which refer to the Sidi ancestor-saints in such terms (*divānā/mastānā*). The *jikar* also refer to Bava Gor as “the king of Ratanpur” (*Ratanpurī rājā*), highlighting the conceptual overlap between a saint’s tomb-shrine (*dargāh*) and a royal court (*darbār*).⁴⁴ These rhythms, images, and themes underscore the Sidi *jikar* corpus as a genre of Sufi devotional song composed in a Hindi-Urdu vernacular accentuated with Gujarati and Swahili verses.⁴⁵

In the recordings, Rumanaben and her mother identify certain songs as belonging to a subgenre called “*subbo ke jikar*” (“morning remembrance songs”), which are to be performed in the morning. Sakinaben also interrupts Rumanaben, stopping her from performing a certain song for the recording. This underscores notions of sacredness and property that inform Sidis’ presentation of the genre to foreign scholars.

⁴² Amy Catlin-Jairazbhoy, “A Sidi CD?: Globalisation of Music and the Sacred,” in *Sidis and Scholars: Essays on African Indians*, eds. Amy Catlin-Jairazbhoy and Edward Alpers (Noida, UP: Rainbow Publishers, 2004), 194.

⁴³ Amy Catlin-Jairazbhoy, “A Sidi CD?,” 193.

⁴⁴ Bellamy, *The Powerful Ephemeral*, 9.

⁴⁵ Linguist Abdulaziz Lodhi of Uppsala University is analyzing the *jikar* corpus and may identify other African languages attested therein.

Places named in the songs include Mecca; Medina; Janjira, the former princely state ruled by Sidi nawabs for centuries; Baghdad, one of two possible places in Iraq where Bava Gor is remembered to have been initiated into the Rifai Sufi order (the other is Basra); Mombasa, a coastal Kenyan city involved in Indian Ocean trade networks; Muscat, the seat of the Omani sultanate involved in the trade and enslavement of eastern Africans, especially on the Zanzibar islands; Zanzibar; and the hills of Ratanpur where Bava Gor, Mai Misra, and Bava Habash are entombed.⁴⁶ The Sidi clan (*aṭak*) name “Makua,” associated with an ethno-linguistic group in Tanzania, also appears in the songs.⁴⁷ Recurrent motifs include the hills (*ḍūmgar*) of Ratanpur and the lions (*śerā/cītā*) that roam Ratanpur’s forests and to whom one of the songs compares Sidi youths.

Terms associated with the Sidi devotional tradition comprise another category of images recurrent in the songs. These items are especially important to the *urs* festivities, such as standards (*niśān*), frankincense resin (*lobān*), sandalwood paste (*sandal*), a special drink called *bojā* (discussed in chapter three), Mai Misra’s water-pot (*ghaṭ*), and sheep or goats offered in sacrifice (“*ghemṭā*,” “*bujī*”).⁴⁸ The instruments, players, and rhythms of the Sidi devotional song-dance performance called *dhammāl* or *gomā* also feature in the songs, including a small drum held under the armpit (*damāmā*), the kettledrum (*naubat*), the musical bow (*maluṅgā*), the *tambolā* rhythm, the now obsolete Nubian lyre (*naṅgās*) and the term for its player, which now refers to the chief ritual musician of the Sidi community who leads *dhammāl* in Ratanpur, the

⁴⁶ Rumanaben performs a *jikar* naming Zanzibar in “1:386:05-1:387:05.”

⁴⁷ For more on such clan names, see Edward Alpers, “Recollecting Africa: Diasporic Memory in the Indian Ocean World.” *African Studies Review* 43:1 (2000): 92.

⁴⁸ The term “*ghemṭā*” is from Gujarati, modified with the Hindi masculine singular suffix *-ā*. The term “*bujī*” is a modified pronunciation of the Swahili word “*buzi*.”

naṅgāsi.⁴⁹ The African origins of a number of these instruments, and of the “movement styles” of the ecstatic *dhammāl* dance during which they are played, underscore the African cultural heritage of the Sidi *dhammāl* song-dance performance, as does its alternate name *gomā* (from the Swahili term *ngoma* meaning ‘drum/drum dance’).⁵⁰

Before situating the Sidi *jikar* corpus against the backdrop of premodern Sufi devotional poetry of Gujarat, it is important to first understand the context within which the *jikar* are generally performed. *Dhammāl* is the devotional context for the performance of *jikar*. The *jikar*, “*Avale Bismillāh* (Beginning in the Name of God),” ubiquitously begins the *dhammāl* performance. This may be followed by the *jikar*, “*Salvāle Nabiyo* (Blessings upon the Prophet),” though Rumanaben notes that this *jikar* should precede “*Avale Bismillah*.”⁵¹ The *jikar* are performed in a call-and-response format between the lead ritual musician and the chorus of participants. The lead ritual musician may generally direct *dhammāl* participants through the performance of seven *jikar*, though audience participation may extend the duration of the performance.

The *dhammāl* performance begins with all participants seated for “*baiṭhī* (seated) *dhammāl*,” whose slower rhythms crescendo into a faster, standing sequence called “*kharī* (standing) *dhammāl*.”⁵² During *kharī dhammāl*, participants form a circle that rotates in a counterclockwise direction. Male performers (*dhammālī*) move, often comically or theatrically,

⁴⁹ Amy Catlin-Jairazbhoy, “A Sidi CD?,” 187-189, 192, 194. Amy Catlin-Jairazbhoy, “Sidi Music,” 138-141.

⁵⁰ Amy Catlin-Jairazbhoy, “A Sidi CD?,” 186, 192.

⁵¹ Rumanaben performs the verse, “*Aval nabiyo salvāle, zāhir nabiyo salvāle* (Beginning with blessings upon the Prophet, blessings upon the manifest Prophet)” before performing “*Avale Bismillah*” in the 1:388:05 recording.

⁵² For more on seated and standing *dhammāl*, see Amy Catlin-Jairazbhoy, “Sacred Pleasure,” 85-91. I learned of two types of *dhammāl* rhythms: “*ādhī* (half) *dhammāl*” and “*pūrī* (full) *dhammāl*” which is described as a “double” meter. Rumanaben explains that Sidis may be called to play *dhammāl* for the funeral of a Saiyid *pīr*, and at that time they perform the “*ādhī dhammāl*” rhythm. *Dhammāl* may be performed at the mosque and the graveyard.

at the center of the circle, while female participants step rhythmically as they comprise the outer circle rotating counterclockwise around the male performers at the center.⁵³ The verbs used to describe the act of performing *jikar* and performing *dhammal* are “*jikar bolnā* (to speak/say *jikar*)” and “*dhammāl khelnā* (to play *dhammāl*).” The verbs “*gānā* (to sing)” and “*nācnā* (to dance)” are never used, underscoring the *dhammāl* performance as an Islamic devotional practice of remembrance (*jikar*) of Allah, the Prophet and his household, and Sufi saints, within the framework of the Sufi practice of *samā* (ritual audition of devotional music).⁵⁴

The *jikar* corpus performed during *dhammāl* is an oral archive of devotional songs that facilitate the Sufi ritual practice of remembrance. It is important to contextualize the *jikar* corpus as an oral genre contributed by Indians of African ancestry to “Hindavī” Sufi poetry.⁵⁵ The discussion below will survey the linguistic identification of two longer *jikar* performed during *baiṭhī dhammāl*, and the implications of this identification with regard to the *jikar* corpus as an oral genre of Hindavi Sufi poetry. However, it is important to note a particularly striking feature of one *jikar*, as it suggests a parallel with a significant genre of Hindavi Sufi poetry that, though

⁵³ The term “*dhammālī*” refers not only to *dhammāl* players, but to Sidi men in general. Sidi women are called “companions” (*saheliyām*) of Mai Misra. Rumanaben explains that mishaps with *dhammāl* instruments, like a broken *maluṅgā* string or a fallen *dammāmā* drum, or a fallen ‘Mai Misra’ coconut shell rattle, are considered omens (*āgāhī*) portending the death of a Sidi man or woman, respectively. A Sidi elder Shroff interviews in her documentary, *Voices of the Sidis: Tradition of Fakirs* (Irvine, California, 2005), notes that a home without a *maluṅgā* cannot truly be called a Sidi household. This points to the centrality of the *dhammāl* sacred devotional music performance, with its associated instruments and *jikar* repertoire, to conceptualizations of community identity among Sidis.

⁵⁴ See Orsini, “Krishna is the Truth,” 224-225, for comments on Sufis’ defense of music and *samā*.

⁵⁵ See Orsini, “Krishna is the Truth,” 223, for commentary on the oral transmission of Hindavi Sufi lyrics.

written, was performed orally in the context of Sufi ritual audition, the generation of ecstatic states, and the cultivation of the Sufi initiate.⁵⁶

The *jikar* under consideration, “*Ghaṭ Bharūmgī Āj*,” incorporates a short head-to-foot description (*śikh-nakh varṇan/sarāpā*) of Mai Misra. This literary technique is a conventional set-piece of the Avadhi Sufi romance (*premākhyān*) genre.⁵⁷ The genre’s earliest canonical text, *Cāndāyan* (1379), was composed just four years before Bava Gor’s death, rendering its author a contemporary of the Habshi saint. The composition of the next canonical romance, *Mirigavati* (1503), was sponsored by the Jaunpur sultanate. A eunuch in the employ of the Delhi sultan, Malik Sarwar governed Jaunpur in 1394 and became its sovereign ruler in 1398, and is disputed to have been Habshi.⁵⁸ Malik Sarwar’s identity as a Habshi would connect the legacy of the Habshi military elites of premodern India with Hindavi Sufi poetry composed during this period.

Linguists Zeenathunissa Sajjada and Oudeshrani Bawa of Hyderabad have identified the language of “*Avale Bismillāh*” as nineteenth-century Dakani, and that of another *baiṭhī dhammāl jikar*, “*Ambā ni Vangā*,” as fourteenth-century Dakani.⁵⁹ The identification of the language of these two *jikars* as Dakani recalls the literary contributions of Malik Khushnud, the Habshi court poet who composed allegorical poems (*mathnawī*) in Dakani under the patronage of the

⁵⁶ Orsini comments on the recitation of the Hindavi Sufi romances in “Krishna is the Truth,” 223. See also Thomas de Bruijn, *Ruby in the Dust: Poetry and History in Padmāvat by the South Asian Sufi Poet Muḥammad Jāyasī* (Leiden University Press, 2012), 79.

⁵⁷ Manjhan, *Madhumālātī: An Indian Sufi Romance*. Translated by Aditya Behl and Simon Weightman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), xviii. The composition dates of *Cāndāyan* and *Mirigāvati* are given on page lvii.

⁵⁸ Kenneth X. Robbins and John McLeod, “Appendix: Identifying Africans in India,” in *African Elites in India: Habshi Amarat*, eds. Kenneth X. Robbins and John McLeod (Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing, 2006), 254.

⁵⁹ See Amy Catlin-Jairazbhoy, “Sacred Pleasure, Pain and Transformation in African Indian Sidi Sufi Ritual and Performance,” in *Performing Islam* 1:1 (2012): 86. The lyrics of “*Avale Bismillāh*” as performed in Ratanpur today are dated to the early twentieth century, attributed to the grandfather of the current *naṅgāsī*; these lyrics vary only slightly with Rumanaben’s performance of the *jikar* in the 1:388:05 recording.

Golconda sultanate in the seventeenth century.⁶⁰ Just as the Ethiopian-born Malik Ambar, de facto ruler of the Ahmadnagar sultanate and contemporary of Malik Khushnud, would have spoken (Dakani) Urdu in addition to Arabic and Oromo, the Habshi elites of these Deccan sultanates would have communicated in Dakani, the Hindavi lingua franca of the Deccan.⁶¹

The Habshi elites of the Gujarat sultanate would likewise have spoken the Hindavi vernacular of their region, Gujri, which in some written attestations is nearly indistinguishable from Dakani.⁶² Soldiers, Sufis, and civil servants migrating from Dehli brought various dialects of the Dihlavi or Hindavi lingua franca to Gujarat and the Deccan in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.⁶³ As they evolved in Gujarat and the Deccan, these closely-related northern dialects came to be called Gujri and Dakani, respectively.⁶⁴ The fact that Gujri writings attest close similarity to Dakani and are sometimes almost indistinguishable from it exemplifies the common origin of both dialects.⁶⁵ Scholars and composers of Gujri literature from Gujarat often settled in the Deccan, particularly in Bijapur, perhaps drawn by opportunities for courtly patronage of Dakani literature; this may also account for similarities between Gujri and Dakani.⁶⁶ While courtly patronage of Dakani contributed to its development as a literary language, Gujri, on the other hand was largely the domain of Sufis in sixteenth-century Gujarat.⁶⁷

⁶⁰ Robbins and McLeod, *African Elites*, 37.

⁶¹ Omar Ali, *Malik Ambar: Power and Slavery across the Indian Ocean* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 8, 25, 32.

⁶² Regarding the relationship between Gujarati and Dakani, see David Matthews, "Dakani Language and Literature: 1500-1700 AD," PhD diss., School of Oriental and African Studies (University of London, 1976), 2, 5.

⁶³ Shamsur Rahman Faruqi, *Early Urdu Literary Culture and History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 72. Matthews, "Dakani Language," 169.

⁶⁴ Matthews, "Dakani Language," 5.

⁶⁵ Matthews, "Dakani Language," 2.

⁶⁶ Matthews, "Dakani Language," 2, 38-39.

⁶⁷ Matthews, "Dakani Language," 38-39

One genre of Sufi poetry current in Gujarat from at least the fifteenth century is called “*jikrī*.” The name of this genre is derived from the Sufi practice of “remembrance” (*zikr*) as described above. *Jikrī* were sung to instrumental accompaniment in the Sufi practice of ritual audition (*samā*).⁶⁸ The *jikrī* genre was current in fourteenth century Delhi; one of the first *jikrī* composers in Gujarat was Shaikh Bahauddin Bajan (1388-1506), born in Ahmedabad where his grandfather had settled after leaving Delhi.⁶⁹ Bajan’s *jikrī* were sung and accompanied instrumentally according to Hindustani musical modes (*rāgas*), and incorporated praise of the *pīr* (Pīr-e Dastgīr) and his *dargāh*, and Bajan’s homeland of Gujarat. The next inheritor of the genre was Qazi Mahmud Daryai (1415-1534), a popular figure in Ahmedabad who was most famous for his *jikrī*.⁷⁰ Daryai travelled in the Deccan before returning to Gujarat, where he died.⁷¹ While Bajan simply called the language in which he wrote “Hindī,” “Hindvī,” or “Dihlavī,” the term “Gujrī” was generally preferred by Daryai’s time.⁷² The origins of the *jikrī* genre and the Hindavi language in Delhi, the genre’s perpetuation and the development of Hindavi into “Gujri” in Gujarat, and the itineraries of Daryai and of Bajan’s grandfather highlight the historical flows of people, languages, and literatures between Delhi, Gujarat, and the Deccan in the premodern period.

With this context in mind, the linguistic identification of “*Ambā ni Vangā*” as fourteenth-century Dakani underscores two important points. The first hypothesis is that the Sidi *jikar* corpus comprises an oral genre of Sufi devotional poetry that participates in the Hindavi/Gujri

⁶⁸ Matthews, “Dakani Language,” 252. Faruqi, *Early Urdu*, 72.

⁶⁹ Faruqi, *Early Urdu*, 71-2.

⁷⁰ Dates attested in Faruqi, *Early Urdu*, 76.

⁷¹ Matthews, “Dakani Language,” 39.

⁷² Faruqi, *Early Urdu*, 71-72, 76.

Sufi *jikrī* genre of premodern Gujarat. The easiest parallel to observe is that the Sidi *jikar* are also called *jikrī*. The themes of the Sidi *jikar* corpus align with those of Bajan’s *jikrī*, from the central focus of remembrance of God, the Prophet, and Sufi saints; to the praise of Ratanpur where the Sidi saints are entombed; to its references to potential Sidi ‘homelands,’ locations associated with Afrodescendants’ passage throughout the northwestern Indian ocean world. Both Bajan’s *jikrī* and the Sidi *jikar* are performed to musical accompaniment as a Sufi practice of ritual remembrance (*zikr*) and ritual audition (*samā*).

The second significant point which the linguistic identification of “*Ambā ni Vangā*” raises is that this *jikar* was composed contemporaneously with the lifetime of Bava Gor, or at least on the heels of the saint’s entombment. The *Mirāt-i Ahmadī* (1748-1762), a Persian history of the Gujarat sultanate composed by Gujarat’s revenue minister Muhammad Ali Khan, records the year of Bava Gor’s death as 785 A.H. (1383 C.E.) and Ratanpur as his burial site.⁷³ Bava Gor would have thus died in Bharuch, Gujarat only five years before Shaikh Bajan was born in Ahmedabad. Bava Gor is documented in the Rifai genealogy (*shajra*) as having initiated disciples, including Bava Habash and Mai Misra; the Ashrafi-Curzon biography noted earlier in this section lists Bava Gor’s initiated representatives (*khalīfa*) as Bava Habash, Said Rumi, Baba Sidi Hilal Dariyabadi, and Baba Sidi Miftah Dhammali. Should any of these initiates have

⁷³ Muhammad Ali Khan, *Tarikh-i Auliya-i Gujarat: Mirat-i Ahmadi*, translated by Qazi Muhammad Nizamuddin Chishti Faruki (Ahmedabad: N.B.S. Book Depot, 2012), 168. For an overview of the *Mirāt-i Ahmadī*, see James Bird, “Analysis of the *Mirat-i-Ahmadi*, A Political and Statistical History of the Province of Gujarat,” *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, 1:1 (1834): 117-119.

survived Bava Gor, living past the late fourteenth century into the fifteenth century, would they have composed the *jikrī*, “*Ambā ni Vangā*,” in remembrance of Bava Gor?⁷⁴

The names of three of these initiates suggest that they were Sidis. Would they have spread the fame of Bava Gor amongst other Habshis of Gujarat? The historian Haji ad-Dabir, employed by elite Habshi patrons in the Gujarat sultanate in the mid-sixteenth century and in the Khandesh sultanate in the early seventeenth-century, records in his seventeenth-century “officially-sponsored, pro-Habshi” Arabic history of Gujarat that Sultan Mahmud Khilji embarked on a pilgrimage to the grave of “the saint of God, Bābā Ghor” in the year 1451.⁷⁵ How did Sultan Mahmud Khilji know of Bava Gor’s tomb? If Haji ad-Dabir knew of the tomb of a Habshi Sufi saint in Gujarat as a pilgrimage site, and he himself was employed by Habshi elites of Gujarat and its southern neighbor Khandesh, these elites likely knew of Bava Gor’s tomb, too.

Did this fourteenth-century *jikar* ever circulate among the Habshi elites of Gujarat, or southward to Khandesh or the Deccan? What did the Habshi courtier Sidi Sa‘ad sing as he played the (presumably Ethiopian) lyre in Malik Ambar’s court?⁷⁶ Is there any connection to be

⁷⁴ Many questions arise from this acknowledgement of Bava Gor’s lineage (*silsila*) of initiates. Does the name of one initiate, “Dharmali,” have any associations with the *dhammāl* tradition? Where did these disciples go after Bava Gor’s death? Did they remain near Bava Gor’s tomb, or commemorate his death anniversary (*urs*) every year? Aside from Bava Habash and Mai Misra, whose tombs are in Ratanpur, are they buried in tomb-shrines of their own; and if so, where?

⁷⁵ Abd Allah Muhammad ibn Umar Ulughkhani, *Zafar Ul Wālih Bi Muzaffar Wa Ālihi*. Translated by M. F. Lokhandwala. [1st ed.] (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1970), 4. Fitzroy André Baptiste, John McLeod, and Kenneth X. Robbins, “Africans in Medieval North India, Bengal, and Gujarat,” in *African Elites in India: Habshi Amarat*, eds. Kenneth X. Robbins and John McLeod (Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing, 2006), 126. Mehrdad Shokoohy, “The Sidi Sayyid – or Sidi Said – Mosque in Ahmedabad,” in *African Elites in India: Habshi Amarat*, eds. Kenneth X. Robbins and John McLeod (Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing, 2006), 159.

⁷⁶ For commentary on the Habshi lyrist Sidi Sa‘ad and the difference between the Ethiopian and Nubian lyres, see Jazmin Graves, “Through the Eyes of the Lyre: A Transoceanic Perspective on the Sidi Sufi Devotional Tradition of Western India,” in *Afro-South Asia in the Global African Diaspora: African Diasporan Communities across South Asia*, eds. Omar H. Ali et al. (Greensboro: University of North Carolina at Greensboro Ethiopian and East African Studies Project), 101-103.

drawn between the unknown musical repertoire of this seventeenth-century Habshi lyricist (“*naṅgāsī*”) and the fact that, though the lyre is now obsolete among Sidis, the chief ritual musician (“*naṅgāsī*”) is hailed as the living repository of the Sidi community’s legendary 125 *jikars*?

Identification of the *jikar* “*Avale Bismillāh*” as nineteenth-century Dakani could suggest the participation of Afrodescendants (called “Chaush”) of Hyderabad in the Bava Gor tradition of Gujarat, as Africans were brought to Hyderabad at least in the nineteenth century.⁷⁷ The grandfather of Asoo Appa, the late mother of the current caretaker of the memorial shrine of Bava Gor in Dongri, was born in Hyderabad as were his ancestors. He traveled to Surat and then to Ahmedabad, where Asoo Appa was born; her father was a singer of *qawwālī*, a popular genre of Sufi devotional music.⁷⁸ Rumanaben explains that “Sidis” had moved to Ahmedabad from Hyderabad some time in the early twentieth century, and had established memorials for Sidi Sarur and Ma Sadiya, two “Sidi” saints of Hyderabad, in Ahmedabad’s Bava Gor *cillā*. Catlin-Jairazbhoy reports photographic evidence of the historical presence of the *naṅgās* in Hyderabad. Additional research will ascertain to what extent older generations of Afrodescendants in Hyderabad had contact with the Bava Gor tradition of Gujarat and the associated instruments and *jikar* repertoire of Sidi *dhammāl*.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ See Omar Khalidi, “The Habshis of Hyderabad,” in *African Elites in India: Habshi Amarat*, eds. Kenneth X. Robbins and John McLeod (Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing, 2006), 247-248.

⁷⁸ Beheroze Shroff, “Sidis in Mumbai: Negotiating Identities between Mumbai and Gujarat.” *African and Asian Studies*, 6 (2007), 311.

⁷⁹ Sofia Péquignot has interviewed Afrodescendants in Hyderabad and observes that some elders have memories of the Bava Gor tradition.

This discussion of the composition, linguistic and generic identification, and circulation of two *baiṭhī dhammāl jikar* has thus far questioned male Sufi initiates' roles as composers of one *jikar* and its potential circulation amongst the predominantly male Habshi elites of the Gujarat, Khandesh, and Deccan sultanates. The discussion now considers women's potential roles in preserving and perpetuating *jikar*, especially those associated with Mai Misra.

As the third chapter of the dissertation will demonstrate, certain *jikar* may be performed in select ritual contexts, such as a procession to a well in Kuda, Bhavnagar where Mai Misra's water-pot (*kalas* or *ghaṭ*) will be filled with water, or during the preparation of *bojā* inside Mai Misra's shrine in Bhavnagar. Seven Sidi women representing the seven companion saints (*saheliyām*) of Mai Misra together grind seven grains in the traditional preparation of *bojā*. Women traditionally grind these grains using a *cakkī* (millstone). While I have not learned of Sidi women reciting *jikar* while using the millstone, I witnessed a Sidi woman lead a chorus of other women in a repetitive *jikar* while men cooked the *bojā* and drummed inside of Mai Misra's shrine in Bhavnagar. I associate the latter event with the comparatively mundane context in which the songs of the *cakkī-nāmā* (grindstone song) genre of Dakani Sufi poetry would have been performed.

Male Chishti Sufis composed the *cakkī-nāmā* to convey Islamic teachings, including the Sufi practice of remembrance of God; women sang the *cakkī-nāmā* while performing the domestic chore of grinding grain.⁸⁰ Likewise, one repetitive *jikar* highlights grinding sandalwood to make sandalwood paste, which is applied to the saints' tombs and memorial shrines during the

⁸⁰ Richard Eaton, *Sufis of Bijapur, 1300-1700: Social Roles of Sufis in Medieval India* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977), 157-164.

Sandal, the eve of the *urs*.⁸¹ The association between certain repetitive *jikar* and certain ritual acts, such as the performance of a *jikar* about preparing *bojā* while *bojā* is being prepared, suggests that such ritual acts may serve as contexts for the recitation and preservation of *jikar*, akin to the functional context for the performance of the Dakani *cakki-nāmā*.

Field Sites & Research Methods

The memorial shrine of Bava Gor in Ahmedabad was the primary field research site for the dissertation. Rumanaben Myava patiently shared her vast knowledge of devotional songs and rituals, the history of the Sidi community in Ahmedabad, and the various issues with which the community contends as an ethnic and religious minority in Gujarat. I studied under Rumanaben's tutelage at her home and at the shrine; Jaibunisaben, Rumanaben's niece who oversees daily affairs at the shrine and tends to the needs of supplicants, also shared her experience and expertise.

Of the numerous additional field sites where I conducted research, Rumanaben and I visited two together. She guided me to five shrines in Patan, Gujarat on October 21, 2019, including the memorial shrine (*cillā*) of Ahmad Kabir Rifai in the same complex as the tomb-shrine (*dargāh*) of Haji Baba Rehan. Haji Baba Rehan is a Rifai Sufi whom Rumanaben identifies as a Sidi and as the spiritual teacher (*murśid*) of Bava Gor himself. Rumanaben introduced me to Saiyid Kamaluddin Rifai at an *urs* event in Ratanpur on September 26, 2019. "Kamaluddin Bava" is the revered leader (*pīr*) of the Rifai Sufi order (*tarīqa*) whose

⁸¹ I have not heard this *jikar* performed while a ritual specialist grinds sandalwood, though I have seen the latter.

headquarters (*khānaqāh*) are in Baroda, Gujarat; many Sidis of Gujarat and Mumbai, including Rumanaben, are his initiated disciples (*murīd*), and certain among them are his agents (*cauś*) and authorized representatives (*khalīfa*), including the current chief ritual musician (*naṅgāsī*) of the Sidi community in Ratanpur.

The terms of “evolving membership” in the study community heavily informed my field research methods.⁸² The opening vignette of this introduction demonstrates the way in which Sidi interlocutors almost invariably welcomed me on first sight as an extended family member. Though I approached the field as a doctoral candidate seeking to participate in ritual events as an objective observer, I was received in the field as a ‘Sidi’ from America who was researching Sidi history, culture, and religion. Rumanaben and her late sister observed that my nature aligned with the characteristics of their natal clan (*aṭak*), the Myava lineage, and informally ‘adopted’ me into their clan and family. This level of intimacy, to varying degrees, followed me throughout my travels in Gujarat and Mumbai and impacted my field research strategies.

Interlocutors enthusiastically supported my research objectives as they diligently reviewed material with me and guided my notetaking. At the same time, the degree of closeness that they expressed with me as a fellow ‘Sidi’ led some individuals to discuss their personal lives at length, even as I asked questions centered on my research. I therefore chose only to record audio of formal interviews and of elders’ narrations of specific episodes relevant to my research. Informal interviews generally took the tone of a youth learning from a grandparent, parent, or elder sibling; I made jottings during these interviews and expanded them into detailed field notes

⁸² Michael V. Angrosino, *Naturalistic Observation* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press Inc., 2007), 21.

after leaving each session. Starting such interviews with a few pointed questions and allowing the interviewee to direct the course of the conversation opened the door to areas of knowledge concerning the Sidi community and its traditions of which I was previously unaware.

In addition to broadening the scope of my field research objectives, the membership role that my interlocutors conferred upon me also opened the door to ritual events that were exclusive to Sidi women. This allowed for my presence as a participating observer in numerous performances of Mai Misra's *Khicaṛī*, a ritual widely observed in Gujarat and Mumbai in honor of Mai Misra. I attended four of these events in Ahmedabad, two in Ratanpur, and part of another in Junagadh. I observed two variations on the standard *Khicaṛī* ritual as performed in Ahmedabad, and two types of *Khicaṛī* ritual performed prior to a Sidi bride's wedding in Ratanpur; I discuss these in the first and second chapters of the dissertation. My acceptance by Sidi women as an Afrodescendant woman facilitated my exposure to versions of the *Khicaṛī* ritual not reported in the existing literature on the Sidi devotional tradition. These variations, as observed in Ahmedabad, disclose volumes regarding the multivocality of the Sidi Sufi tradition and its historiographic potential.

I visited Ratanpur on many occasions during my field research, including Mai Misra's *urs* celebrations on March 19, 2019 and the *Urs* of the *Caśma* on September 26, 2019. The latter is an annual celebration of a stream (*caśma*) associated with Bava Gor, held on the last Thursday of the Gujarati lunar month *Bhādarvo*. On October 22, 2019, I visited the *dargāh* of Mai Misra's supposed fiancé Sultanji Daud and the *dargāh* of Bava Gor's 'brother' Baba Rustam in Pariej, approximately forty kilometers from Ratanpur.

I made two attempts to visit the Rifai *pīr* Kamaluddin Bava at the Rifai *khānaqāh* in Baroda on December 12, 2018 and September 29, 2019. Though the first attempt was unsuccessful, I had the opportunity to meet and informally interview a Sidi ritual specialist in Baroda. I met Jamaluddin Bava, the esteemed younger brother of Kamaluddin Bava, on my second visit, and was subsequently granted the opportunity to meet and informally interview Kamaluddin Bava at that time.

I engaged in participant-observation of the ‘*urs*’ festivities at various shrines, including Ahmedabad from March 29 to April 2, 2018; Ratanpur on March 19, 2019; two sites in Bhavnagar district on March 16, 2019 and March 17, 2019; and Dongri, Mumbai on March 31, 2019. I recorded oral narratives of the saints’ origin stories at the memorial shrine of Bava Gor in Bhavnagar on March 16, 2019 and on October 23, 2019.⁸³

The Mumbai memorial shrine of Bava Gor patronized by a Parsi community of devotees proved to be an important secondary site for dissertation field research.⁸⁴ I engaged in participant-observation of the ‘*urs*’ of Bava Gor and Mai Misra at the “Parsi *cillā*” on April 5 to April 7, 2018, and of other ritual events such as the Thursday (*jumerāt*) observances and new moon (*cāndrāt*) mediumship rituals. Dates of attendance include August 16, 2017, March 18, 2018, September 28, 2019, and October 29, 2019. I conducted formal and informal interviews with this shrine’s lead ritual specialist and mediums of Mai Misra on August 11-16, 2017, March 29, 2019, April 2, 2019, and October 30, 2019.

⁸³ I am grateful to Faridaben Mubrik for her hospitality and guidance in Bhavnagar.

⁸⁴ I am grateful to Beheroze Shroff for her hospitality and guidance.

A significant component of my field research entailed visiting the shrines of Mai Misra's seven companions (*saheliyām*) and other 'sister' saints (*bahanem*), whose identities proved elusive.⁸⁵ These include the *dargāh* of Ai Mai "Senātwālī Ma" ("Army Mother") in the town of Rander in Surat on March 6, 2019 with participant-observation at her 'urs on April 27, 2019; the *dargāh* of Mai Ḍoṅgrī in Dabhoi, Baroda on March 10, 2019; the shrines of Mai Khinnī in Ankleshwar, Bharuch on March 13, 2019 and in Ratanpur on January 26 and October 22, 2019; the shrine of "Dariyāī" Mai Misra ("Seaside" Mai Misra) and the nearby temple of the Hindu goddess Vahanvati Shikotar Ma, venerated by some Muslim Sidis as a companion of Mai Misra named "Makhan Devi," in Ghogha, Bhavnagar on March 16, 2019 and the *dargāh* of Jīcā Ma in Bhavnagar on March 17, 2019; the memorial shrine of Mai Maryam on April 5, 2019 and the *dargāh* of Mai Ghaṇocī on April 6, 2019 during the 'urs of Mai Maryam in Junagadh; the *dargāh* of Mai Pārsā near that of Nagarchi Pir, and the open-air shrine of Vāghwālī Ma or Sāvajhwālī Ma ("Lion Mother") in Jambur on April 7, 2019; in Jamnagar, the memorial shrines of Bava Gor and Soḍhīwārī Ma (also called Amlīwālī Ma), Mai Maryam with Mai Misra, and Bava Gor with Mai Misra and Mai Ghaṇocī on April 8, 2019, the memorial shrine of Iṭārewālī Ma in Itara, Dhrol and the seaside shrine of Aḍibeṭwālī Ma on April 9, 2019; and the *dargāh* of "Mai Saheb Ma" or Mai Maryam in Gondal, Rajkot on October 24, 2019.

Chapter Outline

Chapter One introduces the primary and secondary textual sources that historicize the African Rifai Sufi saints at the center of the Sidi devotional tradition. This chapter delves into the role of Mai Misra as a Rifai saint venerated as a *kulpīr* (lineage saint) of the Sidi community, and

⁸⁵ I am grateful to Rumanaben Myava and M. Rafikbhai Vajugada for their hospitality and guidance.

considers the ritual authority of Sidi women who care for Mai Misra's memorial shrine and broker transaction-based devotional relationships characterized by reciprocal exchange between the saint and supplicants at her shrine. These transactions involve material media that, along with other items, uniquely gender Mai Misra's shrine as a feminine space in a landscape of male Muslim saint shrines. The chapter surveys spirit mediumship in Mai Misra's *khicrī* ceremony as a site for the ritual re-presentation of Mai Misra's historical role as a Sufi teacher and guide in fourteenth-century Gujarat. The chapter's analysis positions Mai Misra's *khicrī* ceremony as context in which Afrodescendant women affirmed conceptually intertwined bonds of 'natural' and 'ritual' kinship linking themselves in community with other dispersed Africans and Mai Misra as 'Mother' and *kulpīr*.

Chapter Two parses excerpts from legal statements composed by Ratanpur Sidi community leaders in the 1980s, published by Basu in 2003, whose terminology affirms Sidis' identity as a Muslim 'caste' (*jamāt*) descended from and devoted to certain Muslim saints, yet describes the tradition in terms of Hindu beliefs and rituals. In particular, they index Bava Gor as a "lineage god (*kuldevtā*)" of the Sidi community, and his *dargāh* as a site for "*pujā*," a term usually applied to worship in Hindu contexts. These statements establish the groundwork for the chapter's analysis of Mai Misra's conceptualization in terms of a goddess. Mai Misra's origin narrative juxtaposes her with the sorceress Makhan Devi, characterizing the two as opposing poles of feminine power (*śakti*). The chapter compares Mai Misra's characterization in her origin narrative to the representation of a Rajput lineage goddess (*kuldevī*) in her foundation myth, demonstrating the first level of Mai Misra's tacit conceptualization in terms of a *kuldevī* of the Sidi community. The chapter analyzes the *Kalaswālī Khicrī* ceremony performed in Ahmedabad,

whose associated material media and terminology suggests that Sidi women in Ahmedabad venerate Mai Misra in a capacity parallel to some Hindu families' veneration of their lineage goddess in Ahmedabad. The materiality of this *Khicrī* ceremony underscores the enrooting of Mai Misra's veneration in the culture of Hindu goddess worship in western India.

Chapter Three delves into the most ubiquitous aspect of the material culture of Mai Misra's veneration: Mai Misra's *kalas* (water-pot). The *kalas* features in Mai Misra's *Kalawālī Khicrī*, representing an aniconic embodiment of Mai Misra in that ritual context. This chapter analyzes Mai Misra's *kalas* rituals observed during the death-anniversary celebrations (*urs*) of the Sidi ancestor-saints. The gynomorphic symbolism of the *kalas* embodying Mai Misra as a bride mobilizes the nuptial connotations of the *urs* to commemorate Afrodescendant women's perpetuation of the Sidi *jamāt* through bonds of natural kinship orchestrated by Mai Misra. The distribution and ingestion of the contents of the *kalas*, given its womb-symbolism, positions Mai Misra as a 'Mother' of the Sidi community whose ritual power (*barkat*) her 'descendant'-devotees inherit. The chapter analyzes the Swahili and Hindi lyrics of Sidi devotional songs to gain insight into the condition of dispersed Africans who found relief from suffering at the tombs of African saints; the term *malungu* used in one devotional song suggests that these newcomers may have conceived of the saints as ancestral spirits of the land whose propitiation would ease distress.

Chapter Four traces the expansion of ritual kinship to devotees outside of the Sidi community through the gift (*bakhśīs*) of spirit mediumship. The chapter examines devotional life at a Mumbai memorial shrine of Bava Gor led by a Muslim family and patronized by Parsi devotees. The rituals of this shrine highlight the distinctive role of spirit mediums who

orchestrate these bonds of ‘ritual’ and ‘natural’ kinship as they mediate the presence of the saints. In the absence of shared African heritage, ‘natural kinship’ with the saints in this context entails the saints’ ‘gifting’ of children to devotees, which creates a ‘family’ of devotees connected by genealogical kinship and linked to ‘father’ and ‘mother’ saints by ritual bonds construed in terms of a parent-child dynamic. Material media at this site facilitate the transmission of the saints’ *barkat* to devotees; a unique incorporation of aspects of Sidi *pyālā* traditions mediate bonds of ritual kinship, formally and loosely conceived, in this devotional context. This chapter surveys the organization of a Parsi diasporan community of devotees around the veneration of Bava Gor and Mai Misra for insight into the process by which African diasporans did the same in nineteenth century Gujarat.

1. Mai Misra as *Kulpīr*: Reciprocity, Re-presentation, and Ritual Kinship

Introduction

This chapter studies the private, women-only ritual called “Mai Misra's *Khicrī*,” a tradition observed by the Sidis of Gujarat and Mumbai. Harnessing the Sufi modes of remembrance (*zikr*) and ecstasy (*hāl*), participants in this ritual perform Sidi Sufi devotional songs (*jikars*) in honor of the ancestor-saint Mai Misra. The devotional music performance may induce ecstatic states conceptualized as *hāl* and defined in this context as the embodied experience of a saint's “presence” (*hāzirī*). The *khicrī* ceremony thus facilitates the ritual re-presentation – that is, the making present once again – of the African Sufi saint Mai Misra, as well as one or more of her seven female companions who may also appear via *hāl*. The event generally culminates in *sawāl-jawāb*, a question-and-answer session between saint and devotees. This process of ritual representation allows for the reenactment of Mai Misra's historical role as a Rifai Sufi of fourteenth century Gujarat.

As a ritual context for spirit mediumship, the *khicrī* ceremony provides a meeting space for two waves of the African diaspora in western India: the Abyssinian or northeast African (Habshi) elites of premodern India, and contemporary Indian Muslims largely of southeast African descent, many of whose ancestors arrived in Gujarat via the Mozambique export trade as enslaved captives. The chapter begins with a profile of the history of the African Rifai Sufi saints of fourteenth century Gujarat, who are the central focus of the devotional rituals of the Sidi Sufi tradition, and concludes with a study of Mai Misra's *Khicrī* ceremony as a focal point for

analyzing the tradition's historiographic potential.⁸⁶ Aside from the human body, a material medium involved in one type of *khicrī* ritual underscores the means by which the *khicrī* ceremony may preserve a history of Afrodescendant women's integration into the fledgling Sidi community of nineteenth century Gujarat through the establishment of devotional bonds with Mai Misra as a *kulpīr* or "lineage saint" of the community.

In order to analyze the role of material media in imbuing the *khicrī* ritual with its historiographic potential, this chapter surveys the material culture of the Sidi saint shrine, which features various items in daily and annual rituals honoring the Sidi ancestor-saints. The use of these media generates devotional relationships characterized by reciprocity between saints and supplicants at their shrines, often by way of a vow (*mannat*) under whose terms a supplicant promises to offer one or more such items to enshrined saints in return for a particular blessing. A *khicrī* ceremony, which may be offered in fulfilment of a *mannat*, uniquely evidences the characteristic reciprocity of devotional culture at the Sidi saint shrine on two levels: reciprocal embodiment and reciprocal consumption of consecrated substances. The chapter presents thick descriptions of three different types of *khicrī* ceremonies performed in Ratanpur and Ahmedabad, along with analysis of the devotional songs performed in these contexts, to outline the levels of reciprocity that characterize the development of devotional bonds between saints and supplicants and to highlight the internal diversity of the Sidi Sufi tradition.

⁸⁶ A preliminary glance at the *khicrī* ceremony suggests rich similarities with eastern African traditions involving spirit possession, a point which anthropologist Helene Basu has explored elsewhere in her pioneering studies of the Sidi Sufi tradition. Helene Basu, "A Gendered Indian Ocean Site," 236-244. See also Basu, "Music and the Formation of Sidi Identity in Western India" and Graves, "Mai Misra's Khicari: Remembrance and Ritual Representation in the Sidi (African-Indian) Sufi Tradition of Western India," In *Symposia, Special Issue: Selected Papers from the Graduate Conference for South Asian Religions*, 9 (2018): 5-6.

The Rifai Sufi Order and the Sidi Sufi Saints

The “Sidi Rifai Lineage (*Silsilā*),” otherwise called the “Lineage (*Silsilā*) of the Sufi Order (*Tarīqā*) of Bava Gor,” begins with the African Rifai Sufi saint Bava Gor.⁸⁷ ‘Bava Gor’ (“Father [of the] Tomb”) is the popular pronunciation of the Arabic title ‘*Bābā Ghaur*’ (“Father [of] Meditation”) given to “Shaikh Mubarak Nobī” when he was initiated into the Rifai Sufi order.⁸⁸ In addition to his status as a Rifai Sufi saint, popular memories of Sidi Mubarak Nobī identify him as an agate merchant, after whom the *babaghori* stones mined in Ratanpur (“city of gems”) are named; and as a manumitted military slave.⁸⁹ The *Mirat-i Ahmadi* lists Bava Gor among the “Saints of Bharuch,” noting that he belonged to the Rifai order and that he died in the year 785 A.H. (1383 C.E.).⁹⁰ The text identifies a hill near a small mosque in the village of Ratanpur as the site of his tomb. However, it conflates Bava Gor with Bava Habash, listing the latter as his alias (*urf*).

⁸⁷ See Figure 1 in the Appendix.

⁸⁸ Babubhai Sidi, the late shrinekeeper (*mujawar*) of the Gabban Shah Bava shrine in Kurla, Mumbai, refers to the tradition as the “Sidi Rifa’i Silsila” in his interview with documentary filmmaker Beheroze Shroff. See *Voices of the Sidis: Two Documentaries* (Irvine, California: 2005). A sign at the entrance to the memorial shrine of the Sidi ancestor-saints in Dongri, Mumbai marks the site as belonging to “The Lineage of the Order of Bava Gor.” In the Rifai *shajra*, the saint is identified as “Shaikh Mubarak Nobī.”

⁸⁹ See Lotika Varadarajan, “Bava Gor and the Creation of Sidi Identity: The Context,” in *Afro-South Asia in the Global African Diaspora: African Diasporan Communities across South Asia*. Eds. Omar H. Ali et al., (Greensboro: University of North Carolina at Greensboro Ethiopian and East African Studies Project, 2020), 67-75. The caretaker of the shrine of Ai Mai in Rander identifies Bava Gor as a soldier sent on the hajj in Shroff’s unpublished documentary, *Sidis of Gujarat: Maintaining Traditions and Building Community*. Another narrative told in Ratanpur indicates that he was freed for his piety. See Jazmin Graves, “Through the Eyes of the Lyre: A Transoceanic Perspective on the Sidi Sufi Devotional Tradition of Western India,” in *Afro-South Asia in the Global African Diaspora: African Diasporan Communities across South Asia*. Eds. Omar H. Ali et al., (Greensboro: University of North Carolina at Greensboro Ethiopian and East African Studies Project, 2020), 98.

⁹⁰ From an appendix to the *Mirat-i Ahmadi, Tarikh-i Auliya-i Gujarat*, printed in Gujarati by N.B.S. Book Depot in Ahmedabad.

A biography of Bava Gor was formerly displayed on the walls of the Ratanpur shrine; this biography is sourced from the text *Khalif-i Shaikhu'l-Islam* composed by Saiyid Nuruddin Ashrafi.⁹¹ The text of the biography is in Urdu transcribed in the Gujarati script:

Your name is Hazrat Shaikh Sayidina Mubarak Nubi. You are called ‘Saidi’ (Sidi) because you came from a village called Saidiyah bordering the region of Sudan in Africa. The name of your tribe was Nubah. This is why you were called Nubi. Your death is in the year 785 A.H. and the blessed age [*umr sharīf*] of 100 years has been written. From this it is known that your birth must have been in 685.

You are the disciple [*murīd*] of Hazrat Ismail bin Saddik Jabruti. You had the deputyship [*khilāfat*] of the Rifai Suhrawardi Lineage [*Silsila-e Rifāīyā Suhrawardīyāh*]. You had the deputyship [*khilāfat*] of the “Rifai of Asia” from Hazrat Baba Kamar Nuri. By the command [*hukm*] of the court of Medina [*sarkār-e Madīnā*] after the haj, you traveled from Sudhan [sic] and by sea from Gujarat, via Ghogha port (Bhavnagar), you came to dispel the magic of Ratanpur.

You were a perfected holy man [*bā-kamāl buzurg*], a miraculous saint [*bā-karāmat walī*], a lover of the Prophet [*āsiq-e rasūl*]. Your respected sister [*bahen sāhebā*], Ma Misra, also came with you from Sudan. After you, a lot of people from your Sidi community [*qaum*] came to Ghogha port, Girnar, etc., and are there today. Your representatives [*khalīfā*] are Hazrat Habash titled [*urf*] ‘Abbas,’ Said Rumi, Baba Sidi Hilal Dariyabadi, Sidi Miftah Dhammali. Thus the lineage [*silsilā*] continued.”

This biography indicates that Bava Gor was born in the year 685 A.H. (1283 C.E.). It associates the ethnonym ‘Sidi’ with a village called Saidiya bordering Sudan, identifying this as Bava Gor’s place of origin; the biography links the name ‘Nubi’ with the Nuba of Sudan. Basu notes that, in addition to various etymologies given for the ethnonym, ‘Sidi’ has also been used to refer to the Shankalla of the Sudan frontier bordering western Ethiopia, who were enslaved in Ethiopia in the

⁹¹ See Figure 2 in the Appendix. I have not been able to identify the publisher of this text. I am grateful to PhD candidate Sofia Péquignot of the University of Toulouse-Jean Jaurès for providing photographs of this biography, the Rifai genealogy, and the plaques displayed at the Ratanpur shrine.

thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.⁹² This generally aligns with the year and place of birth of Bava Gor identified in the biography.

The biography states that Bava Gor's sister, "Ma Misra," came from Sudan with him, and that Bava Gor initiated "Hazrat Habash" as his representative (*khalīfā*). Bava Gor, Bava Habash, and Mai Misra are traditionally seen as siblings, with Bava Gor being the eldest; Basu points out that the names 'Habash' and 'Misra' refer to Abyssinia and Egypt, and that together with Nubia the three sibling-saints' names "evoke the landscape of the Nile Valley – the area from where most African slaves were drawn in the early centuries of Muslim state building."⁹³ Historian Edward Alpers observes that, "Mubarak is a characteristic Islamic slave name"; as mentioned above, Bava Gor is often remembered as a soldier, which aligns with the history of military slaves from the Horn of Africa serving in regional sultanates in India as early as the thirteenth century onward through the eighteenth century.⁹⁴ These three saints' names indexing locations from which enslaved Africans were drawn to serve in Indian sultanates, and the biography's identification of Bava Gor's year and place of birth align to suggest a potential backdrop for the departure of Bava Gor and Mai Misra from Sudan sometime after Bava Gor's birth in 1283 C.E.

⁹² Endnote 7 of Helene Basu, "Introduction," *Journeys and Dwellings: Indian Ocean Themes in South Asia* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman Private Limited, 2008). See also Mordechai Abir, "The Ethiopian Slave Trade and its Relation to the Islamic World," in *Slaves and Slavery in Muslim Africa: The Servile Estate*, ed. John Ralph Willis (London: Frank Cass, 1985), 128.

⁹³ Basu, "Theatre of Memory," 251, 260.

⁹⁴ See Edward Alpers, "Africans in India and the Wider Context of the Indian Ocean," in *Sidis and Scholars: Essays on African Indians*, eds. Amy Catlin-Jairazbhoy and Edward Alpers (Noida, UP: Rainbow Publishers, 2004), 28. See also Richard Pankhurst, "The Ethiopian Diaspora to India: The Role of Habshis and Sidis from Medieval Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century," in *The African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean*, eds. Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya and Richard Pankhurst (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2003), 189-222.

The years 1275 to 1365 marked a one-hundred-year period of warfare between Christian Nubia and the Bahri Mamluk Dynasty of Egypt.⁹⁵ This period of time overlaps with the lifespan of Bava Gor, who is said to have died a centenarian in the year 1383. In 1264, Nubians reinstated the *baqt* tribute to Mamluk Egypt, which they paid again in 1268. This tribute had been established in the year 652 and involved sending 360 slaves to Egypt as a form of payment, in return for which Egypt would send wine; between 652 and 1264, the *baqt* payment to Egypt had not been continuous. The Mamluks executed their last military campaign against Dongola, the center of Nubia, in 1289. 1317 was a momentous year in which the last Christian king of Nubia was defeated, the first Muslim king acceded to the throne, the first mosque was built at Dongola and the *baqt* tribute was reestablished. It is possible that ‘Mubarak Nobi’ was among enslaved persons sent as tribute to Egypt, or among captives taken during this one-hundred-year period of war; his sister’s name ‘Misra’ may recall a period of dwelling in Egypt prior to arrival in India.

The biography indicates that Bava Gor was a representative (*khalīfā*) of the Rifai Sufi order and was initiated by two figures, Hazrat Ismail bin Saddik Jabruti and Hazrat Baba Kamar Nuri. The Ratanpur display features one of these initiation lineages on either side of the central plaque showcasing the biography. To the right of the biography is the “Genealogy of the Kambari-Rifai Deputyship (*Shajra-e Khilāfat-e Kambariyah Rifāiyah*).” At the head of this list is Ahmad Kabir Rifai, the founder of the Rifai Sufi order, followed by Sultan Shaikh Mohammad Haji Rajab Rumi Patani. The *Mirat-i Ahmadi* lists an entry for “Baba (Hazrat Shaikh) Haji Rajab (Sultan Muhammad),” noting that “Shaikh Baba Haji Rajab Rifai, the disciple and representative

⁹⁵ The information in this paragraph is drawn from Rober Kramer, Richard Lobban, and Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban. *Historical Dictionary of the Sudan* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2013), xxxi-xxxiii, 131. I am grateful to Robert Kramer and Richard Lobban for their assistance with this research.

of Sayyid Ahmad Kabir, came to Patan in the year 616 A.H.” and “died in Patan on the twelfth day of the month of Rajab in the year 670 A.H. and was buried there.”⁹⁶ Rumanaben identifies a figure named “Sidi Rajab” as a Sidi Sufi teacher (*murśid*) who initiated Bava Gor.⁹⁷

While the “Kambari-Rifai” initiation lineage and the date of Shaikh Haji Rajab’s arrival and death in Patan preclude the notion that the two saints were contemporaneous with one another, the idea that this Sufi saint initiated by the founder of the Rifai order was Sidi raises two important points. First, Shaikh Haji Rajab’s arrival in Gujarat in the early thirteenth century suggests that he is the second African documented in a historical text as having been active in India in the thirteenth century; the first was Jamaluddin Yaqut, the stable-keeper and friend of Razia Sultan of Delhi (1236-1240).⁹⁸ Furthermore, his initiation by the founder of the Rifai order himself, Ahmad Kabir Rifai (1106-1182), points to the involvement of Africans in the early history of Sufism: as Ahmad Rifai left the Basra-Kufa region of southern Iraq, “the nurture center for Arab Sufism,” only once to go on a pilgrimage in 1160, Haji Rajab could have been initiated in Iraq or at some point if the two figures met on pilgrimage.⁹⁹

According to the above biography, Bava Gor initiated four representatives (*khalīfā*): Bava Habash, Said Rumi, Baba Sidi Hilal Dariyabadi and Sidi Miftah Dhammali. The title ‘Sidi’ before two of these representatives’ names suggest that they were also African; the name Sidi

⁹⁶ Muhammad Ali Khan, *Tarikh-i Auliya-i Gujarat: Mirat-i Ahmadi*, translated by Qazi Muhammad Nizamuddin Chishti Faruki (Ahmedabad: N.B.S. Book Depot, 2012), 142.

⁹⁷ Rumanaben remembers notes that Sidi Rajab’s given name in the Rifai order was “Haji Baba Rehan.” Ratanpur’s *nanḡāsī* remembers Haji Baba Rehan inversely as a *murīd* (initiate) of Bava Gor, and both saints as “*pīr-bhāī*,” brothers under the Rifai *pīr*. Communication in Ahmedabad on March 3, 2019, in Patan on October 21, 2019 and in Ratanpur on October 22, 2019.

⁹⁸ Pankhurst, “The Ethiopian Diaspora to India,” 191.

⁹⁹ Omar Khalidi, “The Rifa’i Sufi Order and the Faqirs in India.” *Hamdard Islamicus* 25(2), (2002): 73.

Miftah Dhammali might refer to the Sidi ancestor-saint, Sidi Mukhta, remembered as Bava Gor's bodyguard and entombed at the exit of Bava Gor's *dargāh*. The Arabic genealogy (*shajra*) of the Rifai order preserved at the Baroda headquarters traces the initiation lineage (*silsilā*) of Bava Gor.¹⁰⁰ On the document, a line of initiation descends from "Al-Shaikh Baba Qambar Nuri" to "Al-Shaikh Baba Ghaur Mubarak Nobī" to "Mama Misra," and from Bava Gor to "Baba Habash Khan Ghazi." The line descends from Bava Habash to "Sidi Hilal Darbari." This name resembles that of the representative "Baba Sidi Hilal Daryabadi" listed in the biography; the term *darbārī* refers to a courtier and may indicate a royal servant in the same way that the term *sultānī* does.¹⁰¹ There is no line of initiation descending from Sidi Hilal Darbari.

Kamaluddin Bava, the head of the Rifai Sufi order based in Baroda, explains that Mai Misra was unable to receive or pass on the authority to initiate disciples [*khilāfat*] since she was a woman.¹⁰² Kamaluddin Bava observes that she is nevertheless included in the genealogy because of her accession to sainthood (*vilāyat*), and that her popularity throughout Gujarat is a testament to her achievement as a saint. An Urdu ode (*qaṣīdā*) written in the Gujarati script, entitled, "Help, O Ma Saheb Ma. An Ode of Ma Saheb. *Al-Madad Yā Mām Sāheb Mām. Kasidā-e-Mām Sāheb*" is displayed in the shrine of 'Mai Sahib Ma,' a respectful title for Mai Misra, in Gondal, Rajkot. The poem praises Mai Sahib by comparing her to Rabia of Basra, who is credited with moving Sufism from asceticism to mysticism.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Photograph of the *shajra* shared by PhD Candidate Sofia Pequignot of Université Toulouse II Jean Jaurès. I have photographed a reprint of the *shajra* in the home of a Sidi Rifai Sufi of high rank in Ratanpur. See Figure 3 in the Appendix.

¹⁰¹ Shokoohy, "The Sidi Sayyid – or Sidi Said – Mosque in Ahmedabad," 159.

¹⁰² Communication in Baroda, Gujarat on September 29, 2019.

¹⁰³ Schimmel, *My Soul is a Woman: The Feminine in Islam* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 34.

Lauding a virtuous woman as “a second Rabia” is not unique.¹⁰⁴ What is pertinent here is that Sidis assert that Rabia of Basra was Habshi (Abyssinian). This belief connects Rabiya, “the liberated slave girl of Basra,” who is linked to Hasan al-Basri and therefore associated with the early eighth century, to the history of the African presence in southern Iraq.¹⁰⁵ In the ninth century, Abbasid rulers increased the trade in enslaved captives from northeast Africa, including Sudan and Ethiopia, and the Swahili coast to meet the labor demands of converting the saline marshlands of southern Iraq into cultivatable land; many captives arrived directly in Basra.¹⁰⁶ The history of this trade renders it likely that this ‘slave girl of Basra’ and celebrated mystic of early Islam may have in fact been of African ancestry.

Nazirbhai of Mumbai, a Sidi representative (*khalīfā*) of the Rifai *pīr*, recounts the tale that Hasan al-Basri fell in love with Rabiya’s dark skin; in love with God, she simply gave Hasan al-Basri a piece of her skin to keep, and went on her way.¹⁰⁷ Rumanaben explains, “Because of her, Sidi women can be initiated [into a Sufi order]. Because of her, Sidis can be initiated. *In kī vajah se, Sidī logom̄ mem̄ auratom̄ ko tarīq dete haim̄. In kī vajah se, Sidī log tarīq le sakte haim̄.*”¹⁰⁸ The ode’s comparison of Mai Misra to Rabia of Basra thus resonates with underlying meanings. As shall be described below, one physical attribute of Mai Misra that Sidi devotional songs celebrate is Mai Misra’s curly hair (*khim̄gariāle bāl*), an indicator of her African heritage.

Bava Gor, Bava Habash and Mai Misra are the three primary saints of the Sidi Rifai lineage and of the Sidi Sufi devotional tradition. While Bava Gor is associated with an entourage

¹⁰⁴ Schimmel, *My Soul is a Woman*, 35.

¹⁰⁵ Schimmel, *My Soul is a Woman*, 35.

¹⁰⁶ See Edward Alpers, *The Indian Ocean in World History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 52-53.

¹⁰⁷ Communication in Mumbai on April 2, 2019.

¹⁰⁸ Communication in Ahmedabad on October 11, 2019

of ten or eleven ‘brothers,’ Mai Misra’s is associated with seven ‘sisters’ or female friends (*saheliyām*); together, these figures comprise the ‘family’ of Sidi ancestor-saints.¹⁰⁹ Basu notes that only the three primary saints are considered “natural siblings. The rest of the saints are related as ritual brothers and sisters through shared ties with a *pir*. The eldest brother is the leading saint of the assembly.”¹¹⁰ While relating that the Sidi ancestor-saints are construed as ‘*Dādā*’ or ‘*Dādī Mā*,’ grandfathers and grandmothers of the Sidi community, Basu suggests that “few people assume ‘real descent’” from them.¹¹¹ Rather, this relationship is understood in terms of ritual or symbolic kinship.¹¹²

Basu elaborates on the interconnected notions of ritual and natural kinship with the ancestor-saints:

“Shidi notions of ritual kinship involve the same kind of ideas about shared substances that underlie conceptions of natural kinship. Descent is attached to the body that figures as the foremost sign of African identity. Curly hair is taken to signify both shared bodily substances between living and dead Shidi as well as ritual powers inherited from the ancestors – ultimately from the apical ancestor of ‘all Africans,’ Hazrat Bilal. Those who share the substances of Hazrat Bilal – that are perceived simultaneously as bodily and moral – are considered the same and eligible to serve the ancestor-saints in the role of ritual specialists called *faqirs*. It is important to note that shared substances may be ritually transmitted by females as well.”¹¹³

Phenotypical markers of African ancestry, especially curly hair, signifies membership in the Sidi community and the inheritance of the “ritual powers” from the ancestor-saints. This conception of ritual kinship is linked to the body, aligning individuals who share the bodily and moral

¹⁰⁹ Basu, “Theatre of Memory,” 251. Rumanaben indicates that there are twelve brothers altogether.

¹¹⁰ Basu, “Theatre of Memory,” 251.

¹¹¹ Basu, “Slave, Soldier, Trader, Faqir,” 244.

¹¹² Basu, “Slave, Soldier, Trader, Faqir,” 243.

¹¹³ Basu, “Theatre of Memory,” 248-249.

“substances” of the ancestor-saints into a community. Members of this community are eligible for ritual initiation as *faqirs*. Thus, Basu observes, “The term *jamat* which is also used for the Shidi caste constituted by natural kinship bonds by tracing genealogical and marriage relationships, refers here to the organisation of professional *faqirs*.”¹¹⁴ The physical and moral inheritance of the “substances” of the ancestor-saints likewise maps onto the dual meaning of the term *jamat*, which indicates the organization of the Sidi community in terms of natural kinship with one another, and the organization of ritual specialists via ritual kinship with the saints.

“Conceptualised as a second birth, initiation” is formally establishes bonds of ritual kinship.¹¹⁵ A Sidi teacher (*murśid*) initiates a Sidi disciple, who becomes a ‘son’ (*balkā*) or ‘daughter’ (*balkī*) of the teacher. Yet again, ritual kinship (teacher-initiate relationship) is conceptualized in terms of natural kinship (parent-child dynamic). “A living *murśid* is himself bound as a *balka*, a ritual child, to an ancestral ‘father’ or ‘mother’ saint”; the saints themselves are construed as siblings.¹¹⁶ Whereas the birth of a child transmits the bodily and moral substances, including the “ritual power” of the Sidi ancestor-saints, to the offspring, the second birth by initiation transfers “ritual power” in a more concrete sense. “The real father bestows familial and caste identity upon his offspring, the *murśid* gives his ritual sons and daughters a new personal identity based on the possession of ritual power (*karamat*).”¹¹⁷ This chapter

¹¹⁴ Basu, “Theatre of Memory,” 250.

¹¹⁵ Basu, “Theatre of Memory,” 250.

¹¹⁶ Basu, “Theatre of Memory,” 251.

¹¹⁷ Basu, “Theatre of Memory,” 251.

identifies the ritual power of the ancestor-saints as charisma (*barkat*), elsewhere using Shroff's definition of *barkat* as "blessings" and *karāmat* as "miracle healing presence/assistance."¹¹⁸

In the nineteenth century, the *dargāh* of Bava Gor in Ratanpur became a safe-haven for fugitive, freed and enslaved Africans dispersed in Gujarat, who established community by forging ritual lineages of descent from the saints.¹¹⁹ Basu highlights elder Sidis' memories of this process:

"Initiation provided the means for integrating strangers into the Sidi fold. This occurred, as older Sidi still vividly remembered, when an African – whether formerly enslaved or "freed" from a slaveship – found his or her way to the *dargāh* [shrine] of Bava Gor where he/she met other Sidi. Individual Africans were integrated into local Sidi groups through the creation of ritual kinship bonds between them."¹²⁰

Basu emphasizes, "Slaves without caste affiliation, ancestry, or family were integrated into a caste of black people by the mediation of fakirs. Fictive kinship ties provided such single individuals with a social identity necessary for establishing marital relations."¹²¹ African heritage suggested the inherence of the bodily, moral, and ritual power "substances" of the ancestor-saints, the prerequisite for initiation into the organization (*jamāt*) of ritual specialists (*faqīr*). The social identity that the initiate gained by becoming a ritual child of the teacher allowed for the creation of natural kinship ties through marriage and childbirth, reconstituting community (*jamāt*) amongst Africans dispersed in Gujarat. The Sidi *jamāt* today is comprised of twenty

¹¹⁸ Shroff, "Goma is Going On," 21, 22. See also Helene Basu and Pnina Werbner (eds.), *Embodying Charisma: Modernity, Locality and the Performance of Emotion in Sufi Cults* (London: Routledge, 1998).

¹¹⁹ Basu, "Redefining Boundaries," 62-63.

¹²⁰ Helene Basu, "Africans in India: Past and Present," *Internationales Asienforum/International Quarterly for Asian Studies*, 32 (2001): 267-268. Quoted in Shroff, "Spiritual Journeys," 262.

¹²¹ Helene Basu, "The Sidi and the Cult of Bava Gor in Gujarat," *Journal of Indian Anthropological Society*, 28 (1993): 293. Quoted in Shroff, "Spiritual Journeys," 260.

clans (*aṭak*), many of whose names indicate ethnolinguistic groups or places of origin in eastern Africa.¹²² The entire community venerates Bava Gor and Mai Misra as “*kulpīr*” (“lineage saints”), while particular clans may secondarily venerate select ancestor-saints as the *kulpīr* of that particular kinship group.¹²³ In this way, the term *kulpīr* highlights the historical process of community formation via the orchestration of ritual kinship lineages with the saints.

Basu observes that for the Shidis of Pakistan, drinking a sacred drink (*pyālā*, lit. “cup”) of the ancestor-saint Shidi Mukhta during the saints’ *urs* (death-anniversary celebrations) “enacts the corresponding rite of initiation for ritual sons (*balka*) of male ancestor-saints.”¹²⁴ Likewise, the *pyālā* of Bava Gor is administered in Ratanpur as a rite of initiation into the Sidi Rifai lineage. Aside from this ‘official’ *pyālā* of ritual initiation, many Sidi ancestor-saints are associated with their own select sacred drinks (*pyālā*), which may be distributed during the *urs* festivities or during a *dhammāl* performance, and are described in the following section. These drinks convey the ritual potency (*barkat*) of the saints and mark ritual kinship in a general sense among those who partake, yet their distribution in such contexts does not connote initiation into the Sidi Rifai lineage. The latter takes place at the *Pyālā* initiation ceremony in Ratanpur.¹²⁵

¹²² See Abdulaziz Lodhi, “Wedding Customs of the Sidis of Gujarat,” in *Afro-South Asia in the Global African Diaspora: African Diasporan Communities across South Asia*. Eds. Omar H. Ali et al., (Greensboro: University of North Carolina at Greensboro Ethiopian and East African Studies Project, 2020), 172-173.

¹²³ Communication in Ahmedabad on December 20, 2018 and communication/observation at various sites throughout the course of field research.

¹²⁴ Basu, “Theatre of Memory,” 261.

¹²⁵ Basu’s 2000 study of ritual kinship with reference to the *urs* of the ancestor-saints in Pakistan appears to suggest that initiation into the ritual lineage of any Sidi ancestor-saint is possible. Likewise, interlocutors in the field have suggested that it is possible to take the initiation (*pyālā*) of saints other than Bava Gor, and that these initiation rites transmit the ritual power of these saints in terms of the ability to embody them in spirit mediumship. Chapter Four discusses this in greater detail. The Ratanpur initiation rite, however, is distinct from these practices. Communication with the *namgāsī* of Ratanpur on October 22, 2019.

The *Pyālā* ceremony is performed in Ratanpur after the induction of initiates (*murīd*) into the Rifai order during the *Urs* of the *Chāsmā*. The *Pyālā* rite mirrors the Rifai initiation that precedes it.¹²⁶ During the Rifai initiation, disciples drink from the same cup (*pyālā*) as the Rifai *pīr* Kamaluddin Bava, touching their lips to the same place on the cup from which the *pīr* had sipped. By this act, the *pīr* transmits some of his charisma or spiritual potency (*barkat*) to the initiate, inducting the latter into the Rifai order.¹²⁷ Following this, an individual may choose to take the *Pyālā* of Bava Gor, establishing formal ties of ritual kinship with the saint and becoming initiated into the Sidi Rifai Lineage as a *faqīr*. Though the two ceremonies are distinct, it is often recommended that the person who desires to take the *Pyālā* of Bava Gor first become an initiate of the Rifai *pīr* before doing so. This mirrors the process by which Bava Gor himself was initiated into the Rifai order centuries prior, before initiating disciples of his own, and underscores the maxim Basu relates, “It is a common saying among Shidi in Gujarat that everybody has three fathers: the ‘real father’ (*saga bap*), the *pir*, and the *murśid*.”¹²⁸

In the Sidi *Pyālā* ceremony, the disciple selects a Sidi teacher (*murśid*) to administer (*pīlānā*, ‘to cause to drink’) the *pyālā* of Bava Gor, from which both consecutively drink. In so doing, the *murśid* mediates a bond of ritual kinship linking both teacher and disciple with Bava Gor. Through this initiation rite, the Sidi Sufi devotional tradition symbolically perpetuates the Sidi Rifai Lineage, which begins with the fourteenth-century saint Bava Gor. The textual sources analyzed above do not name any representatives (*khalīfā*) after those established by Bava Gor.

¹²⁶ Shroff portrays both the Rifai initiation and the Sidi *Pyālā* initiation rite in the unpublished film, *Sidis of Gujarat: Maintaining Traditions and Building Community*.

¹²⁷ Peter van der Veer notes belief in the healing power of the Rifa’i *pīr*’s saliva in “Playing or Praying: A Sufi Saint’s Day in Surat,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 51:3 (August 1992), 554, 561.

¹²⁸ Basu, “Theatre of Memory,” 251.

Seven centuries later, Sidi teachers who ceremonially administer the *pyālā* of Bava Gor symbolically perpetuate the Lineage of the Sufi Order of Bava Gor. Thus the lineage continues.

Ritual Offerings at the Sidi Saint Shrine

The way in which the Sidi *Pyālā* rite mirrors the Rifai initiation ceremony draws a parallel between the Rifai Sufi *pīr*, who is a living authority, and the Sidi ancestor-saints, who are described as ‘hidden’ or “veiled” (*pardewāle*) rather than as ‘deceased.’ Jaibunnisaben of Ahmedabad, a disciple (*murīd*) of the Rifai *pīr*, explains that the *pīr* maintains a more direct connection to God due to his pious practice of prayer and other devotional observances (*ibādat*).¹²⁹ This perspective applies to the saints: Kamarbhai, the son of the caretaker of the shrine of Ai Mai, Mai Misra’s *sahelī*, in Rander explains that the departed saints are busy performing *ibādat*; God therefore hear their prayers more quickly than others.’¹³⁰ This is the rationale for supplicants’ visitation of shrines to request the saints’ assistance.

Kamarbhai elaborates, “We cannot go directly to Allah, like we cannot go directly to the magistrate: we go through a lawyer. The saints are like this, they are lawyers. *Ham direct Allāh ke pās jā nahīm sakte haim. Jaise ham sīdhe magistrate ke pās nahīm jā sakte. Vakīl ke zariye jāte haim. Auliyā aise haim, vakīl haim.*” He emphasizes that, like lawyers, the saints do not discriminate; they receive cases from all people, regardless of religious background. Hindus and Muslims, therefore, come to the shrine for help. He summarizes his understanding of the saints’

¹²⁹ Communication in Ahmedabad on December 30, 2018.

¹³⁰ Communication in Rander on March 6, 2019.

facilitation of blessings: “God’s command, their intercession. *Allāh kā hukm, in kā vasīlā.*” The saints serve as intermediaries, interceding with God on supplicants’ behalf.

One popular means by which supplicants seek the intercession of saints is the making of a vow (*mannat*) at the *dargāh* (tomb-shrine; also used to refer to a memorial shrine or *cillā*) of a Sufi saint. A *mannat* entails a supplicant’s pledge to present an offering to the saint upon attainment of the desired blessing. The semantic range of the term encompasses the supplicant’s “humble and earnest” request, the saint’s “kindness” and “service” performed as an “obligation” toward the supplicant, and the latter’s resultant gratitude and “praise” of the saint.¹³¹ The vow thus engenders a reciprocal relationship between supplicant and saint. The supplicant requests and the saint obliges; the supplicant receives the gift requested of the saint through prayer, and fulfils the agreed-upon terms of the relationship by presenting a gift to the saint in return. This theme of reciprocity informs the ritual action of Mai Misra’s *Khicṛī* ceremony, which a supplicant may promise to sponsor in fulfilment of a *mannat*. In order to provide a foundation for the analysis of the *khicṛī* ceremony, this chapter now explores the theme of reciprocity as it features in *mannat*-making and ritual offerings at the Sidi saint shrine.

The following devotional song (*gīt*) performed in Hindi by Sidi women in Ratanpur introduces some of the material media that may be presented to the saints as offerings at their shrines:

<i>Ham Bāvā Gor jāēṅge, dekh lenā</i>	We are going to Bava Gor, take a look
<i>Ham Bāvā Gor jāēṅge, dekh lenā</i>	We are going to Bava Gor, take a look
<i>Sunne kī thālī mem lobān kī joṛā</i>	A heap of frankincense on a golden tray

¹³¹ Platts, *A Dictionary of Urdu*, 1071.

<i>Ham lobān caṛhāemge, dekh lenā</i>	We will offer the frankincense, take a look
<i>Ham Bāvā Gor jāemge, dekh lenā</i>	We are going to Bava Gor, take a look
<i>Sunne kī thālī mem niśān kī joṛā</i>	A pile of flags on a golden tray
<i>Ham niśān caṛhāemge, dekh lenā</i>	We will offer flags, take a look
<i>Ham Bāvā Gor jāemge, dekh lenā</i>	We are going to Bava Gor, take a look
<i>Sunne kī thālī mem caddar kī joṛā</i>	A pile of floral coverings on a golden tray
<i>Ham caddar caṛhāemge, dekh lenā</i>	We will offer the floral coverings, take a look
<i>Ham Bāvā Gor jāemge, dekh lenā</i>	We are going to Bava Gor, take a look
<i>Sunne kī thālī mem galef kī joṛā</i>	A pile of cloth coverings on a golden tray
<i>Ham galef caṛhāemge, dekh lenā</i>	We will offer the cloth coverings, take a look
<i>Ham Bāvā Gor jāemge, dekh lenā</i>	We are going to Bava Gor, take a look
<i>Sunne kī thālī mem nāriyal kī joṛā</i>	A heap of coconuts on a golden tray
<i>Ham nāriyal caṛhāemge, dekh lenā</i>	We will offer the coconuts, take a look
<i>Ham Bāvā Gor jāemge, dekh lenā</i>	We are going to Bava Gor, take a look

This song depicts devotees' preparation for visiting the tomb of Bava Gor in Ratanpur by gathering items to offer. These include items that are ubiquitous at Sufi saint shrines in India, such as frankincense resin (*lobān*) which is burned, and large embroidered satin cloths (*galef*) and shawls of threaded flowers (*caddar*) which are placed atop the saints' tombs. The song also references coconuts (*nāriyal*) which are cracked in offering to the saints, and flags (*niśān*) which are borne by standard-bearers (*niśāndār*) leading *urs* processions. With the exception of the *niśān*, these items represent material media regularly offered by devotees at Sidi saint shrines.

The presentation and subsequent consumption of edible offerings creates a dynamic of reciprocity between the saint and his or her visitor at the shrine. A visitor at the *dargāhs* of Bava Gor, Mai Misra and Bava Habbash in Ratanpur may purchase various items, including rose petals, alcohol-free perfume (*attar*), frankincense resin, incense sticks, and coconuts to offer at

the shrines. Ritual specialists at these shrines will accept the gifts and place the rose petals on the tombs. Sacred ash (*khāk*) from the fire burning perpetually near Bava Gor's tomb, commemorating his continuous prayer at that site, will then be given to the visitor. The visitor may consume a pinch of ash, which is believed to have healing properties. Ritual specialists will then crack the coconut, offering it to the saint, and return its water and meat to the visitor to consume.

Many shrines also have water on site, considered sanctified by the presence of the saints, which visitors may drink to receive the saints' "blessings" (*barkat*) or "miracle healing assistance" (*karāmat*). Visitors may even bring a water bottle of their own to circle seven times around the head of the tomb, a process believed to infuse the water with the saint's ritual power (*barkat*). At many shrines, visitors may also consume rose petals that have been offered to the saint and are lying atop the tomb. Coconuts and rose petals, ubiquitously offered items, best express the reciprocity of gift-giving at Sidi saint shrines. Such items, which visitors present in honor of the saints, become sanctified by the process of offering; imbued with the saints' *barkat*, they are returned to the visitors for consumption, allowing the latter to integrate the saints' *barkat/karāmat* into their own bodies. This connection between reciprocity and embodiment resurfaces in Mai Misra's *khicṛī* ritual, to be described later in the chapter.

The saints' death-anniversary celebrations (*urs*) provide an opportunity for devotees to collectively honor the saints. In return, participants experience the saints' *barkat/karāmat* through the consumption of sanctified offerings of food (*niyāz*) or interaction with the embodied saints in *hāl*. The following excerpt from a devotional song (*gīt*) below, performed in Hindi by

Sidi women in Ratanpur, identifies a sacred dish and sacred drink that are consumed in private ritual contexts honoring the Sidi ancestor-saints:

<i>Mārī kā ḍuṅgar mazedār re</i>	Mother's hill, what fun!
<i>Māī Sāhib kā ḍuṅgar mazedār re</i>	Mai Sahib's hill, what fun!
<i>Khiṅgaṛiāle bāl, o bāl re, khiṅgaṛiāle bāl</i>	Curly hair, oh hair, curly hair
<i>Jab maim hotī Bāvā Gor ke cauk mem</i>	When I am in Bava Gor's square
<i>Dhammāl khelātī mazedār re</i>	I play <i>dhammāl</i> , what fun!
<i>Khiṅgaṛiāle bāl, o bāl re, khiṅgaṛiāle bāl</i>	Curly hair, oh hair, curly hair
<i>Jab maim hotī Māī Sāhib ke cauk mem</i>	When I am in Mai Sahib's square
<i>Khicṛī khilātī mazedār re</i>	I serve <i>khicṛī</i> , what fun!
<i>Khiṅgaṛiāle bāl, o bāl re, khiṅgaṛiāle bāl</i>	Curly hair, oh hair, curly hair
<i>Jab maim hotī Bāvā Habash ke cauk mem</i>	When I am in Bava Habash's square
<i>Ghāvā pilātī mazedār re</i>	I serve <i>ghāvā</i> , what fun!
<i>Khiṅgaṛiāle bāl, o bāl re, khiṅgaṛiāle bāl</i>	Curly hair, oh hair, curly hair

The female narrator of the song introduces edible and potable substances that may be served in private ritual contexts: Mai Misra's *khicṛī* and Bava Habash's *ghāvā*. *Ghāvā* is also associated with Bava Gor and is at times called Bava Gor's *pyālā* (sacred drink) – not to be confused with Bava Gor's *pyālā* of ritual initiation administered in Ratanpur. Before a wedding, a bride must perform Mai Misra's *khicṛī* ceremony, while the groom may optionally perform Bava Gor's *ghāvā*. These are private ceremonies in which only persons of the same gender participate: women consume Mai Misra's *khicṛī* and men drink Bava Gor's *ghāvā*. Basu observes the role of these ritual events in supporting female fertility and male virility, transferring the ritual potency (*barkat*) of the respective saint to the bodies of ritual participants via the ingested sacred substance, *khicṛī* or *ghāvā*.¹³² The refrain, “Curly hair, oh hair, curly hair,” gestures toward the

¹³² Basu, “Hierarchy and Emotion,” 94-95. See also Basu, “Theatre of Memory,” 260-261.

phenotypical indicator of inheritance of the saints ritual potency (*barkat*), indexing the transmission of the saints' ritual power through the sharing of "substances" – in this case food items – imbued with their *barkat*. The song also situates *dhammāl* among the types of offerings that can be made to the saints; it is an intangible medium of the saints' *barkat*, as Chapter Four of the dissertation will describe in greater detail.

At the close of the first day of the *urs* in Ahmedabad, called the *Sandal*, three sacred drinks (*pyālā*) of the saints are distributed to participants.¹³³ These included *ghāvē*, the *pyālā* of Bava Gor that contains water spiced with ginger powder and sweetened with jaggery; black coffee, the *pyālā* of Bava Habash; and milk, the *pyālā* of Mai Misra.¹³⁴ *Niyāz* of lentil soup and rice (*dāl-pulāo*) was served after this. Before the start of the nightlong *dhammāl* performance of the *Sandal*, three trays of *niyāz* emerged from the shrine and was circulated through the crowd: rock sugar (*miśrī*), a sweet dish of flour cooked with ghee and jaggery (*malīdā*), and drying crumbs of sandalwood (*sandal*) paste that had been applied to the saints' tombs and memorial niches (called "*cillā*") inside of the memorial shrine (*cillā*, called "*dargāh*"). Participants took a pinch of each to consume; the sandalwood paste may also be applied to the forehead or middle parting of the hair.¹³⁵ The consumption of sandalwood paste that had been applied to the saints' tombs exemplifies the concept of reciprocity in the Sidi Sufi devotional tradition. A substance

¹³³ Participant observation in Ahmedabad on March 29, 2018.

¹³⁴ Observation in Ahmedabad on March 29, 2018 and communication with Rumanaben in Ahmedabad on September 23, 2019. *Ghāvē* appears to be a rendering of the Urdu word for coffee, *qahwā*. This may account for the overlapping identification of *ghāvē* as Bava Gor's and Bava Habash's: Rumanaben identifies black coffee alternately as the *pyālā* of Bava Gor and Bava Habash. Communication in Ahmedabad on January 7, 2019. In this conversation, she identifies coffee as the *pyālā* of Bava Gor, ginger-and-jaggery flavored water as the *pyālā* of Bava Habash, and milk as the *pyālā* of Sidi Mukhta. At the *urs* of Bava Gor at the Parsi memorial shrine in Mumbai, the Sidi *dhammāl* players served Bava Gor's *ghāvē* made of ginger powder, jaggery and water to all Sidis present. During the *urs* of Ai Mai and her brother "Senatwala (Army) Baba" in Rander, Bava Gor's *ghāvē* was distributed, and sweetened milk with dry fruits was distributed. Participant observation in Rander on April 27, 2019.

¹³⁵ I observed the latter application of the sandalwood paste at Mai Misra's shrine in Bhavnagar on March 16, 2019.

that has been offered to the saints returns to the devotee imbued with the saints' *barkat*, which the devotee then consumes (or applies to the body) to incorporate the saints' *barkat* into the body.

Outside of the spectacular *urs* celebrations, the transference of *barkat* to the body via material media offered at the shrine takes place regularly. Around the time of sunset, Jaibunisaben burns frankincense resin (*lobān*), and lights an oil lamp sitting in each of the eight *cillā* on the walls of the shrine.¹³⁶ Starting at Bava Gor's memorial tomb at the center of the shrine, she carries the burning frankincense to each of the *cillā*, circling the interior of the shrine in a counterclockwise motion. Young boys pound drums, whose rhythm inform all within earshot that it is time for *lobān*.

The caretaker (*mujāwar*) exits the shrine and winds through the Sidi residential compound, offering *lobān* at the shrine of Sidi Mukhta; in the narrow lanes where smaller shrines stand; and at the tombs of Malang Shah Bava, Jicha Ma, and unnamed children buried in quiet, unfrequented area of the compound. The incense smoke billows throughout the compound, signaling that it is time to gather in the shrine. People cover their heads deferentially and quietly assemble in the shrine as Jaibunisaben offers *lobān* to all present. Recipients cup their hands, wafting the smoke into their faces and over their bodies. One by one, the *mujāwar* briskly pats

¹³⁶ In Ahmedabad, the shrine of Bava Gor contains eight *cillās*, cupboard-like enclosures curtained by embroidered satin coverings (*galef*). Six of the *cillās* commemorate Sidi ancestor-saints: Mai Misra; Bava Habbash; Sidi Sahib and Sidi Sultan, Habshi elite ancestor-saints buried in Panch Kua and Shahi Bagh, respectively, in Ahmedabad; and Sidi Sarur and Ma Sadiya, whose *cillās* were installed by Sidi families who moved from Hyderabad to Ahmedabad in the early twentieth century. The other two *cillās* memorialize the Sufi saint Khwaja Gharib Nawaz (Moinuddin Chishti) of Ajmer Sharif, whose fame is widespread in India, and Hazrat Ali, cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, considered the head of the Sufi orders of Islam. These eight *cillās* surround the memorial tomb of Bava Gor, which stands majestically at the center of the shrine beneath a chandelier. The memorial tomb is crowned with a turban and covered with several *galef*, atop which sits a peacock-feather brush (*pīcī*).

their heads and shoulders with a peacock-feather brush (*pīcī*), tapping the brush on the surface of Bava Gor's memorial tomb.

This vignette of devotional life at the shrine of Bava Gor in Ahmedabad demonstrates another instance of reciprocity and embodiment of *barkat*. Fragrant frankincense smoke is presented to each of the saints memorialized in the shrine; devotees then inhale the smoke, directing it toward their faces and bodies. The *mujāwar* sanctifies a substance by offering it to the saints, which devotees then incorporate into their own bodies. Shroff discerns this notion of embodiment in the use of the peacock-feather brush: “The brush is laid on the head of the *cilla* [memorial tomb], from where it draws energy. It is then placed on the head and shoulders of the devotee so that healing energy and blessings are transferred from the saint into the body of the devotee.”¹³⁷ In this way, the motions of the peacock-feather brush direct the saints' *barkat* into visitors' bodies.

Devotees at the Parsi memorial shrine of Bava Gor in Mumbai collectively light its oil lamps. Some of the lamps are lit according to the terms of fulfilled *mannats*; other are lit specifically in honor of Bava Gor; the Sufi saint Abdul Qadir Gilani; Hazrat Ali and his grandson, Zainul Abidin; and Hazrat Khizr, a Qur'anic figure believed to be immortal.¹³⁸ Spreading their hands over the lamps, devotees draw their palms to their faces, hands warmed by the lamplight. Like the *lobān* ritual, the act of lighting lamps in remembrance of the saints then partaking of that light underscores the theme of reciprocity in the Sidi Sufi devotional tradition,

¹³⁷ Shroff, “Goma is Going On,” 21.

¹³⁸ Communication with the wife of the shrine's caretaker in Mumbai on October 30, 2019.

and the transference of *barkat* from offerings to the saints to the bodies of those who have made the offering.

Making Mannats at the Sidi Saint Shrine

Material media visible at the Sidi saint shrine reflect not only various offerings presented by visitors, but the process of making and fulfilling *mannats*. In order to make a *mannat*, a supplicant informs the shrinekeeper of issues for which he or she is seeking the saint's assistance. The shrinekeeper then facilitates the making of the *mannat*, by which the supplicant promises to present an offering to the saint in return for a blessing received. The shrinekeeper may then cut a length of red thread (*dorī, dhāgā*), which will be tied to the latticework (*jālī*) of the gate surrounding the saint's tomb or *cillā*.¹³⁹ The verbs used to express making and fulfilling *mannats* include *mannat rakhnā*, 'to place a *mannat*;' *mannat utārnā*, 'to take down a *mannat*;' and *mannat chuṭnā*, 'to release a *mannat*.' This language metaphorically associates the *mannat* with the thread tied to the *jālī*, marking this material medium as a record of the *mannat* made at the shrine and as a representation of the bond between saint and supplicant which the *mannat* facilitates.¹⁴⁰

The shrinekeeper will then inform the supplicant of the kinds of offerings to present the saints once the *mannat* is fulfilled, including incense, flowers, and *galef*. A *jālī* filled with thread creates visual of the multitude of visitors to the shrine and the magnitude of faith they place in its

¹³⁹ Such threads feature in the material culture of Sufi saint shrines in India in general, and are by no means limited to Sidi saint shrines. See Bellamy, *The Powerful Ephemeral*.

¹⁴⁰ Many believe that failure to release a *mannat* after the desired result has been achieved will bring misfortune. This is described as a weight (*bhar*): the weight of the *mannat* will burden the supplicant until it is lifted via the offering of gifts at the shrine, as the supplicant had promised when making the *mannat*. Personal communication in Ratanpur on March 13, 2019.

saints. Similarly, a shrine replete with offerings visually demonstrates the volume of traffic therein and signifies successful returns on visitors' investments of faith, underscoring the efficacy of the saints enshrined there. The material media visible at the shrine thus reflect the spiritual economy of the site, in which the shrinekeeper brokers an exchange between saint and supplicant through the ritual of making a *mannat*.

The following examples of common *mannats* made to Mai Misra in Ahmedabad illustrate the way in which the *mannat* establishes a ritual relationship between saint and supplicant, characterized by reciprocal exchange between the two. The material media employed to create and resolve these *mannats* also highlight Sidi saint shrines memorializing female ancestor-saints as gendered spaces. These items may feature among the general gifts which may be offered at any Sidi saint shrine, such as coconuts; however, certain items used to create and resolve *mannats* with Mai Misra comprise a genre of offerings specific to female saints. The devotional song (*gīt*) below, performed in Gujarati by Sidi women in Ratanpur, provides a closer look at these types of offerings:

Paṅkhirā ho paṅkhirā ho paṅkhirā
Paṅkhirā re uṛīne jajo Bāvā Gor re
Māṛī Māī Sāhib Mā ne jāīne kahjo
Vahelā āvo re

Birds, oh birds, oh birds
 Birds, fly to Bava Gor
 Go to Mother Mai Sahib Ma and say
 “Come early”

Paṅkhirā ho paṅkhirā ho paṅkhirā
Gām gām māīm Sidīrā vahelā vahelā āvo re
Māṛī Māī Sāhib Mā ne vāt ruṛī cundar lāo re
Sārī lāo sundar lāo vahelā āvo re
Māṛī Māī Sāhib Mā ne jāīne kahjo
Vahelā āvo re

Birds, oh birds, oh birds
 “Sidis in every village, come early
 Bring good veils for Mother Mai Sahib Ma
 Bring good and beautiful ones, come early”
 Go to Mother Mai Sahib Ma and say
 “Come early”

Paṅkhirā ho paṅkhirā ho paṅkhirā

Birds, oh birds, oh birds

<i>Gam gam na Sidirā vahelā vahelā āvo re</i>	“Sidis in every village, come early
<i>Mārī Māī Sāhib Mā ne vāte ruṛī baṅglī lao re</i>	Bring good bangles for Mother Mai Sahib Ma
<i>Sārī lāo sundar lāo vahelā āvo re</i>	Bring good and beautiful ones, come early”
<i>Mārī Māī Sāhib Mā ne jāīne kahjo</i>	Go to Mother Mai Sahib Ma and say
<i>Vahelā āvo re</i>	“Come early”
<i>Paṅkhirā ho paṅkhirā ho paṅkhirā</i>	Birds, oh birds, oh birds

In this song, a devotee requests that birds fly to the Bava Gor’s (shrine) hilltop in Ratanpur, and issue an announcement from Mai Misra’s shrine. The birds should announce that Sidis in every village come there early, bearing two gifts for Mother Mai Sahib Ma: “good and beautiful” veils (*cundar* or *cundarī*) and bangles (*baṅglī*, also called *cūrī*). Offered in repayment for an answered prayer, these material media establish bonds of reciprocity between Mai Misra and supplicant in the context of *mannat* making at the Sidi saint shrine in Ahmedabad, to be described below.

An inconspicuous yet significant marker of female Sidi ancestor-saint shrines as gendered spaces is its *galef*, or decorative covering. A woman in Ahmedabad who had previously made a *mannat* for the health of a family member inquired about the number of *galefs* to offer at the shrine to fulfil her *mannat*.¹⁴¹ Jaibunisaben advised her to offer nine, one for each *cillā* in the dargāh; Bava Gor’s would be the largest, as it should cover his memorial tomb. For the *cillās* of Mai Misra and Ma Sadiya, the woman should bring one red *cundarī* (veil) each. They could bear the Gujarati tie-dye (*bāmdhni*) pattern, a type of *cundarī* particularly associated with Mai Misra, or any other style as long as they were red. The woman agreed, and promised to return on Thursday (*jumerāt*), a special day of the week for devotional activity at the shrine. During Navratri, ceremonial red cloths called “*cunrī*” are offered to Hindu goddesses, the color

¹⁴¹ Observation in Ahmedabad on January 29, 2019.

red highlighting the goddess' power (*śakti*).¹⁴² In this way, the red *cundarī* offered to female Sidi ancestor-saints is a multivocal symbol of sacred feminine power.¹⁴³

The decorative covering of Mai Misra's *cillā* also plays a role in the generation of a ritual relationship between saint and supplicant in the following example of establishing a *mannat*. A young man visited the Ahmedabad shrine to request assistance with getting married.¹⁴⁴ Jaibunisaben instructed the young man to hold on to the *cundarī* covering Mai Misra's *cillā*, telling him, "Take hold of [Mai Misra's] the skirt. *Dāman pakar lo.*" This command evokes the image of a child clinging to its mother's skirt. The semantic range of this command also includes the metaphorical meanings: "to take refuge (with), to come under the protection (of); to become an adherent (of); to detain by holding the garment (of)."¹⁴⁵ By grasping Mai Misra's 'skirt' – the decorative covering of her *cillā* – the supplicant symbolically grabs her attention, detaining her to make a request of her. In so doing, the supplicant enters her protection, or the domain of her spiritual authority (*vilāyat*). This marks the formation of a bond linking saint and supplicant; the imagery of the command underscores the familial dimension of this relationship, in which the supplicant stands as a child under the protection of the saint as 'Mai' - mother. Once the *mannat* is fulfilled, the supplicant may become an 'adherent' or devotee, visiting the shrine often to pay respect and present gifts to the saint.

The imagery of the *dāman* is often applied to Mai Misra's *cillā* at the Ahmedabad shrine, where women tend to lift the edge of its cloth covering, gently touch it to their faces and closed

¹⁴² Observations in Ahmedabad on September 29, 2019. Hillary Rodrigues, *Ritual Worship of the Great Goddess: The Liturgy of the Durga Puja with Interpretations* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003), 89, 221, 262.

¹⁴³ Basu analyzes the representation of Mai Misra in terms of *śakti* in "Redefining Boundaries," 67.

¹⁴⁴ Details from this scene are drawn from observation on December 30, 2018.

¹⁴⁵ McGregor, *The Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary*, 491.

eyes, and kiss it. These actions resemble the manner in which devotees grasp the hand of a respected ritual specialist such as a shrine's caretaker (*mujāwar*), affectionately touching the back of his or her hand to their eyes and forehead before kissing it. Such treatment of the 'skirt' of Mai Misra's *cillā* thus represents a fond, reverent greeting of the saint, drawing another parallel between the "veiled" (*pardewāle*) saint and a living spiritual guide such as the Rifai *pīr*. This parallel also applies to the act of being initiated by the Rifai *pīr*.¹⁴⁶ Disciples hold a green cloth spread before the *pīr*, as if it were the skirt of his robes (*dāman*); receiving his *barkat* through the *pyālā* of initiation into the Rifai order, disciples become not only initiates, but 'siblings' of one another. The *pīr* thus assumes the role of 'father.' The imagery of the child clutching its mother's skirt applies in this case as well, reinforcing the role of the *dāman* as a material medium engendering ritual bonds through physical contact with its fabric. In this way, the decorative covering of Mai Misra's *cillā*, as her *daman*, provides a means of contact with the saint, mediating her presence and ultimately her *barkat* to the supplicant.

Another material medium which transmits the *barkat* of the saint within the ritual relationship established by the *mannat* is Mai Misra's bangle (*cūrī*). As the young man clutched the edge of the decorative covering of Mai Misra's *cillā*, Jaibunisaben placed one hand inside of the *cillā*. She prayed, holding a bangle in her hand. She then passed it to the young man, along with the instructions that he return the bangle to the shrine with the following offerings after he successfully marries: a new *cundarī* for Mai Misra's shrine; a floral garland (Hindi, *serā*/Gujarati, *sero*) to adorn the *cillā*; a set of new bangles (*cuṛiyām*); alcohol-free perfume (*attar*); and sweets, which will be distributed to everyone present. Bangles are distinctly associated with

¹⁴⁶ From communication with Jaibunisaben in Ahmedabad on December 30, 2018.

a woman's auspicious status as wife (*suhāgin*); they are an integral part of bridalwear, which in many traditional contexts includes red attire, especially a large red veil. Likewise, the *serā* floral garland is also worn by brides.¹⁴⁷ These items offered to Mai Misra symbolically represent her as a bride, a point which is central to her veneration during the *urs* as discussed in Chapter Three.

The gifts to be presented to the saint upon fulfilment of the *mannat* are items which may be used to adorn a bride. In some cases, a collection of items called *suhāgpurā* is offered in fulfilment of a *mannat* for marriage.¹⁴⁸ These items are used to adorn a bride and include scented turmeric powder (*pīṭhī*) to apply to the body, powder for the teeth (*missī*), and a fragrant powder (*khuśbū*) to apply to the middle parting of the hair. Similarly, the offering of sweets at the shrine mirrors the way in which a woman may be fed sweets on occasions associated with her transition to wifhood, such as her engagement ceremony (*sagāī*) or upon arrival at her in-laws' home on the first night of marriage. In this way, the gift offerings which complete the *mannat* for marriage reflect reciprocal exchange between saint and supplicant: a woman will become a bride (whether she or her groom is the supplicant), and Mai Misra will be symbolically adorned as a bride in return. The bangle mediates this reciprocal relationship as it is given to the supplicant to initiate the *mannat* and is returned to the Mai Misra, along with a new package of bangles, to resolve the *mannat*.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁷ Personal communication with Beheroze Shroff.

¹⁴⁸ Communication with Muslim woman (non-Sidi) caretaker of Mai Dongri's shrine in Dabhoi, Baroda on March 10, 2019 and with a Sidi woman caretakers of Mai Misra's shrine in Bhavnagar on October 23, 2019. At the former location, twelve to twenty four bangles, two coconuts, one *galef* and one *suhāgpurā* package is offered in fulfilment of a *mannat* for marriage, which also involves borrowing a bangle from the shrine.

¹⁴⁹ Mai Misra's bangle may also be given in *mannats* concerning matters other than marriage. Communication in Ahmedabad on December 30, 2018.

The supplicant takes possession of the bangle during the period of the *mannat*. In so doing, he or she carries a material medium imbued with Mai Misra's *barkat* from the sacred space of the shrine to his or her home, where the bangle must be treated as a sanctified object. Supplicants are not advised to wear the bangle, since it may accidentally break; women must observe purity restrictions and refrain from touching it during their menses. Therefore, the bangle is commonly tied to a string and hung on a wall in the home. If the bangle breaks before the *mannat* is complete, its pieces are to be placed in a river or well, where it will be 'cooled' – that is, its *barkat* dispersed in the water.¹⁵⁰ Other ritually sanctified items which have passed their period of use, such as fresh flowers offered to the saints which have wilted and dried over the course of the hot day, are disposed of in this way. This underscores the treatment of the bangle as a material medium from the shrine infused with the saint's *barkat*.

Just as the supplicant becomes, or becomes wed to, a bride and must therefore reciprocate the blessing by adorning Mai Misra as such with offerings, so too must the transmission of *barkat* via the lending of the bangle be reciprocated. The supplicant reciprocates the lending of the *barkat*-infused bangle not only by returning the bangle borrowed, but by gifting an entire set of new bangles to the saint. These bangles are usually red or green, the former color associated with the sacred potency of the female ancestor-saint (as expressed by the red *cundarī*), and the latter color associated with Islam, often used for the *galef* of male ancestor-saints. The ribbons used to affix them to the shrine for display may also be red or green. The bangles displayed at a the shrine of a female Sidi ancestor-saint shrine genders the site as a feminine space, a point

¹⁵⁰ After Navratri, icons and other symbolic representations of the goddess are generally immersed in a river to “dissipate the immense power built up during the festival... naturally and safely.” Lynn Foulston and Stuart Abbott, *Hindu Goddesses: Beliefs and Practices* (Brighton and Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2009), 163, 168-169. See Image 12 between pages 148 and 149.

accentuated by the presence of red bangles, while the green bangles identify the site as an Islamic sacred space.

Furthermore, the display of colorful bangles at the shrine advertises the saint's efficacy to future visitors. This spreads her fame and encourages others to establish ritual relationships with her by making *mannats*, ultimately ensuring the longevity of the shrine and the remembrance of the saint it commemorates. The presentation of gifts, including sweets, allows visitors to collectively celebrate the fulfilment of a supplicant's *mannat*, and draws future visitors to whom the saint's *barkat* - through bangles or other material media - may be spread. The multiplication of the bangle involved in the *mannat* from one to many symbolizes this diffusion, as the supplicant eventually multiplies from one to many through the advertisement inherent in both the visible result of the *mannat*, such as the removal of an obstacle or reversal of a difficult situation, and in the offering of gifts at the shrine.

Like the bangle, the coconut is another item that transmits the saint's *barkat* to a supplicant who has made a *mannat*. A woman enters the shrine of Bava Gor in Ahmedabad, seeking assistance in the matter of conceiving a child.¹⁵¹ Jaibunisaben places a coconut into Mai Misra's *cillā*, then wraps the coconut in a red *cundarī*. She then instructs the woman to place the coconut in her lap, where the edge of her scarf (*dupaṭṭā*) or shirt (*kurtī*) lies. The woman then wraps the coconut in the fabric of her garments, cradling it. Jaibunisaben advises her to place the coconut on a tray atop her dresser at home, where it is to be kept high above ground as no

¹⁵¹ Observation on May 4, 2019. Additional details drawn from communication with Jaibunnissaben on December 30, 2018. This is not the only means by which a supplicant may make a *mannat* for pregnancy. A supplicant may tie knots in her *dupatta* and circle the interior of Mai Misra's *dargāh* in Ratanpur seven times in a counterclockwise direction. Fulfilling the *mannat* for pregnancy at this site also involves circling the *dargāh* in the same manner. Observation in Ratanpur on March 13, 2019.

shadow must ever fall on it. She then informs the woman of the items to offer at the shrine when her *mannat* is fulfilled: a veil (*cundarī*), coconut, flower garland (*serā*), bangle (*curī*), alcohol-free perfume (*attar*), frankincense (*lobān*), and sweets. This list of items includes the same offerings which fulfil a *mannat* for marriage, introducing only two additional items: a coconut and frankincense. As observed above, these material media transfer the saint's *barkat* to devotees via consumption and inhalation.

The act of placing the coconut in Mai Misra's shrine and covering it with her red *cundarī* facilitates the transference of her *barkat* to the coconut. The woman then receives this gift into her lap and covers it with the hem of her scarf or garment, representing the incorporation of Mai Misra's *barkat* into her physical person. This part of the *mannat* is called "god *bharnā*," a verb which literally means 'to fill the lap' and is a metaphor for becoming pregnant. The coconut swaddled in both Mai Misra's and the woman's garments symbolizes the unborn child who will yet sit atop the woman's lap. The swaddled coconut engages the parental imagery of the *dāman*, discussed above in the context of the decorative covering of Mai Misra's *cillā*.

Just as a bangle is lent and ultimately returned to the shrine in the *mannat* for marriage, the supplicant desiring a child receives a coconut from the shrine and promises a coconut in return. Fulfilling the *mannat* mirrors its creation, highlighting the completion of a cycle of exchange between saint and supplicant. In the *mannat* for marriage, Mai Misra is promised items befitting a bride in return for a woman's becoming a bride; the *mannat* for pregnancy also evidences such reciprocity between saint and supplicant. The *mannat* is established through the act of placing a coconut wrapped in Mai Misra's *cundarī* in the supplicant's lap, called "god *bharnā* (to fill the lap)." The verb designating this act recalls the *God Bharāī* ceremony which a

Sidi usually woman observes in the seventh month of her first pregnancy.¹⁵² The sister-in-law of the expecting mother garlands the latter, placing floral wreaths over her neck, in her hair, and on her wrists. She then places a coconut in the pregnant woman's lap and feeds her sweets. Seven married women repeat the gesture, feeding the woman sweets and observing other formalities.

The “*god bharnā*” portion of the *mannat* foreshadows its culminating result. The placement of a coconut in the supplicant's lap during the *mannat* mirrors the placement of a coconut in the expecting mother's lap during the *God Bharāī* ceremony. Both acts symbolize the forthcoming placement of a child in the lap of the mother. The occurrence of the latter fulfils the *mannat* and requires reciprocity on behalf of the new mother, who must now symbolically ‘fill the lap’ of Mai Misra. Mai Misra, then, is to be gifted items which the expecting mother might wear, receive or be fed during her *God Bharāī* ceremony: a veil, bangles, a garland, a coconut and sweets. These offerings evidence the reciprocity of exchange characteristic of making offerings at the Sidi saint shrine in general and making *mannats* specifically.

The frankincense given and sweets distributed in fulfilment of the *mannat* provides a means by which visitors at the shrine may in turn receive Mai Misra's *barkat*, incorporating it into their person through inhalation and consumption. This is another instance of reciprocity, in which the supplicant, who has received the saint's *barkat* via the material medium of the *cundarī*-robed coconut, then presents offerings which facilitate the transference of *barkat* to others. The presentation of gifts at the shrine thus completes the circle of exchange between saint and supplicant as mediated by the ritual specialist.

¹⁵² Communication in Ahmedabad on October 17, 2019.

Material media such as bangles on display or a red *cundarī* covering a female saint's *cillā* mark these sites as gendered spaces, as does signage that explicitly prohibits men's presence in or touching these shrines.¹⁵³ Female ritual specialists' mediating the *barkat/karāmat* of a female saint in spaces visibly marked as 'feminine' renders these Sidi saint shrines distinctive among Sufi shrines in India. In Ahmedabad, women are the primary caretakers of the memorial shrine of Bava Gor housing the *cillās* of both male and female saints; their ritual authority at this site upends the common prohibition against women touching (or entering) male Sufi saints' tombs at *dargāhs* throughout India.¹⁵⁴ The women caretakers of Sidi saint shrines thus claim ritual authority in the domain of female and sometimes male saints, an act which mirrors Mai Misra's spiritual authority (*vilāyat*) as a woman saint among the documented male representatives of Bava Gor. Women's exercise of ritual authority at these sites, whether they are caretakers, ancestor-saints, or musicians leading a *dhammāl* performance, disrupts the norm of male ritual authority within such devotional contexts, marking the distinctiveness of the Sidi tradition within the landscape of Sufi saint shrines in India. The following section provides a closer look at the *khicrī* ceremony as a context in which Sidi women as ritual specialists and devotees reenact Mai Misra's historical role as a Sufi teacher or guide.

Mai Misra's Khicrī: Remembrance, Re-presentation and Reciprocity

One oral narrative traces the origins of Mai Misra's *khicrī* ceremony to the saint's lifetime.¹⁵⁵ A woman seeking aid in a personal matter would consult Mai Misra, asking her to

¹⁵³ Observation at Mai Misra's memorial shrines in Bhavnagar and Ahmedabad, and Ma Sadiya's memorial shrine in Ahmedabad. Men are not allowed to enter the *dargāh* of Mai Misra in Ratanpur.

¹⁵⁴ Women used to be allowed to touch the tomb of Bava Gor in Ratanpur prior to its 'Islamization.' Basu, "Redefining Boundaries," 75-76.

¹⁵⁵ Personal communication with Shabbirbhai, brother of the lead ritual musician of Ratanpur.

pray on her behalf. The supplicant would vow to offer a gift to Mai Misra should the object of her prayers be granted. When Mai Misra's prayers were successfully answered, the supplicant would then present Mai Misra with a dish of *khicṛī*, lentils and rice cooked together. Mai Misra would have a taste, and her seven companions would then sit together in a closed room to consume the remainder. This tradition survives today as Mai Misra's *Khicṛī*; its reported origins preserve a history of women's consultation of the living saint to request her aid through prayer, affirming her station as a Sufi teacher or guide. As the analysis below shall demonstrate, the *khicṛī* ceremony provides a stage for the ritual reenactment of the saint's historical role as a Sufi guide in fourteenth century Gujarat.

Like the original tradition, Mai Misra's *Khicṛī* is a private (“*pardewālī*”) ritual observed behind closed doors by female participants only. Prior to the ceremony, seven women are each given a clove as notification of their selection to participate in the ritual; these women are called *sahelīs*, like the seven companion-saints of Mai Misra. These women should fast from the moment they wake until the start of the ritual, which takes place in the morning; they will break their fast by consuming the dish of *khicṛī*. The following steps form the common core of the *khicṛī* ceremony. Seven women gather around a large tray of *khicṛī* as frankincense burns. The *khicṛī* must be sanctified; usually this is done through the recitation of prayer (*fātihā dilānā*), yet one may alternatively circle the burning frankincense over the tray of *khicṛī* seven times, invoking Mai Misra's name. After the seven women eat, other women may enter the gathering to partake of the remaining *khicṛī*. Participants tie a red thread (*dorī/dhāgā*) to the right wrist prior to or after consuming the *khicṛī*. They also adorn themselves with items placed near the tray of

khicṛī, such as non-alcoholic perfume (*attar*), henna, and a small chain of flowers (*veṇī*) for the hair.

The following verse from a devotional song (*gīt*) in Gujarati that Sidi women perform in Ratanpur exemplifies the dynamics of the concluding segment of a *khicṛī* ceremony: “*Damāmu vāge, musindo vāge, vāge Māi Misrā / Bolo Māṛī bolo ramvām āvśo ke nahīm*. The *damāmā* beats, the *musindo* beats, the ‘Mai Misra’ beats. Tell us, Mother, tell us will you come playing or not?” Mai Misra’s *khicṛī* ceremony concludes with a *dhammāl* performance featuring percussion instruments such as the *musindo* cylindrical drum, identical to the *ḍholak*, and coconut-shell rattles named after Mai Misra.¹⁵⁶ Seven devotional songs are generally performed during the *dhammāl* component of the ceremony, which is usually limited to *baiṭhī* (seated) *dhammāl*; these songs, especially the *jikar*, evoke the Sufi practice of remembrance of God through ritual audition of devotional music, which may generate ecstatic states of trance (*wajd/hāl*) in the listener.¹⁵⁷ Accordingly, during the *dhammāl* performance, participants may enter an ecstatic state (*hāl*) which in the Sidi Sufi devotional tradition connotes embodiment of the “presence” (*hāzirī*) of an ancestor-saint; during the *khicṛī* ceremony, this would be the *hāzirī* of Mai Misra or a companion saint.

When Mai Misra’s presence becomes manifest during *khaṛī* (standing) *dhammāl*, a woman in *hāl* may step rhythmically to the beat of the drums as she embraces a devotee, grasping the latter’s shoulders or placing a hand over the latter’s head while ‘dancing’ with

¹⁵⁶ See Catlin-Jairazbhoy, “A Sidi CD?,” 192-193. Chapter Four will take a closer look at the ‘Mai Misra’ rattle.

¹⁵⁷ Flueckiger, *In Amma’s Healing Room*, 216-217.

her.¹⁵⁸ The vocabulary of the devotional music performance avoids the language of ‘singing’ and ‘dancing,’ which have a more secular connotation: ‘singing’ *jikar* is called ‘speaking’ *jikar* (*jikar bolnā*) and ‘dancing’ *dhammāl* is called ‘playing’ *dhammāl* (*dhammāl khelnā*). The latter phrase overlaps with the vocabulary of *hāl*, where moving about in *hāl* is called ‘playing’ (*hāl khelnā*).¹⁵⁹ The movement of a woman in *hāl*, especially while embracing an interlocutor in the fashion described above, is called Mai Misra’s ‘play’ (*khel*).¹⁶⁰ The song lyrics quoted above, which would be performed in the context of a *khicṛī* ceremony, therefore ask Mai Misra whether or not she will “come playing,” in response to the sounds of the *dhammāl* instruments.

The *khicṛī* ceremony may be held in fulfilment of a *mannat*: a supplicant usually promises to arrange a *khicṛī* ceremony for Mai Misra when the problem faced is particularly severe.¹⁶¹ In some locations, the *khicṛī* ceremony is performed annually during the *urs* or monthly at the start of a new lunar month (*cāṁdrāt*) of the Islamic calendar.¹⁶² Outside of these instances associated with the rituals of the shrine, nearly every Sidi woman will hold a *khicṛī* ceremony in her lifetime, as it is a rite incumbent upon brides. A bride’s *khicṛī* ritual usually occurs among other pre-wedding events one to two days prior to the wedding ceremony. Ideally, it takes place before the bride’s *pīṭhī*, when she is publicly and playfully anointed with turmeric paste, fed sweets, and given money by relatives, friends and other wedding guests. Traditionally, a household hosting a private *khicṛī* ceremony for a daughter would also be responsible for sponsoring a “*khulī* (open) *khicṛī*,” serving all wedding guests a meal of *karī-khicṛī* (yogurt soup

¹⁵⁸ I have observed men in *hāl* move in this fashion, embracing while standing or while seated, in Ahmedabad on March 29, 2018.

¹⁵⁹ Communication with Rumanaben in Ahmedabad on March 29, 2018 and April 21, 2019.

¹⁶⁰ Personal communication with Beheroze Shroff.

¹⁶¹ Communication with Rumanaben in Ahmedabad on December 19, 2018.

¹⁶² Communication in Bhavnagar on March 16, 2019 and in Ahmedabad on March 8, 2019.

and *khicṛī*).¹⁶³ The private ceremonial *khicṛī* and the public meal should ideally take place simultaneously. While financial constraints might limit families' ability to observe this tradition, supplicants may host simultaneous *pardewālī* and *khulī khicṛī* ceremonies in fulfilment of a *mannat*.

This section will survey three kinds of *khicṛī* ceremonies: the *Suhāgin Khicṛī* in Ratanpur, and the *Kalaswālī Khicṛī* and *Śakkarwālī Khicṛī* in Ahmedabad. Thick descriptions of these rituals will highlight the differences between them in order to demonstrate diversity within the Sidi Sufi tradition. The juxtaposition of these three rituals will further illuminate the material culture of the Sidi devotional tradition and the theme of reciprocity of exchange. Like all of the *khicṛī* ceremonies discussed below, the *Suhāgin Khicṛī* mirrors the *mannat* for marriage in its characteristic reciprocity. The additional element of the *kalas* featured in the *Kalaswālī Khicṛī* facilitates reciprocity of embodiment, while the *Śakkarwālī Khicṛī* demonstrates reciprocity in the consumption of consecrated offerings. Most importantly, the *Śakkarwālī Khicṛī* provides a window onto the history of the African diaspora in India as it sheds light on the process by which Afrodescendant women cultivate symbolic bonds of ritual kinship with Mai Misra.

Suhāgin Khicṛī

Two days before the wedding, women who were among the bride's peers in age gathered for a *khicṛī* ritual in Ratanpur.¹⁶⁴ Beside the tray of *khicṛī*, made of rice cooked with mung beans, sat a bowl of crystallized sugar and a bowl of melted ghee. The sugar and ghee were generously poured atop the steaming mound of *khicṛī*, which the seven participants consumed in silence.

¹⁶³ Communication with Rumanaben in Ahmedabad on March 7, 2019.

¹⁶⁴ Participant observation in Ratanpur on January 25, 2019.

After eating, the women shared a cup of water, then began to distribute the contents of two trays amongst themselves whilst enjoying cups of chai. One tray held a coconut, chewing tobacco, and ingredients for *pān*. The other tray held red thread (*dorī*), *suhāgpurā*, and seven items: turmeric, betel nuts, dates, henna, eyeliner powder (*surmā*), *attar* and coconut oil. *Suhagpura* was to be offered at Mai Misra's *dargāh* after the wedding.

The women tied the thread to their right wrists, while Nargis, who had been arranging the items to be used in the ceremony, cracked the coconut and distributed its water and meat to the participants. By this time, the frankincense had stopped burning and other women had entered the gathering to partake of the *khicrī*. Nargis brought sets of red and green bangles into the room, as well as cloves and cashews; should cardamom and almonds have been included, the latter two items alongside the turmeric, betel nuts, and dates would have completed an offering of seven 'fruits' which may be included in a *khicrī* ritual.¹⁶⁵ Finally, after everyone had eaten, one woman unlatched the doors of the room in which the ceremony had taken place, opening the space to the public. The women sang seven devotional songs, after which the woman who had opened the door called, "*Salām alaykum!*" The group replied, "*Wa alaykum asalām,*" concluding the event.

The *Suhagin Khicrī* took place the following day.¹⁶⁶ Only married women participated in the ritual consumption of the *khicrī*, which consisted of cooked rice (no lentils were visible) topped with milk, ghee and sugar. As fourteen women were present for the ritual, the *khicrī* was served on two trays around each of which sat seven women. After the *khicrī* was eaten, Nargis

¹⁶⁵ Communication in Ahmedabad on December 30, 2018.

¹⁶⁶ Observation in Ratanpur on January 26, 2019.

cracked a coconut and passed around its meat and water. Then, the women distributed and decorated themselves with items of the *suhāgpurā* variety. One woman explained that this custom was based on a hadith in which the Prophet's daughter, Bibi Fatima, requested a quarter maund (*sawā mann*) or approximately 11.25 kilograms of *surmā* and henna for daily adornment as a married woman.¹⁶⁷ As the women were thus adorning themselves, the doors of the room were opened, and someone brought in small floral chains called Mai Misra's *veṇī* for the women to attach to their hair. Then, Nargis led the call-and-response of the *dhammāl* performance, singing two sets of seven songs as she played the *musindo*.

Unlike the previous *khicrī* ceremony, during which no one experienced *hāl*, four women entered ecstatic states during the first set of devotional songs. Two women shouted “*Gomā!*” One exclaimed, “*Gomā! Hamārī (Our) Gomā!*,” as she urged Nargis to continue drumming. Nargis patiently reassured the embodied ancestor-saints that their *gomā* would continue and kept playing. Other participants secured the scarves of the women in *hāl* or otherwise restrained them so that they wouldn't accidentally hurt anyone with their unpredictable movements. Others approached the embodied saints for *sawāl-jawāb* (question-and-answer). The women in *hāl* were given water, and the saints' *hāzirī* eventually departed. The woman who had opened the doors on the previous day again stood beside the doors. After each set of seven songs, she called out “*Salām Alaykum,*” to which the group responded “*Wa alaykum asalām.*” After this final salute, two trays of lentil soup and white rice were brought from the kitchen and distributed to all guests.

¹⁶⁷ The kilogram equivalent of a maund is given in McGregor, *The Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary*, 780.

The analysis of the *Kalaswālī Khicṛī* ritual below underscores a significant commonality between these two iterations of the *khicṛī* ritual: reciprocity between ancestor-saint and Sidi “descendant”-devotee.

Kalaswālī Khicṛī

In Ahmedabad, a bride’s *khicṛī* ceremony is described as a *sthāpanā* (installation), requiring the installation of Mai Misra’s *kalas* at the start of the ritual.¹⁶⁸ If a woman is unable to observe the *khicṛī* ceremony before her wedding day, she may do so afterward. The performance of a *Kalaswālī Khicṛī* is not limited to weddings, as it may also be held voluntarily on other occasions.

Mai Misra’s *Kalaswālī Khicṛī* took place on a Thursday morning in Ahmedabad. The bride’s older sister sprinkled a mixture of milk, rosewater, and *attar* around the room to purify it while the woman who would be presiding over the event, assembled the *kalas*. She stacked two clay pots filled with sugared water (*śarbat*) atop one another, tying a red thread (*dorī*) around the mouth of each pot. She placed a coconut inside of the mouth of the uppermost pot and wrapped a tie-dyed (*bāmdhnī*) *cundarī* around the entire structure. She secured the veil by tying a thread around the coconut, draped the *kalas* with flower garlands, and set it upon a tray holding grains of raw rice. This rice was to be added to the new harvest as a blessing. A tray of *suhāgpurā*-type items sat before the *kalas*, including henna, tooth powder, amla oil, *khuśbū* powder, *attar*, and green and gold bangles. The woman dipped her finger in the *khuśbū* powder and applied it to the center of the brow and vertically along the crown of the *kalas*’s coconut ‘head.’ Completing the

¹⁶⁸ Communication in Ahmedabad on December 20, 2018. The following account draws from participant observation of the ritual on this day.

installation, she uttered the word, “*Hoyāle* (So it is),” to which the women assembled in the room responded in kind. On the third repetition of this utterance, participants exclaimed “*Dariyā pār!* Across the ocean!”

The *kalas* seemed to oversee the entire affair as it sat in the corner of the room beside the woman who had made it, who was presiding over the ritual alongside other older women. Red threads were tied around participants’ right wrists to ward off the evil eye and inauspiciousness. The *khicṛī* was dressed with ample amounts of ghee and side dishes of yogurt were served alongside it. Even before the *dhammāl* performance, a woman entered *hāl* while eating the *khicṛī*. She called in an aunt of a participant, whom she counseled. She then advised another participant to hold a *Śakkarwālī Khicṛī* ceremony, performed in honor of Mai Misra’s *sahelī* Itarewali Ma. She gave the bride a lemon, instructing her to wrap it in a red veil, and to ‘cool’ it after its work was done. She prayed over my head after reminding me, “You came before and your work was done, don’t you know that? *Terā kām purā ho gayā, tere ko mālum hai ne?*” She fed participants small handfulls of *khicṛī*. She was given a cup of water to drink, from which participants also drank after the saint’s departure.

The bride then lit a few incense sticks, wafted them around the circle of participants, and set them in front of the *kalas*. It was time for the *dhammāl* performance. Participants sang devotional songs (*jikars*) while seated, then transitioned to standing (*khariṭ dhammāl*). The bride stepped forward and raised Mai Misra’s *kalas*, balancing it atop her head. Participants filed in line behind her, moving in a counterclockwise circle as they sang the *jikars* of Mai Misra, and played Mai Misra rattles. The bride began to enter *hāl*; she swiftly removed the *kalas* from her head and held it at her side, like a child, lest it fall and break. *Khariṭ dhammal* continued until *hāl*

came to the same woman who had given “question-and-answer” (*sawāl-jawāb*) moments prior. A woman brought her baby into the gathering for the embodied saint to bless. The woman in *hāl* sprinkled sugar in water to be given to the baby to drink, tied knots on a thread, and prayed. *Attar* was applied to the hand of the woman in *hāl*, who again tied another thread of knots. She blessed and prayed over many of the participants gathered. The woman who had made the *kalas* fed the embodied saint ash (*khāk*) from the incense that had been burning.

After the woman’s *hāl* ended, the bride made chai for the participants while the woman who had made the *kalas* disassembled it. She cracked the coconut topping it and mixed its water into the *śarbat*. The women then adorned their hair with flowers, anointing it with amla oil and *khuśbū* powder. Some applied *surmū*, others henna, tattooing an auspicious design called *śakan* onto their palms.¹⁶⁹ The bride then removed the green and gold bangles from the tray and carried them to the shrine of Bava Gor along with a tray of flowers which had witnessed the entire ceremony. She placed the flowers in each *cillā*, and the bangles in Mai Misra’s.

The three *khicṛī* ceremonies described above diverge in two distinct ways. First, the Ratanpur bride did not participate in either of the two rituals, while the Ahmedabad bride played a central role in her *khicṛī* ceremony. The final area of difference concerns the *dhammāl* performance. In Ratanpur, the doors of the room in which the ritual takes place are opened, rendering this segment of the *khicṛī* ceremony open to the public. There, participants observe seated (*baiṭhī*) *dhammāl*. The *dhammāl* performance of the Ahmedabad *khicṛī* ritual, however, remains *pardewālī*, closed to male observers. Yet women who did not participate in the ritual may join the gathering to engage in *sawāl-jawāb* with the embodied saints. The *Kalaswālī Khicṛī*

¹⁶⁹ The design features a large circle in the palm of the right hand and a henna stain on the uppermost digit of the pinky finger.

features both *baiṭhī* and *kharī* (standing) *dhammāl*, during which participants rise from a seated position and “play” *dhammāl*, stepping rhythmically as they walk in a counterclockwise circle.

These pre-wedding *khicṛī* ceremonies demonstrate reciprocity between Mai Misra and the bride via the material media participants use to adorn themselves. The bangle which a supplicant borrows from the shrine to establish a *mannat* for marriage perpetuates the transference of the saint’s *barkat* to the supplicant for the duration of the *mannat*, after which the supplicant must return not only the borrowed bangle but present a set of new bangles at the shrine. This offering reciprocates the gift requested and received by the supplicant: the latter becomes, or becomes the groom of, a bride and must in return adorn Mai Misra as such with offerings of a red *cundarī*, bangles, flower garlands and *attar*. The *khicṛī* ceremonies described above reflect this dynamic of reciprocity. Prayer and burning frankincense consecrate the dish of *khicṛī*; this ritual environment also imbues the trays of *suhāgpurā*-type items set near the *khicṛī* with the same energy of *barkat*. After consuming the *khicṛī* and thus embodying its *barkat*, participants then adorn their bodies with the consecrated items, further transferring the saint’s *barkat* onto their bodies.

Having received these gifts energized by the saints’ *barkat*, the bride or her natal household is responsible for returning the same to the saints. Thus, *suhāgpurā* is offered to Mai Misra at her tomb in Ratanpur following the wedding. In Ahmedabad, the bride carries to the shrine an offering of flowers and bangles which have been energized by the *khicṛī* ritual, placing the flowers in each *cillā* and the bangles in Mai Misra’s. The bride’s household sponsors a ceremony in which participants may adorn themselves with consecrated items; such items are then offered to Mai Misra to metaphorically dress the latter as bride, as the young woman will be

so adorned on her upcoming wedding day. Flowers, bangles and *suhāgpurā* items thus mediate devotional relationships between Mai Misra and her devotees, demonstrating reciprocity between the two.

In addition to facilitating a reciprocal cycle of gift-giving between saint and devotee, these material media play a significant role in facilitating embodiment during the *khicṛī* ceremony. Embodiment in the context of ritual offering at the Sidi saint shrine refers to the transference of the saint's *barkat* to the devotee's physical person; the *khicṛī* ceremony amplifies this by facilitating the embodiment of the saint's presence (*hāzirī*). Participants' self-adornment with items infused with the saint's *barkat* during ritual facilitates this embodiment. Cleansing the space and its participants with the rosewater, milk, and *attar* mixture and the fragrant smoke of incense sticks and frankincense prepares the space and its participants for the presence of the saints and invites them into the gathering. Perfuming the hands with *attar* and henna and scenting the hair with flowers and *khuśbū* prepares the bodies of participants for the presence of the saints, inviting them therein. These preparatory acts precede the *dhammāl* performance, whose devotional songs explicitly invoke the saints' presence.

Yet it is the material medium of the *kalas* which engenders reciprocity of embodiment in a manner unique to the *Kalaswālī Khicṛī*. A woman builds the *kalas* from material media distinctly associated with Mai Misra – her veil (*cundarī*) and water pot (*kalas*) – and adorns it with flower garlands and *khuśbū*. In so doing, she symbolically embodies Mai Misra in the installation of the *kalas*, a point which will be explored in greater detail in the following chapters. Much like a Hindu priest's recitation of a mantra or Tantric seed syllables to complete the installation of the jar-form (*ghaṭasthāpanā*) of a goddess, the woman creating the *kalas* leads

participants in a call-and-response articulation of the term, “*Hoyāle*.” This utterance may be replaced with the phrase “*Yā hoyā*,” both expressions are believed to be Swahili and are pronounced at the completion of important ritual actions in Sidi Sufi devotional contexts. One ritual specialist offers a Hindi translation of these terms as, “*Huā*” or “*Ho gayā*,” meaning, “It happened.”¹⁷⁰ The utterance ‘*Hoyāle*’ at the end of constructing the *kalas* concludes this ritual act with an affirmation of its efficacy.

The significance of this concluding utterance emerges most poignantly in its final reply, “*Dariyā pār* (Across the ocean).” Sidis may chant this phrase while marching in ritual procession during *urs* celebrations, exclaiming: “From where did they come? From across the ocean! *Kahām se āye? Dariyā pār se!*”¹⁷¹ One woman experiencing the *hāl* of Dariyewali Ma (“Ocean Mother”), an epithet of Mai Misra, during the *urs* in Ahmedabad exclaimed: “I came across the sea! *Dariyā pār karke āyi!*” The exclamation ‘*dariyā pār*’ refers to the ancestor-saints’ journey across the Indian Ocean to India. Its role in concluding the installation of the *kalas* affirms the symbolic embodiment of Mai Misra, who has come from across the ocean.

The *kalas* engenders reciprocity of embodiment during the *Kalawālī Khicrī* in two distinct ways. It is constructed of material media associated with Mai Misra, symbolically embodying her. Similarly, the intangible media of scent and sound employed in the ritual invoke participants’ embodiment of the saint in *hāl*. This state transforms participants into physical mediums of the presence (*hāzirī*) and *barkat* of the saints. The red thread featured in the ritual is the material medium representing the link between saint, *kalas*, and participants. Tied to the

¹⁷⁰ Communication in Rander on April 27, 2019.

¹⁷¹ Observation in Mumbai on March 31, 2019.

lattice-work gating a saint's shrine, the thread represents the bond between saint and supplicant and the transference of *barkat* from the former to the latter. Outside of the context of a *mannat*, a ritual specialist may tie this thread to the gate (*jālī*) and the supplicant's right wrist while praying for the saint to assist a supplicant in a matter; the symbolism of the thread applies to this act, as well.¹⁷² The latter act most closely resembles the way in which thread is tied to participants' wrists during the *khicrī* ceremony.

The thread serves a protective function by linking its wearer with the spiritual energy of the saint. The thread is also tied to the mouths of the pots forming the body of the *kalas* and used to secure the veil (*cundarī*) to its coconut 'head.' This thread, literally linked to the shrine, connects the material medium of the *kalas* and the physical person of the participant with the ritual power of the saint: like the flow of blood, the red thread mediates the flow of *barkat* between the inanimate and animate material media embodying the saint. The *kalas* and the physical medium of the devotee thus demonstrate reciprocity of embodiment during the *Kalawālī Khicrī* ritual.

A participant presents the *kalas* as an offering, whose liquid contents become consecrated by the ritual power of the saint. This gift is reciprocated by the saint's embodiment in a participant, who in turn becomes energized by the saint's *barkat*. Participants drink the contents of the *kalas*, integrating the saint's *barkat* into the body. Similarly, the person in *hāl* is offered a drink of water, which becomes an additional liquid medium of the saint's *barkat* and is passed to

¹⁷² Participant observation at the shrine of Mai Misra in Bhavnagar on October 23, 2019. A band made from the fabric of a used *galef* may be tied to a visitor's arm in order to cover the wearer in the *barkat* of the saint. Participant observation at the shrine of Nagarchi Pir in Jambur on April 7, 2019.

other participants to drink. The study of the *Śakkarwālī Khicṛī* below engages this concept of embodiment of *barkat* and reciprocity in greater detail.

Śakkarwālī Khicṛī

The male ancestors of Ahmedabad's ritual practitioners lived in Itara village in Jamnagar; across from their former home stands the shrine of Itarewali Ma, a *sahelī* of Mai Misra. Women in Ahmedabad may therefore observe a *khicṛī* ceremony honoring Itarewali Ma, called a *Śakkarwālī* (Sugar) *Khicṛī* in which the dish of *khicṛī* is garnished with sugar. This ceremony may be performed in fulfilment of a *mannat* and is open to attendance by Sidi women exclusively. The entire event, including the *dhammāl* performance, is *pardewālī*, occurring behind closed doors.

After the *dhammāl* performance, both Mai Misra and her *sahelī* Itarewali Ma arrived in *hāl*.¹⁷³ At this point, the music stopped so that participants could hear the saints speak. The faces of the two women in *hāl* were covered with their veils once the saints arrived. This was so that onlookers would not conflate the identity of the woman in *hāl* with that of the saint after the ritual; it was also intended to honor the saints, as women of high status traditionally observed the rules of *purdah*. Mai Misra and Itarewali Ma held *sawāl-jawāb*, speaking individually with whomever engaged them. Mai Misra placed her hands over each woman's head, praying for her or softly offering counsel. Itarewali Ma was more expressive, wailing out her counsel including admonitions for all the women to hear, whom she addressed as her own *saheliyām*, companions.

¹⁷³ Personal observation of ritual in Ahmedabad on August 7, 2017.

The environment bristled with a sense of intimacy and intense catharsis; many of the women gathered began to weep.

While Itarewali Ma counseled the women on one side of the room, Mai Misra interacted with the others. She asked for a lemon, wrapped it in cloth, and offered it to one woman as a means of binding negative energy. Before Mai Misra departed, she was fed ashes (*khāk*) from the incense, as well as a few sips of black coffee from a cup that had been set next to a cup of milk and a tray filled with fruit. Mai Misra was treated to these items just as one offers refreshments to a guest. The coffee and milk were sacred drinks (*pyālā*) of Itarewali Ma and Mai Misra, respectively.¹⁷⁴

Shortly thereafter, the women's *hal* ended, and the ritual concluded. Participants distributed fruit and passed the cup of coffee amongst themselves so that everyone would have a chance to drink the remnants of the coffee which the embodied saint had sipped. Although the *Śakkarwālī Khicṛī* as a rule involves Sidi women only, the fruit could be distributed for women outside of the community to consume. Participants remained sitting, eating the fruit, and chatting long after the ritual's close.

Reciprocity is a characteristic feature of *khicṛī* ceremonies hosted in fulfilment of a *mannat*. A supplicant requests Mai Misra's intercessory prayers regarding a matter, offering a *khicṛī* ceremony in return. A ritual specialist initiates the ceremony by reciting prayers to consecrate the dish of *khicṛī* and bring blessings upon those gathered. These prayers initiating the

¹⁷⁴ Rumanaben later explained that the coffee was Itarewali Ma's *pyālā* and the milk was Mai Misra's *pyālā*. Mai Misra, embodied during *hāl*, was fed Itarewali Ma's *pyālā* of coffee. Communication in Ahmedabad on September 23, 2019.

khicrī ceremony that marks the fulfilment of the *mannat* mirror Mai Misra's intercessory prayers for the supplicant, the act which initiates the *mannat*. In this way, the ritual specialist who leads the ceremony mirrors Mai Misra, just as the seven Sidi women who ritually consume the tray of *khicrī* symbolize Mai Misra's seven companions.

As in the *Kalaswali Khicrī* described above, the consumption of food during and after the ritual reflects an additional layer of reciprocity. Edible items such as coconuts and sweets may be offered in fulfilment of a *mannat*; the dish of *khicrī* featured in this ritual is the food item associated with fulfilment of the *mannat*. Like other edible items offered at the shrine, the *khicrī* is consecrated during the ritual and thereby imbued with Mai Misra's *barkat*. Participants consume the *khicrī* to embody this potency during the ritual. Like sweets offered at a shrine, the *khicrī* is distributed to participants after the seven *sahelīs* have ritually consumed the first serving of the dish. This invitation for food advertises its cause, the saint's successful fulfilment of a *mannat*, encouraging the perpetuation of this tradition amongst devotees.

After all have eaten the consecrated dish, reciprocity manifests in the offering of edible and potable substances to the embodied saint during *hāl*. As demonstrated above, this may include a cup of water, incense ash, or the saints' *pyālā*. Water from a shrine (or circled around a saint's tomb/*cillā*), ash, and the saints' *pyālā* are consecrated substances which devotees ingest outside of the context of the *khicrī* ceremony to receive the saints' *barkat*; offering these substances to the saints in return solidifies ritual bonds between saints and devotees. Another layer of reciprocity forms via participants' consumption of the water or *pyālā* of coffee imbibed by the embodied saint. The reciprocal act of offering then consuming the saint's *pyālā*

during the *Śakkarwālī Khicrī* bears great import toward surveying the historiographic potential of the rituals of the Sidi Sufi devotional tradition, a point examined in greater detail below.

Historical Dimensions of Mai Misra's Khicrī

Since at least the early nineteenth century, the shrine of Bava Gor magnetized displaced Africans, especially those fleeing servitude, who integrated into an organization (*jamāt*) of ritual specialists (*faqīrs*) united by bonds of ritual kinship linking initiates and their teachers as 'children' of African Rifai Sufi 'ancestor'-saints. These ritual kinship bonds were conceptually bound to notions of natural kinship: these bonds were described in terms of parent-child and sibling dynamics, and phenotypical features like curly hair suggested the natural inheritance of ritual power (*barkat*) from the saints. Furthermore, these ritual bonds integrated kinless individuals into ritual 'families,' creating the social identity necessary to establish 'true' bonds of natural kinship through marriage and childbirth.

The Sidi community (*jamāt*) consisting of conjugal and genealogical ties of natural kinship thus formed through the mediation of the organization (*jamāt*) of ritual specialists. Africans of diverse ethnic origins thereby constituted a Muslim "caste" (*jamāt*) of African ancestry comprising twenty clans (*aṭak*), with Bava Gor and Mai Misra as the *kulpīr* of the entire community, and other ancestor-saints as *kulpīr* of distinct clans. For example, Itarewali Ma is the *kulpīr* of the Myava clan, whose name indexes the Yao ethnolinguistic group of southern Tanzania and northern Mozambique.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁵ Communication in Ahmedabad on December 20, 2018. Lodhi, "Wedding Customs," 172.

With Bava Gor's tomb providing a center of gravity for the growing Sidi community in the early nineteenth century, Mai Misra's tomb only a few paces away was likely included in this process of magnetization. Mai Misra's *Khicrī* ceremony suggests the history of Afrodescendant women's cultivation of devotional relationships with this female African Rifai Sufi ancestor-saint. A criterion for selecting the seven *sahelīs* for the ritual is that the women should be 'true Sidi' – that is, they should have curly hair.¹⁷⁶ Dark skin and curly hair evidence 'natural' kinship with the ancestor-saints in terms of shared African heritage, and phenotypically mark inheritance of the saints' ritual power (*barkat/karāmat*).¹⁷⁷ Sidi women in Ahmedabad and Ratanpur reflect that theirs is the hair of their ancestor-saints Mai Misra and Hazrat Bilal, the Abyssinian companion of the Prophet.¹⁷⁸ Their hair is indicative of their membership in the Sidi "caste."¹⁷⁹ This 'natural' transference of spiritual power is the prerequisite for ritual kinship with the ancestor-saints, a relationship of devotional service mediated through ritual initiation.

Basu observes that the initiation of ritual daughters (*bālkī*) of Mai Misra is reflected in one sequence of the 'urs celebrated by Shidis (Afro-Pakistanis) in Karachi, in which seven women initiates of Mai Misra consume *khicrī* in seclusion near the saint's shrine.¹⁸⁰ Basu observes, "Transmitting substances of mothers, the sharing of food visualises the creation of ritual daughters and the transmission of female ritual power."¹⁸¹ These "ritual daughters" parallel

¹⁷⁶ Basu, "A Gendered Indian Ocean Site," 251.

¹⁷⁷ Basu, "Theatre of Memory," 248-249. Basu, "Ritual Communication," 238.

¹⁷⁸ Communication in in Ratanpur on January 24, 2019 and in Ahmedabad on January 29, 2019.

¹⁷⁹ Basu, "Theatre of Memory," 249. Guneet Kaur, "Culture, Identity and Rhythms of Resistance: A Case Study of the Sidis of Ahmedabad," in *Afro-South Asia in the Global African Diaspora: Black Ambassadors of Politics, Religion, and Jazz in India*, eds. Omar H. Ali et al. (Greensboro: University of North Carolina at Greensboro Ethiopian and East African Studies Project, 2020), 187.

¹⁸⁰ Basu, "Theatre of Memory," 260.

¹⁸¹ Basu, "Theatre of Memory," 261

the seven *sahelīs* of Mai Misra’s *khicṛī* ceremonies in India, indicating that the *khicṛī* ceremony portrays ritual kinship bonds linking Mai Misra and participants through the consumption of food imbued the saint’s *barkat*. Outside of Bava Gor, Bava Habash, and Mai Misra who are remembered as ‘true’ siblings, their entourages of male and female saints are remembered as ritual brothers and sisters under a common *pīr*. This indicates that Mai Misra’s seven companion saints were her ritual sisters. The seven *sahelis* who consume the *khicṛī* symbolically represent these seven ritual sisters, and the criterion that they all have curly hair conveys this notion of ‘natural’ inheritance of the ritual power (*barkat*) of the saints. Mai Misra’s *khicṛī* tradition may therefore provide a window onto Afro-descendant women’s integration into the Sidi community through the affirmation of loosely conceived notions of ‘natural/ritual’ kinship with the Sidi ancestor-saints.

The following *jikar* exemplifies how the ‘play’ of Mai Misra in *hāl* reinforces these bonds of kinship. The *jikar*, excerpted below, is performed in Ahmedabad during Mai Misra *khicṛī* ceremonies. Its Gujarati lyrics urge the saint to come ‘swaying’ and ‘playing’ across the ocean to do her ‘work:’

<i>Jhūltām āvo Mārī, ho naṅgāse</i>	Come swaying Mother, o <i>nangasi</i>
<i>Kheltām āvo Mārī, ho naṅgāse</i>	Come playing Mother, o <i>nangasi</i>
<i>Khelo ne, Māmā</i>	Won’t you play, Mama?
<i>Dariyā jāṅgo Mārī, ho naṅgāse</i>	Cross the ocean Mother, o <i>nangasi</i>
<i>Mārī taruṃ kām che Mā, ho naṅgāse</i>	Mother you have work Ma, o <i>nangasi</i>

On one hand, this *jikar* recalls the saints’ origin narrative in which they traveled to Ratanpur to challenge a sorceress: the biography of Bava Gor analyzed at the start of the chapter reads, “by

sea ...you came to dispel the magic of Ratanpur.”¹⁸² On the other hand, this *jikar* pleads with Mai Misra, calling her ‘mother’ in three different ways - *Mā*, *Mārī*, and *Māmā* - so that she may come ‘play’ with her children. This exemplifies notions of ritual kinship with the ancestral saint (*kulpīr*) conceptualized as a ‘mother’ of her ritual ‘children’ (*bālkā/bālkī*).

The *jikar* connects work and play in the context of Mai Misra’s arrival from across the sea. Individuals embodying the presence of an ancestor-saint become available for *sawāl-jawāb* (question-and-answer) with devotees. These sessions provide opportunities for interlocutors (*sawālīs*) to request the saint’s assistance, advice, and intervention. In the context of Mai Misra’s *khicrī* ceremony, these sessions are cathartic moments of emotional release and generate confidence, hope, and devotional bonds between Mai Misra and devotees. Mothers may bring babies inside of the room for the embodied ‘Mother’ saint to bless. The embodied Mai Misra may craft an item charged with healing power for a woman to keep on her child’s person or in her home. This is the ‘work’ which the *jikar* above exhorts Mai Misra to come to do.

The *khicrī* ritual solidifies the bond between saint and supplicant created by the *mannat* in presenting to the latter an opportunity to interact with the former via *sawāl-jawāb*. The embodiment of Mai Misra’s presence (*hāzirī*) facilitates the re-enactment of her historical role as a Sufi teachers and guide in fourteenth-century Gujarat. The *khicrī* ritual in which she is re-presented (that is, made present) allows her to resume her role through *sawāl-jawāb*, during which she counsels and prays for devotees. The ‘play’ of the embodied saint creates a context for

¹⁸² Rumanaben explains that ‘*jāngo*’ in the line “*Dariyā jāngo Mārī* (Cross the ocean, Mother)” is a Gujarati word that expresses the imperative ‘*pār karo* (cross).’ Personal communication on July 3, 2020. One definition of the Hindi noun *jaṅg* is a ‘large, wide boat.’ See Syamasundara Dasa, *Hindī Sabdasagara* (Kasi: Nagari Pracarini Sabha, 1965-1975), 1661.

the performance of ‘work’ identifiable as spiritual healing (*rūhānī ilāj*).¹⁸³ Women embodying Mai Misra may prepare a lemon for the purpose of removing negativity from a devotee or may blow prayers (*duā*) onto the head of a supplicant, techniques which appear in other contexts of Sufi healing.¹⁸⁴ This performance of spiritual healing techniques by a person embodying Mai Misra’s presence (*hāzirī*) makes the *khicrī* ceremony a site for her ritual re-presentation – that is, rendering this fourteenth-century Rifai Sufi saint ‘present’ for the performance of her historical roles as a Sufi teachers, healer, and spiritual guide.

The closing act of the *Śakkarwālī Khicrī* ceremony described above underscores the *khicrī* ceremony as a site for the ritual re-presentation and reenactment of the historical role of Mai Misra as a Rifai Sufi saint. The act of imbibing a *pyālā* (sacred drink) which the embodied saint herself had sipped mirrors the process by which a Sidi *murśid* administers the *pyālā* of ritual initiation, formally establishing a bond of ritual kinship between an ancestor-saint and the ritual child. Devotees’ sharing a *pyālā* (sacred drink) sipped by the saint embodied in *hāl* conveys the initiation of ritual daughters, who form a cohort of ritual sisters, like the seven women who consume the *khicrī* symbolize Mai Misra’s seven *sahelīs*. The *Śakkarwālī Khicrī* ceremony may thus preserve a history of women’s perpetuation – or affirmation – of bonds of ritual kinship with Mai Misra, affording valuable insight into the process of Afrodescendant women’s integration into the Sidi community.

¹⁸³ Shail Mayaram, “Beyond Ethnicity? Behind Hindu and Muslim in South Asia,” in *Lived Islam in South Asia: Adaptation, Accommodation and Conflict*. Eds. Imtiaz Ahmad and Helmut Reifeld (New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2004), 29.

¹⁸⁴ Flueckiger, *In Amma’s Healing Room*, 66, 94-95, 97, 109. Participant observation at the headquarters of the Rifai *pīr* in Baroda on September 29, 2019.

Conclusion

This chapter surveys the material media featured in devotional rituals at Sidi saint shrines in order to establish a foundation for the study of Mai Misra's *Khicrī* ceremony. Such material media establish reciprocal bonds of exchange between saint and supplicant. The primary context in which this occurs is the establishment and fulfilment of a *mannat* or vow binding saint and supplicant in a temporary ritual relationship. At times offered to complete a *mannat*, the various iterations of Mai Misra's *Khicrī* ceremony described above demonstrate reciprocity between saint and devotee in two distinct ways: the reciprocity of embodiment and of consumption of consecrated substances.

By facilitating the embodiment of the ancestor-saints, the *khicrī* ritual illuminates the historical dimensions of ritual kinship between the saints as *kulpīr* (lineage saints) of their Sidi 'descendant'-devotees. Through its engagement of the Sufi practice of remembrance (*zīkr*) through the ritual audition of devotional music, the *khicrī* ceremony serves as a stage for the ritual remembrance and re-presentation of the African Rifai Sufi saint Mai Misra and one or more of her seven 'sister' saints. During the *Śakkarwālī Khicrī* ceremony, the material medium of the *pyālā* (sacred drink) evokes the *pyālā* of ritual initiation, underscoring the *khicrī* ritual as a context for the affirmation of loosely conceived bonds of ritual kinship linking the 'Mother' ancestor-saint with ritual 'children' or 'descendant'-devotees. The historical and contemporary agents simultaneously understood to be at work in this ritual invite us to problematize the notion of Mai Misra's limited ritual authority as a Rifai Sufi, who as a woman would not have been able to receive nor pass on deputyship [*khilāfat*] in the order. Today, women's ritual authority as

caretakers of the shrines of female, and sometimes male, Sidi ancestor-saints further disrupts the norm of male religious authority at Sufi saint shrines in India.

The historiographic potential of the *khicrī* ceremony rests in its provision of a meeting space at which the African Rifai saint Mai Misra, “Mother [from] Egypt,” provides guidance and counsel to the Sidi ritual practitioners and devotees who keep her shrines and traditions. *Sawāl-jawāb* sessions are believed to provide a forum for historical personalities, about whom oral narratives are recalled, historical documents are preserved, and academic texts are published, to seize the opportunity to speak. Most times, they speak about their interlocutors (*sawālīs*), but on rare occasions, they speak about themselves.¹⁸⁵ It is thus during rituals of spirit mediumship in the Sidi Sufi tradition that we may stop to hear subaltern spirits speak.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁵ Shroff, “Spiritual Journeys,” 266.

¹⁸⁶ In this turn of phrase I pay homage to Gayatri Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313.

2. Mai Misra as *Kuldevī*: Mai Misra’s Origin Narrative and *Kalaswālī Khicrī* Ceremony

Introduction

The turn of the twenty-first century brought darkness and bloodshed to the city of Ahmedabad. One of the worst communal riots in the history of post-independence India wracked Gujarat state in 2002, with nearly half of all deaths occurring in Ahmedabad.¹⁸⁷ Strategic acts of terror dealt crushing blows to the state’s Muslim minority, displacing hundreds of thousands, destroying businesses and subjecting women to sadistic brutality. “Even the dead were not immune from attack. In efforts to blot out glories of the Muslim legacy in Ahmedabad, tombs of revered saints and scholars were vandalized, destroyed, and paved over, sometimes with state resources.”¹⁸⁸ Among those targeted in the violence were an ethnic minority within the state’s Muslim minority: Sidis, a community of East African origin, who maintain the shrines of African Sufi ancestor-saints who have lain entombed in Gujarat for over six centuries.

A number of Hindu friends who had grown up with Sidis saw the “miracle” that occurred in 2002 when tens of thousands of rioters descended upon the Sidis’ residential complex housing a memorial shrine of Bava Gor at its center.¹⁸⁹ Bottles and stones flew between both fronts, though police presence had reached the site. A stone hurled from the mob’s side hit a police officer, who retaliated and routed the rioters. Later, Hindu friends visited the Sidis and asked them, “How did you get all of those horsemen to protect you?” “Horsemen?” they echoed

¹⁸⁷ Howard Spodek, *Ahmedabad: Shock City of Twentieth-Century India* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 248-270. Many thanks to Howard Spodek for sharing his expertise with me while in the field in Ahmedabad.

¹⁸⁸ Spodek, *Ahmedabad*, 257.

¹⁸⁹ From informal interviews in Ahmedabad on March 3, 2019, and October 11-12, 2019. For a full rendering of this incident, see Jazmin Graves, “A Tree Enrooted: African Sufi Saints as “Lineage Deities” of a Muslim Community of East African Ancestry in Western India (Gujarat and Mumbai),” in *Routledge Handbook on Islam in Asia*, ed. Chiara Formichi (London, New York: Routledge, forthcoming 2021).

blankly. “We didn’t have any horsemen.” Mounted guards had appeared between the mob and the Sidis’ residential complex. Sidis could not see them, but Hindus could. The horsemen even stayed overnight, reassuring the police officers who had stayed behind to guard the area, yet were too frightened to sleep: “You go to sleep. We are here. *Āp so jāo. Ham yahām haim.*” These talking apparitions were the merciful intervention, if not the self-disclosure, of the saints memorialized at the shrine. “Some people have questions about Bava Gor and Mai Misra,” one Sidi woman reflects, “but those who know the old stories know that Bava Gor protected us. This is why we love him, and we believe in him.”

Sidis’ close encounter with anti-Muslim communal violence galvanized by absolutist politics belies the entrenchment of their devotional tradition and community identity in the cultural fabric of the nation of their birth. The tomb complex of Bava Gor, his siblings, and other members of his saintly entourage in Ratanpur, a remote village in the Bharuch district of Gujarat state, has historically been a site of ethnic and religious pluralism.¹⁹⁰ This ethos developed over at least two centuries of interaction between Sidi custodians of the shrine and other residents of the locality, including Hindu and Adivasi (indigenous) communities. Among the latter, Bhils held longstanding ties to Bava Gor, whom they venerated as the patron saint of the agate bead industry in which they participated. “By eclectically combining and mixing Sufi, Bhil, Hindu and African cultural elements,” Basu synthesizes, “the cult of Gori Pir [Bava Gor] can be understood as a new, uniquely creolised cultural production that has been brought about by the interactions of Sidi with their social environment.”¹⁹¹

¹⁹⁰ See Basu, “Redefining Boundaries.”

¹⁹¹ Basu, “Redefining Boundaries,” 67.

The dispersal of Africans in Gujarat and their acculturation to a multireligious environment facilitated the emergence of a multifaceted devotional tradition at the shrine of the African Sufi saint Bava Gor. This exemplifies the fact that “Many, if not most Muslims live amidst other religions and traditions, their cultural roots intertwining, complementing and competing not as isolated transplants but as part of a forest of local character that involves them in the lives of others at a level that transcends religion.”¹⁹² This chapter illuminates the ways in which the Sidi Sufi devotional tradition is enrooted in the religious and cultural ecology of western India.

Parsing excerpts of legal statements composed in the early 1980s and published by Basu in 2003, the chapter illustrates Sidi community leaders’ own articulations of the multivalence of their devotional tradition and identity in relation to other Muslims. These statements conceive of Bava Gor in terms of a deity to whom the Sidi community has been bound in worship over the generations, one of many self-conscious acknowledgements of the intertwinement of Hindu beliefs and practices within the Sidi devotional tradition.

These statements establish the groundwork for the chapter’s analysis of Mai Misra’s representation in Sidi devotional songs and oral narratives. The chapter analyzes the ways in which these oral texts characterize Mai Misra in terms of a Hindu goddess. Her origin narrative in particular positions her in a way that runs parallel to a Rajput lineage goddess’ foundational

¹⁹² Peter Gottschalk, “Mapping Muslims: Categories of Evolutionary Difference and Interaction in South Asia,” in *Lived Islam in South Asia: Adaptation, Accommodation and Conflict*, eds. Imtiaz Ahmad and Helmut Reifeld (New Delhi: Social Science Press), 14.

myth, while women's veneration of the saint evokes various ways in which a Rajput *kuldevī* or other goddesses are worshipped in their respective devotional contexts.

Mai Misra's *kalas*, a clay or metal jar that features ubiquitously in Mai Misra's death anniversary (*urs*) observances, has a distinctive role in the *Kalaswālī Khicṛī* ceremony performed in Ahmedabad. The form and function of Mai Misra's *kalas* in this ceremony recall the ritual installation of a clay or metal jar (*ghaṭ/kalas*) as a gynomorphic embodiment of a Hindu goddess (*ghaṭasthāpanā*). Relative to a carved or printed image, the aniconic nature of the jar-form of a Hindu goddess allows for its use in an Islamic devotional tradition in veneration of a Sufi woman saint. These analyses underscore the ways in which the Sidi Sufi tradition draws from the religious culture of its environment to configure the interpretive framework for its devotional mode and the performative idiom of its rituals.

This chapter's study of the Sidi Sufi tradition of Gujarat and Mumbai contributes to academic discourse on literary and material cultures and Sufi ritual practices as they evidence accommodation, reinterpretation and exchange between Hindu and Muslim communities in South Asia.¹⁹³ Departing from the language of "syncretism" to analyze the agents, products and motives of such exchange, scholars have engaged the concept of "liminality" to illuminate interstitial texts, identities and devotional practices.¹⁹⁴ This chapter views the liminality of Mai Misra's identity as a Sufi saint conceived and venerated in terms of a Hindu goddess as an expression of multivocality, by which one symbol accrues multiple meanings based on its

¹⁹³ Consider for example Busch and de Bruijn 2014, Behl 2012, Ernst 2009, Flood 2009, Alam 1996, cited in the introduction. See also the contributions by Tschacher, Tontini, Steimhardt, Rasmussen, Arjana, and Xavier in Formichi, *Routledge Handbook on Islam in Asia*.

¹⁹⁴ Consider for example Ahmad and Reifeld, *Lived Islam*, cited in the introduction.

circulation in a multi-religious environment.¹⁹⁵ The *kalas*, composed and installed by Hindus in worship of a goddess or by Sidi Muslims in remembrance of their ancestor-saint Mai Misra, is one such symbol. The devotional songs, oral narratives, rituals, and material culture of the Sidi Sufi tradition thus encode the process by which Muslims of African ancestry dispersed in Gujarat established community on the basis of devotion to African Sufi saints entombed in Gujarat while acculturating to the motifs and paradigms of their environment.

Bava Gor as “Lineage God (*Kuldevtā*)” of the Sidi Community

In the early 1980s, Sidi community leaders appealed to the Office of the Charity Commissioner of Gujarat, which had constituted a board of trustees to manage the affairs of Bava Gor’s *dargāh* in Ratanpur. Sidi leaders sought to reclaim control over their ancestral shrine from members of a different Muslim community who had come to dominate its board of trustees.¹⁹⁶ Excerpts of Sidi leaders’ legal statements, published by Basu in 2003, provide a solid point of departure for analyzing Sidis’ reflexivity regarding their devotional tradition. These documents record a self-conscious effort to articulate the polyvalence of their tradition; the statements incorporate select terminology that affirms their identity as Muslims yet conveys the sheer distance of their shrine-based traditions from what would be intelligible to their challengers as Islam, expressing rather their direct proximity to Hindu beliefs and devotional rituals. While outside contenders based their claims to the shrine on their devotion, as Muslims, to the Muslim saints buried thereat, the Sidi petitioners mobilized caste-based norms of worship and profession

¹⁹⁵ Orsini, “Krishna is the Truth,” 228.

¹⁹⁶ See Basu, “Slave, Soldier, Trader, Faqir,” 238-241 and Basu, “Redefining Boundaries.”

drawn from the dominant religio-cultural milieu to express their ancestral connection to Bava Gor and, therefore, their exclusive rights to his shrine.

One statement outlines the relationship between Bava Gor and the Muslim Sidi community.¹⁹⁷ It identifies Bava Gor as an “*auliya*” or Sufi saint and locates Mecca, the birthplace of Islam, as his point of departure on his journey to Gujarat. This communicates the legitimacy of Bava Gor and his siblings, Bava Habash and Mai Misra, as Sufi saints. The statement proposes that the three were all Sidis, and that the male saints are the forebears of the contemporary Sidi community.¹⁹⁸ The statement then sketches the expanse of the Sidi community and its network of ancestor-saint shrines throughout Gujarat, eastward to the city of Mumbai in the neighboring state of Maharashtra, and southeastward to Hyderabad, the capital city of Telangana state in southern central India, highlighting the localities which Muslim Sidis generally populate.¹⁹⁹ The statement affirms Bava Gor as a Sufi saint and forbear of the Sidi community in order to validate his Sidi “descendants” as a legitimate Muslim community. This reads as a challenge to those Muslims vying for control over Bava Gor’s shrine based on their self-identification as Muslim devotees of Bava Gor as a Sufi saint: not only are Sidis themselves

¹⁹⁷ Basu, “Slave, Soldier, Trader, Faqir,” 238-239.

¹⁹⁸ According to a conversation with the caretaker of Mai Misra’s *dargāh* in Ratanpur on April 29, 2019, Mai Misra was engaged, but her fiancé was martyred before their marriage, precluding the birth of any children.

¹⁹⁹ The statement does not name the South Indian state Karnataka, home to Hindu, Christian and Muslim Sidis who have relatively less exposure to the devotional tradition of Gujarat’s Muslim Sidis. See Pashington Obeng, *Shaping Membership, Defining Nation: The Cultural Politics of African Indians in South Asia* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2007). The Sidi Sufi tradition of Gujarat appears to have spread to Sidis in Karnataka by the twenty-first century, approximately two decades after the composition of these statements. See Catlin-Jairazbhoy, “A Sidi CD?,” 203, fn. 16. Sofia Péquignot observes the role of social media in facilitating connections between Sidis in India in “Re-shaping Siddi Communities.”

Muslim, they are the descendants of Bava Gor and therefore the rightful custodians of his shrine.²⁰⁰

Sidis' claim to ownership of the shrine rests upon an ancestral relationship to the saints conceived in terms of natural kinship, by which Sidis view the saints as their ancestors, and in terms of a generational history of devotional service.²⁰¹ The statements appeal to terminology and place names that characterize Bava Gor and his descendants as legitimate Muslims, yet assertively distinguish Sidis' relationship with Bava Gor as unique from any devotional relationship that other Muslims might have with the saint. One statement self-consciously declares, "According to Muslim religion, Muslims do not do any other form of worship except their own and pray to no one except Allah. We, the people of the Sidi community are different."²⁰² Another statement clarifies the terms of this distinction: "Till [sic] today we consider Bava Gor a *kuldevta* (lineage god) and show our respect by doing *pujavidhi* (rituals)."²⁰³ The terms *kuldevta* and *pujavidhi* in Hindu religious contexts refer to a deity (*devtā*) and a method (*vidhi*) of worship (*pujā*). A *kuldevtā* is a deity worshipped by a particular kinship group (*kul*) over generations; the *kuldevta*, in exchange, is believed to perpetuate that lineage by protecting and providing for its members.²⁰⁴ The term *kuldevta* thus communicates the unique dynamic between the Sidi descendant-devotee and the Sidi ancestor-saint, underscoring the

²⁰⁰ Basu, "Redefining Boundaries," 72.

²⁰¹ Basu, "Slave, Soldier, Trader, Faqir," 239-240.

²⁰² Basu, "Slave, Soldier, Trader, Faqir," 239.

²⁰³ Basu, "Slave, Soldier, Trader, Faqir," 240.

²⁰⁴ See Lindsay Harlan, *Religion and Rajput Women: The Ethic of Protection in Contemporary Narratives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

former's singular rights to the latter's shrine over the claims of any Muslim outside of the Sidi community.

Regardless of physical proximity to a memorial shrine (*cillā*) of an ancestor-saint, Sidi families tend to maintain household shrines (also called *chillā*) dedicated to one or more ancestor-saints.²⁰⁵ This practice evidences Sidis' singular relationship to the ancestor-saints construed as 'deities' attached to the kinship groups comprising the Sidi community (*jamāt*), a dynamic derived from Hindu contexts. An image of a Hindu deity may be housed in a temple (*mandir*) attended by priests and open to visitation by worshippers; household temples (also called *mandir*) in a Hindu family's home provide a space for worshipping the family's *kuldevtā*. For example, members of a particular patrilineal kinship group from Veda village in Gujarat, worship the goddess Khodiyar Ma as their *kuldevī* (lineage goddess); while Veda is home to one of the goddess' many temples throughout Gujarat, a family from the aforementioned kinship group living in the urban center of Ahmedabad worships Khodiyar Ma in their household temple alongside images of other pan-Hindu deities. Sidis' maintenance of private, household shrines dedicated to one or more ancestor-saints similarly reflects their ancestral bond to the saints, articulated in the Sidi leaders' statements in terms of a *kuldevtā-kul* dynamic.

The term *kuldevtā* is not exclusively used to identify the Sidi Sufi saints in relation to their Sidi devotees. The saints are also referred to as *kuldādā* or *kuldādī*, compound nouns which

²⁰⁵ See Neelima Jeychandran, "Charismatic Afterlives of African Saints and Martyrs: Sidi Sacred Geography and Spiritual Practices in Gujarat," in *Afro-South Asia in the Global African Diaspora: African Diasporan Communities across South Asia*. Ali, eds. Omar H. et al. (Greensboro: University of North Carolina at Greensboro Ethiopian and East African Studies Project, 2020), 77-91.

substitute *devtā* (deity) with *dādā* (paternal grandfather) and *dādī* (paternal grandmother).²⁰⁶

These identifiers also emphasize the saints' conceptualization as ancestors of the Sidi community. Sidi interlocutors in Ahmedabad identify the ancestor-saints by the term *kulpīr* (lineage saints), which substitutes "deity" or "grandparent" for *pīr*, (spiritual guide), a title for a Sufi saint.²⁰⁷ This term conveys the same notion of an ancestral relationship to the saint through generations of devotional service but foregrounds the object of devotion as a Sufi saint or spiritual guide rather than as a deity. While Bava Gor and Mai Misra are generally revered as *kulpīr* of the entire Sidi community, various clans (*aṭak*) within the community may secondarily venerate other ancestor-saints as the *kulpīr* of that particular kinship group (*kul*). This reinforces the notion of ancestral links binding Sidi lineages with Sidi ancestor-saints in terms that parallel a *kul-kuldevtā* dynamic.

The statements enumerate some of the rituals by which Sidis venerate Bava Gor. These include praying to Bava Gor by reciting *jikar*, glossed in the statements as Swahili prayers, and by performing a dance called *gomā* or *dhammāl*.²⁰⁸ This devotional music and ecstatic dance performance, with its musical instruments of African origin, evokes the *ngoma* institutions of central, eastern, and southern Africa.²⁰⁹ Amongst the rituals of the Sidi ancestor-saint shrine, the performance of *jikar* and *dhammāl* bespeaks the African heritage of the Sidi Sufi tradition, its custodians and its saints. Yet the same statements also assert that Sidis' customs are comparable to those of Hindu ascetic orders and define the type of worship conducted at the *dargāh* as

²⁰⁶ Basu, "Ritual Communication," 237.

²⁰⁷ Basu, "Hierarchy and Emotion," 87.

²⁰⁸ Basu, "Slave, Soldier, Trader, Faqir," 238.

²⁰⁹ See for example Basu, "A Gendered Indian Ocean Site," 236-244; Catlin-Jairazbhoy, "Sidi Music;" Shroff, "Spiritual Journeys," 260-263.

“*puja*.”²¹⁰ This characterization of the ritual practices at the shrine of Bava Gor underscores the multivalence of the Sidi Sufi tradition, born of African cultural elements enrooted in a plural religious context in western India.

The statements outline the performance of these rituals as the distinct profession of Sidis. This notion is tied to occupation-based concepts of caste in India, by which a specific caste may traditionally be responsible for a specific occupation. The statements draw from the logic of the surrounding sociocultural milieu in which profession and caste often correlate to identify the ancestral profession of the Sidi community as inextricably linked to the shrine of Bava Gor. Sidi leaders’ linking their community with a particular ancestral profession illuminates the definition of the term *jamāt* as “caste” in this social context in western India.²¹¹ The concept of caste as a factor binding Muslim Sidis to the devotional service of Bava Gor reinforces the *kuldevtā-kul* dynamic characterizing this relationship.

Having asserted to “outside Muslims” that Bava Gor is a Muslim saint and that Muslim Sidis are his descendants, the statements attempt to convince the Office of the Charity Commissioner that allowing just any Muslim to run the shrine will endanger and ultimately alienate its diverse clientele.²¹² Members of any other Muslim caste would be completely unacquainted with, if not scornful of, those aspects of the shrine’s rituals which draw from Sidis’ eastern African heritage and are paramount to the rituals’ efficacy; only Sidi Muslims, whose ancestral profession is the worship of Bava Gor, can correctly administer these rituals to

²¹⁰ Basu, “Slave, Soldier, Trader, Faqir,” 238-239.

²¹¹ Basu, “Slave, Soldier, Trader, Faqir,” 238, 241; Satish C. Misra, *Muslim Communities in Gujarat: Preliminary Studies in their History and Social Organization* (New York: Asia Publishing House, 1964), 139, 129-149; Gottschalk, “Mapping Muslims,” 15.

²¹² Basu, “Slave, Soldier, Trader, Faqir,” 239.

facilitate communication with Bava Gor and provide solutions for seekers at the shrine. Basu notes the precarious position in which this appeal to the polyvalence of the Sidi Sufi tradition places the petitioners: the ambiguity of the Sidi Sufi tradition is simply incomprehensible in an administrative context that conceives of bounded, monolithic religious identities.²¹³

The Sidi leaders' statements suggest that they perceive their community as sharing the Muslim religious and African ethnic identity of their ancestor-saints. However, they are acutely aware of the ways in which their devotional tradition is enrooted in the religious culture of their environment, locating them outside of the scope of what their challengers, from a different Muslim community, might be inclined to believe or practice. One of the most accentuated indications of this difference is the Sidi leaders' conceptualization of their community's devotional relationship with Bava Gor in terms of a *kuldevtā-kul* dynamic. As in Hindu contexts, this foregrounds a bond formed between a kinship group and its object of devotion over generations of worship. Sidi custodianship at the shrine of Bava Gor is documented in the early nineteenth century, indicating that their devotional relationship with Bava Gor spans at least two hundred years.²¹⁴ Defining this as a *kuldevtā-kul* relationship also encodes the history of community formation amongst Africans dispersed in Gujarat.

Mai Misra's Foundational Narrative and Characterization as a Goddess

Oral narratives detailing Mai Misra's arrival in India place her directly in confrontation with a sorceress (*jādūgarnī*) named Makhan Devi. This section parses two versions of Mai

²¹³ Basu, "Slave, Soldier, Trader, Faqir," 240-241. See also Morgenstein Fuerst in *Routledge Handbook on Islam in Asia*.

²¹⁴ Basu, "Redefining Boundaries," 62.

Misra's origin narrative as told in Ahmedabad and Bhavnagar in tandem with devotional practices in Bhavnagar and Jambur involving the veneration of both Mai Misra and Makhan Devi to outline the conceptualization of both as goddess figures. The shores of Kuda in Bhavnagar feature a shrine and a goddess temple which, according to the Bhavnagar version of the tale, are the final resting places of Mai Misra and Makhan Devi, respectively; the temple belongs to the goddess Shikotar Ma. Mythical, architectural, ritual and terminological alignments between the Misra and Makhan Devi, at times involving the popular Gujarati goddess Khodiyar Ma, reveal the incorporation of Hindu goddesses into Mai Misra's extended family of 'sister' or companion (*sahelī*) saints as well as into Muslim Sidi devotional practice. These adoptions suggest that the battle between the Sufi saint and the sorceress goes beyond a myth depicting Hindu-Muslim conflict in fourteenth century Gujarat, but rather identifies the two as opposite iterations of feminine power (*śakti*).²¹⁵

The theme of migration drives the narrative action of the Bhavnagar telling of the foundational myth. Through the 'avatar' of Makhan Devi, the tale references Vahanvati Shikotar, goddess of the waters propitiated, sometimes with animal sacrifice, by Gujarati seafarers.²¹⁶ The

²¹⁵ A collection of memorial stelae called *sati* and hero stones rise like tombstones from the sands of the Kuda shore near Shikotar Ma's temple. Future investigation will determine whether the stones bear legible inscriptions detailing a conflict which took place at or near that site. For more on memorial stelae in Gujarat, see Durga Kale, "Speaking Stones: Oral Tradition as Provenance for the Memorial Stelae in Gujarat," *Heritage*, 2 (2019): 1085-1096.

²¹⁶ The origins of her worship are traceable to the Socotra archipelago off the coast of Yemen and the Horn of Africa, underscoring the centrality of seaborne migration to the origin story of the Sidi ancestor-saints and to the birth of the African diaspora in South Asia. See H.P. Ray, "From Salsette to Socotra: Islands across the Seas," in *Connectivity in Motion: Island Hubs in the Indian Ocean World*, eds. Burkhard Schnepel and Edward A. Alpers (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 364. See also Vitaly V. Naumkin, *Island of the Phoenix: An Ethnographic Study of the People of Socotra* (England: Ithaca Press, 1993): 315-316, 318-320. In a 1993 ethnography of Socotra, Naumkin details, "In ancient times and during the Middle Ages Socotra was known as the Island of Spirits, and travellers believed its inhabitants were sorcerers who had links with evil spirits." Socotran sorcerers determined vessels' fates by controlling the wind and seas, Marco Polo surmised in the thirteenth century. Naumkin elaborates that while sorcerers and spirits (*jinn*) on Socotra may be male and female, witches and female spirits (*jinniyya*) are especially feared as bringers of illness and death; witches may also "transport themselves across long distances" and

Bhavnagar version of the narrative follows the peregrinations of the saints, locating their tombs (*dargāh*) and memorial shrines (*cillā*, also called *dargāh*) at sites where members of Bava Gor's entourage of saint-soldiers passed away or stayed behind while the rest of the caravan trod onward to Ratanpur. The Bhavnagar telling maps in broad strokes the expanse of Sidi settlements in Gujarat and its associated network of Sidi ancestor-saint shrines. Complementing this, the tale unearths an alternate center of gravity for the Sidi Sufi tradition beyond Ratanpur. References to Mai Misra's entombment in Kuda, Bhavnagar compete with the dominant belief that Bava Gor, Bava Habbash and Mai Misra lie at rest in Ratanpur. This counternarrative facilitates the appreciation of the entire network of Sidi saint shrines as a complete system whose center, Ratanpur, is sacred yet not the standard by which to measure the history and traditions of other shrines throughout this multi-sited network.

One version of the story, as told by Rumanaben in Ahmedabad, takes place at the Dudhiya Talav, a milky pool of white clay, barely accessible in the densely forested area behind Bava Habbash's tomb.²¹⁷ Makhan Devi was wont to bathe daily in this pool, after which she would kill one villager and marked her forehead with a *īrkā* of freshly spilled blood. One day, Bava Gor encountered a weeping woman who feared that her son would be Makhan Devi's next victim. Bava Gor consoled the woman and offered to take her son's place. Though he confronted

float rather than sink when, bound and loaded with ten pounds of stones, they are cast into the sea at trial. The dangerous seas evidence the fierce nature of the goddess controlling them, Shikotar Ma, apotheosis of the spirits of Socotra island. Socotra's malevolent female spirits and witches perhaps find expression in the medieval Gujarati depiction of Shikotar as man-eating demoness and the Sidi foundational myth's representation of Makhan Devi as the murderous sorceress who scales the seas in one leap.

²¹⁷ This narrative was told in Ahmedabad on December 20, 2018, with additional information provided on October 13, 2019. Supporting details are drawn from a version of the tale narrated by the son of the caretaker of Ai Mai Senatwali Ma's shrine in Rander on March 6, 2019.

the sorceress, Bava Gor refused to physically harm a woman. He instead enclosed himself in a tomb, where he performed devotions (*ibādat*) for twelve years.²¹⁸

Eventually, Mai Misra came to investigate her brother's disappearance. She confronted the sorceress who was bathing at the Dudhiya Talav and confiscated her water pot, forbidding her to bathe there any longer. Incensed, the sorceress challenged Mai Misra to a duel in which they would each have three turns to strike. The sorceress' three blows didn't harm the seven-year-old Mai Misra; each of Mai Misra's blows, however, sent the sorceress' body plunging underground until only her head remained visible. On the brink of defeat, the sorceress asked Mai Misra not to fully bury her, so that her people could perform her worship ("*pujā*"). Relenting, Mai Misra departed, and the sorceress' head turned to stone. Now, the sorceress was at the mercy of vengeful villagers. They began to tug angrily at her golden hair and pelt her head with stones. So the sorceress sank fully underground to avoid their wrath. Until today, she is believed to terrorize people by causing malevolent spirit possession, from which supplicants seek healing at the tombs of Mai Misra and Bava Habbash in Ratanpur.²¹⁹

This version of the tale identifies the Dudhiya Talav as Mai Misra's and Makhan Devi's battlefield. It is not only the site of the protagonist's and antagonist's conflict but of their juxtaposition. Yet a prepubescent girl, Mai Misra boldly confronts Makhan Devi to preclude the murder of an innocent villager that would follow the sorceress' bath. That Makhan Devi's next victim, prior to her encounter with Bava Gor, would have been a child reputed cruelty; Mai

²¹⁸ This activity is the source of his title "Bava Gor" meaning "Father [of the] Tomb" in Hindi-Urdu. See Catlin-Jairazbhoy, "A Sidi CD?," 185. The term '*gor*' itself is a regional pronunciation of the Arabic '*ghaur*' in the saint's title "Baba Ghaur" ("Father of Meditation") as listed in the Rifai genealogy (*shajra*). Photograph of the genealogy courtesy of Ph.D. Candidate Sofia Pequinot at the University of Toulouse-Jean Jaurès.

²¹⁹ Basu, "A Gendered Indian Ocean Site," 235. Observation at the tomb of Bava Habash on January 26, 2019.

Misra, by contrast, demonstrates restraint by sparing Makhan Devi's life. Mai Misra's piety further contrasts her character with that of the sorceress in the context of their encounter at the Dudhiya Talav.²²⁰ As the following version of the tale details, Mai Misra performs ablutions before praying for assistance to defeat the sorceress. Makhan Devi as a foil to Mai Misra mirrors this by bathing in the Dudhiya Talav before her daily ritual sacrifice of a human life. By interrupting the sorceress' bath and confiscating her water pot, Mai Misra disrupts this process. The narrative thus portrays the two opponents as opposites, a parallelism which, as the following sections detail, counterintuitively reveals an alignment between them as goddess-figures.

The narrative's juxtaposition of Mai Misra with the sorceress at the Dudhiya Talav, which is today believed to be a spiritually potent site and a source of healing water, positions the saint as a force for ordering imbalance. This representation of Mai Misra is evident in supplicants' appeals to the saint for relief from suffering of all kinds, including issues with health, relationships, finances and more. Mai Misra's service to devotees in this capacity underscores her identification as 'Mai' – 'Mother' – despite her appearance in her foundational myth and to her shrinekeepers as a seven-year-old. This paradoxical image of the saint as both virginal and mother bears significantly on her conceptualization in terms of a goddess, outlined further below.

An elder Sidi woman in Bhavnagar tells another version of Mai Misra's foundational narrative.²²¹ The tale begins in Mecca, whose inhabitants the sorceress was perhaps

²²⁰ Just as Bava Gor turns to twelve years of prayer to discover a means for the sorceress' defeat, Mai Misra also displays this attribute of piety in the next version of the tale below. Such parallel characterizations reflect a devotional perspective which validates veneration of Bava Gor and Mai Misra equally, rather than subsuming the veneration of the younger female character under that of the older male. See Basu, "Redefining Boundaries," 78.

²²¹ From an interview in Bhavnagar with the mother of the keeper of Mai Misra's shrine in Ghogha, March 26, 2019.

inadvertently disturbing all the way from Ratanpur with the dazzling light of a quarter of a maund (*sawā mann*) of oil lamps (*diyā*). So, both Khwaja Gharib Nawaz and Bava Gor received a command “from the house of God” to go to India. (“*Khudā nuṁ ghar se hukam huā. Bāvā Gor, Khwājā Gharīb-e Nawāj, donom ko hukam huā Hindustan meṁ āne kā.*”) They then departed from Medina and went to dargahs in “all locations.” (“*Madīnā meṁ se nikal gaye, baddhe thekaṇā jagahom par dargāh āte āte āte nikalte nikalte nikalte.*”) Bava Gor traveled in a large caravan of people, among whom were “all the saints” (“*sab auliyā*”): his sister Mai Misra and his brothers, including Bava Habbash, Sidi Mukhta, Dariya Pir and Nangasi Pir. Khwaja Gharib Nawaz then gave the command for Bava Gor to go to Kathiawar, referring to Saurashtra or peninsular Gujarat. The caravan arrived in Kathiawar and wherever they went, some, gaining sainthood (*vilāyat*), passed away. (“*Jahām jāe, inko vilāyat maḷtī thī. Vo vafāt ho gaye.*”) They traveled through Junagadh and Porbandar, where Mai Misra dwelled (“*baiṭh gaye*”) for some time. They left Porbandar and, arriving in Ratanpur, settled there. Mai Sahib Ma was seven years old when she beheld the jungles of Ratanpur for the first time.

Finally, they encountered Makhan Devi, whose lamps were yet burning atop the hill where Bava Gor’s tomb (*mazār*) stands today. Bava Gor and Mai Misra climbed the hill to discover the source of the light. Bava Gor decided to confront the sorceress; instead of harming her, he sat and kept her occupied by playing a game with her. Many days passed. Wondering why her brother had been gone for so long, Mai Misra then approached the pair. Concerned, Bava Gor asked, “You’re younger than me. You’re so little; now what are you about to do? What will you do? *Tuṁ mane choṭā che. Tuṁ itnī meṁ to kyā karne kī abhi? Tu kyā karegī?*” She

replied confidently, “Brother, stand up. *Bhaī, khade ho jāo.*” Taking God’s name in prayer, she sat before Makhan Devi to play in her brother’s stead.

A physical confrontation ensued. She struck the sorceress twice, and the latter pleaded, “Preserve my memory. *Merī oḷkhām rakho.*” “Tell me, how? *Bol, tāri oḷkhām sun?*” “You must be Sidi, right? No one else. *Tamāri Sidī nī qaum hase ne? Bijā koī nahīm.*” “Tell me, what should the world offer you? *Batā do, duniyā ki caḍhāve?*” “Offer me fish and then just roti. *Macchī ne bijā roṭī itnī caḍhāe.*” Yet the conflict did not stop there. Mai Sahib went to a well to perform ablutions for prayer. She spotted the sorceress inside the well and yanked her out by her braid. When she let go, the sorceress fled. “Where are you going? *Kyām jāis?*” Mai Misra asked. “I am going to that which will become my abode (*āstān*). I will go there now. *Māruṁ je āstān hoegā ne? Tyām mem jāuṁgī phir.*”

She flew away, and Mai Sahib pursued her. Her brothers Bava Gor, Habash Khan, Sidi Mukhta and Dariya Pir accompanied her with horses, elephants and soldiers. Finally, the two reached the sea, over which the sorceress soared. Mai Misra wondered, “Where in the ocean could she be going? *Iskā dariyā mem kahām calnā hoe?*” The army then reached the seaside, and Mai Sahib’s brothers urged, “She’s gone. We have to go back. *Calī gayī. Apṇe to vāpas cali jāe che.*” “No,” Mai Misra responded, “We won’t turn back. *Nahīm. Vāpas nahīm jāne kā.*” “Where will we go? She must be flying away. *Apṇe jāyemge kahām? Ye to uḍ-uḍke calī jāte hoegī.*”

Mai Sahib then performed ablutions in the sea. She tied her scarf and prayed the evening prayer. She pleaded, “Oh God, Oh God and the Prophet, Oh Dwellers of Madina, Oh Khwaja Gharib Nawaz, all saints, all saints, remember us all. Remember us and pray for us yourselves, that a vessel will come for us. *Yā Allāh, yā Allāh nā Rasul, e Madina-wāḍā, yā Khwājā Gharib-e*

Nawāj, kul auliyā, kul auliyā, sab ko yād kar. Yād kar ne pote duā māṅge tāke horī āke kharī rahe pānī [mem].” Then, a steamer came and everyone climbed aboard.²²²

Mai Misra arrived at Kuda in Ghogha, Bhavnagar. “Now where will you go? *Have kyām jāis?*” Mai Sahib asked, reaching the sorceress. With one last blow, she buried the sorceress underground until only her head was visible. Then, Mai Sahib Ma received God’s command. (“*Pīche Māi Sāhib Mā ko Allāh kā hukm huā.*”) She defeated Makhan Devi, then she herself was martyred. She was buried in front of Makhan Devi, where she sleeps. (“*To isko gārad kar dī thī pachi iske sāmne dafan huā. Khud, pote śahīd ho gayī. Sute wahām.*”)

This narrative of Mai Misra’s encounter with Makhan Devi serves as an oral history recording fourteenth-century migrations to Gujarat via the Arabian peninsula. Discrepancies surround the saints’ port of entry amongst various interlocutors. According to the Bhavnagar recension of the tale, Bava Gor and his entourage left Medina for Kathiawad, traveling through Junagadh and Porbandar to Ratanpur, and by ship from there to Kuda. The Sidi residents of Ghogha, however, maintain that Mai Misra first arrived in India at Ghogha, as part of an entourage of one hundred twenty-five people.²²³ A Sidi community leader in Jamnagar concurs, stating that Bava Gor stayed in Ghogha for three days when he arrived in Gujarat.²²⁴ Rumanaben in Ahmedabad informs, “Those who came did so via Cambay. *Jitne āye, Khambāt hoke āye.*”²²⁵

²²² Or, in another telling, Mai Misra cast her scarf into the sea, and it became a ship – as told at the shrine of Bava Gor in Dongri, Mumbai.

²²³ From a visit to Ghogha on March 16, 2019. 125 is the canonical number of devotional songs (*jikar*) that the *naṅgāsī*, lead ritual musician of the entire Sidi community of Gujarat, should know. It is also the number of days believed necessary for a person to be cured of malevolent possession at the Ratanpur shrine and the number of *khazāna* (white agate stones) placed inside the Mai Misra rattle. For more on the latter, see Chapter Four.

²²⁴ From a meeting in Jamnagar on April 8, 2019. He also states that Bava Gor then dwelled in Jamnagar for one day, reversing Bava Gor’s itinerary as the storyteller in Bhavnagar recalls it.

²²⁵ From a meeting in Ahmedabad on October 13, 2019.

Cambay, Ghogha, and Bharuch form the vertices of a triangle in the Gulf of Cambay; travel between these locations via the waters of the Gulf is much faster than by land. This renders the seaborne leg of Mai Misra's migration, whether from Bharuch to Ghogha or vice versa, viable.

The most significant aspect of this route of migration, however, is its complementary theme of dwelling. A sign painted above the entrance to Mai Misra's memorial shrine (*cillā*) in Ghogha declares: "Kuda-Dweller Mai Misra Ma, Seat No. 1. *Kuḍāvāle Māi Misrā Mā, Gādī Nam. 1.*" This shrine commemorates Mai Misra's habitation at that site. The identification of this shrine as Mai Misra's first "seat" reinforces the notion that Ghogha was Mai Misra's first dwelling place in India. The Bhavnagar telling of her myth expresses 'dwelling' or 'habitation' with the verb '*baiṭhnā*,' 'to sit': "Mai Sahib sat in Porbandar. She came to Ratanpur and sat. *Porbandar meṁ Māi Sāhib baiṭh gaye. ...Ratanpur āve ne... baiṭhe.*" In this way, shrines commemorating locations where the saints dwelled as they travelled through India are called "seats" (*baiṭhak*) or "homes" (*makān*).

Though the Bhavnagar rendition of the tale suggests that Mai Misra's initial dwelling place was Ratanpur rather than Ghogha, the narrative underscores the significance of dwelling to the history of the Sidi saint shrines. The storyteller explains, "Wherever they went, they gained sainthood. They died. *Jahām jāe, inko vilāyat maḷṭī thī. Vo vafāt ho gaye.*" As the caravans passed from Medina to Kathiawad and onward to Ratanpur, some people passed away and attained sainthood (*vilāyat*). "Everyone became [*pīrs*, saints] in this way. *Aim pakyā thāi gayā baddhā,*" the storyteller emphasizes. She thus associates dwelling and dying in various locations with attaining sainthood and with the construction of those saints' tomb-shrines (*dargāh*): "They left Medina, coming to and exiting from all locations, places and shrines (*dargāh*). *Madīnā meṁ*

se nikal gaye, baddhe thekaṇā jagahom̄ par dargāh āte āte āte nikalte nikalte nikalte.” Her sequential repetition of the verbs “coming” and “exiting” emphasizes the length and breadth of the saints’ travels.

The storyteller further highlights the expansiveness of the saints’ habitations and the relationship between dwelling places and shrines by describing the prevalence of Mai Misra’s shrines in Gujarat. Each saint went to various locations; “wherever [they] went, Mai Misra is in all of those locations. Mai Misra is in India.” (“*Tame phālānā thekaṇā jāve. Tame ā thekaṇā jāve. Tame ā thekaṇā jāve. Je je jagah maḷe... baddhe nā thekaṇā māṁ Māī Sāhib Mā.Hindustān māṁ Māī Sāhib Mā.*”) This emphasizes the prominence of Mai Misra’s shrines throughout the Sidi saint shrine network in western India.

While a saint’s dying in a particular location allows for the construction of a shrine, a shrine does not always have to be a tomb (*dargāh/mazār*) but can be a *makān* or *baiṭhak* memorializing a saint’s sojourn in a particular location. These commemorative shrines are also called *cillā*, a term which comes from the Persian word for forty (*cehel*) and refers to the performance of forty days of worship (*ibādat*) in Sufi practice.²²⁶ The second recension of Mai Misra’s narrative foregrounds her piety in terms of her consistent practice of prayer, evidencing her faith in God and in the prayers of the saints she invokes. This, as does Bava Gor’s characterization as pious in the Ahmedabad telling of his conflict with Makhan Devi, suggests that *ibadat* was a regular feature of the saints’ daily lives. As “seats” or “homes” of the

²²⁶ Bellamy, *The Powerful Ephemeral*, xix.

journeying saints, *cillās* represent locations where they lived and performed devotions; this reinforces the connection between the concept of *ibādat* and the origin of the term *cillā*.²²⁷

Shrines (*dargāh*), whether tombs (*mazār*) or commemorative sites (*cillā*), anchor the charisma (*barkat*) or spiritual potency of the associated saint in a physical location. The structures themselves as material media effectively mediate the saint's *barkat* between past and present - that is, between the lifetime of the saint and the lifetime of the supplicant seeking access to the saint. The shrine's mediation, in time and space, of the intangible is a macrocosmic representation of the role of the shrinekeeper or ritual practitioner who mediates access to the saint's *barkat* anchored at that site by means of ritual. In the context of ritual, mediation of *barkat* occurs at tertiary levels, whether through intangible media such as music or fragrance; material media such as edible and potable substances, jewelry, ointments, clothing, musical instruments; or, more intuitively, spirit mediums.

Outlining the migratory itinerary of the saints as a network of shrines effectively maps the spiritual power grid of the Sidi Sufi tradition. Though Ratanpur is the sacred center of this grid, generating a bird's-eye view of this network allows for a fuller appreciation of the diversity of local histories and ritual traditions within this system. This is especially important in the context of Mai Misra's veneration. We recall that, before flying across the sea to Kuda, Makhan Devi informed Mai Misra that she was going to her "*āstān*," a Persian term signifying a 'court' or 'palace' as well as the 'entrance to a shrine' or 'abode of a *faqīr* or holy man.'²²⁸ In this way, it is synonymous with the term '*darbār*,' another word for 'court' which is used to refer to a Sufi

²²⁷ Other *cillās* are household shrines built in devotees' homes, and do not represent historical "seats" of the saints.

²²⁸ John T. Platts, *A dictionary of Urdu, classical Hindi, and English* (London: W. H. Allen & Co., 1884), 48.

saint's *dargah*.²²⁹ The nearly defeated Makhan Devi entrusts Mai Misra with instructions for 'preserving her memory' or venerating her: to offer her fish and roti. The references to a sacred abode in Kuda, the items to offer her during worship explicitly called as "*pujā*" and her head turning to stone all identify Makhan Devi, as her name suggests, as a goddess whose image is worshipped in a temple in Kuda. According to the Bhavnagar narrative, Mai Misra was martyred after defeating Makhan Devi and buried in front of her; Sidis in Ghogha affirm that Mai Misra passed away not in Ratanpur, but in Kuda.²³⁰ We can therefore expect to find a shrine of Mai Misra near Makhan Devi's temple.

Indeed, two such edifices stand across from one another by the seaside in Kuda: a goddess temple and a shrine of "Dariyai Mai Misra" ("Mai Misra of the Sea"). Should Mai Misra have been buried where she died, her Kuda shrine would effectively stand as her tomb (*mazār*). An middle class Sidi woman in Bhavnagar believes the Kuda shrine to be Mai Misra's *mazār*, as does a Sidi woman from Ahmedabad who lived in Bhavnagar after marriage.²³¹ To the latter interlocutor, Mai Misra's shrine in Kuda is her "original tomb" ("*aslī mazār*"), while that in Ratanpur is a *cillā*. These women's identification of the Kuda shrine as Mai Misra's *mazār* counters the dominant belief that the saint is buried in Ratanpur. If we are to understand the shrine of "Kudavale Mai Misra Ma" in Ghogha as her first seat and the shrine of "Dariyai Mai Misra" in Kuda as her last, this seaside locale in Bhavnagar represents an alternate center of gravity in the Sidi Sufi tradition. Ratanpur, given its overarching importance to Sidis and its overwhelming popularity amongst pilgrims from beyond the Sidi community, garners significant

²²⁹ Bellamy *The Powerful Ephemeral*, 9.

²³⁰ From a visit to Ghogha on March 16 2019.

²³¹ Personal communication with Beheroze Shroff in April 2018; from a meeting in Ahmedabad on December 30, 2018.

attention in the academic study of the Sidi devotional tradition. However, this Kuda-Ghogha counternarrative bespeaks the need for equal consideration of the oral histories and venerational practices of Sidi saint shrines throughout western India. Ultimately, this will afford a more complete picture of the Sidi Sufi tradition, highlighting its diversity and the variegated histories of local Sidi communities in Gujarat and Mumbai.

An elderly Hindu man who cares for the goddess temple at the seaside in Kuda explains that whom the Sidis call Makhan Devi, Hindus call Shikotar Ma.²³² He identifies her as Mai Misra's "*sahelī*," a term denoting a woman's female confidante, and notes that Shikotar Ma originally came from Sindh in Pakistan, and from there went to Kuda via Bharuch. Shikotar Ma's journey to Kuda from Bharuch parallels Makhan Devi's flight from Ratanpur village in Bharuch, affirming the association between the two. Common to both Mai Misra's and Shikotar Ma's origin stories are the themes of journeying and dwelling. Their tales begin with a larger migration - transcontinental in the case of Mai Misra, (retrospectively) transnational in the case of Shikotar Ma. Sindh is a site along their routes of travel which they may share in common. According to the late father of the current *naṅgāsī*, in Ratanpur, Bava Gor and his twelve brothers left Mecca and arrived in Sindh, where they traveled and sojourned for some time.²³³ A Saiyid caretaker of the shrine of a certain "Ma Saheb Ma" in Gondal, Bhavnagar notes that 'Ma Saheb' came from Sindh.²³⁴ Mai Sahib's and Makhan Devi's journeys end with their

²³² From a visit to Kuda on March 16, 2019.

²³³ Mark Kenoyer and Kuldeep Bhan, "Sidis and the Agate Bead Industry of Western India," in *Sidhis and Scholars: Essays on African Indians*. Eds. Amy Catlin-Jairazbhoy and Edward Alpers, (Trenton: The Red Sea Press, Inc., 2004) 48. Sindh is home to a Shidi population larger than that of Gujarat, whose members venerate the Sidi ancestor-saints. See Frembgen and Husain in *Afro-South Asia in the Global African Diaspora* (2020).

²³⁴ From a visit to Gondal on October 24, 2019.

enshrinement across from one another in their presumably final ‘dwelling’ places, their *āstān* (abodes).

In the Hindu caretaker’s conception of Mai Misra’s and Shikotar Ma’s relationship, they are allied as friends rather than foes. Their shrines’ spatial positioning thus signifies not opposition, but alignment. Mai Misra’s agreement to Makhan Devi’s terms of worship before the latter’s defeat and the former’s own martyrdom represents a truce of sorts. Makhan Devi requests offerings of fish and roti from Mai Misra’s people (“*qaum*”), the Sidi community. Mai Misra agrees and extends an additional grace: her people would first pay their respects to Makhan Devi before doing so to her.²³⁵ With this, Sidis visiting these sacred grounds in Kuda traditionally present Makhan Devi with fish, then offer prayers (*fātihā dilānā*) at Mai Misra’s shrine. Sidis also used to perform *dhammāl* in front of Makhan Devi’s temple. This would reportedly cause the icon’s eyes to spin, bringing excessive visitors to the temple; to remedy this, the original *murti* has now been placed behind a new one whose eyes are immobile. Yet this is not the only change that has occurred in this shared devotional space. Visitors, including Hindus and Sidis, now prefer to make *mannats* at Mai Misra’s shrine before visiting Makhan Devi. This reflects the popularity of entreating Sufi saints’ assistance at their shrines, affirming Hindus’ belief in the Sidi saint and Sidis’ tradition of respect for the Hindu goddess.

The teller of the Bhavnagar recension thus highlights Mai Misra’s widespread veneration: “Everyone believes [in her]: Hindus, Muslims, Kolis. *Sab mānte haim: Hindū, Musalmān, Koḷī.*” Referring to the latter group, which she identifies as a scheduled caste, the storyteller explains,

²³⁵ The information in this paragraph is drawn from meetings in Ahmedabad on October 13, 2019 and Kuda on March 16, 2019.

“They come from the village and say, ‘[She is] India’s Mother, right?’ *Gām thī āke keh, ‘Hindustān kī Mā ne?’*” Through her vocal inflection, the storyteller emphasizes, “She is India’s Mother. *Hindustān kī Mā hai.*” In this way, she positions Mai Misra as a mother figure for all Indians, regardless of religion, caste or ethnicity.

What emerges from this glimpse into the devotional culture surrounding Mai Misra and Shikotar Ma in Kuda is the conceptualization of the former in terms consonant with that of a goddess such as the latter. The iconography of Shikotar Ma at her temple in Kuda contours the goddess along local and national lines: as Kudagiri Ma, Shikotar Ma is a goddess established in Kuda. As Vahanvati Mata, seated atop the lion vehicle (*vāhan*) of the pan-Indian goddess Durga Ma, she allows for the safe passage of seafaring ships (*vāhan*). Shikotar Ma’s conceptualization in terms of both a regional and pan-Indian goddess, all identified as “Mother” (“Ma” or “Mata”) parallels the narrator’s subtle divinization of Mai Misra. As her title ‘Mai’ (“Mother”) suggests, the Sidi ancestor-saint is a mother to her people (*qaum*); yet the storyteller asserts that she is also “India’s Mother,” expanding Mai Misra’s accessibility as a mother from whom blessings may be invoked by all Indians regardless of ethnic heritage, caste or religion. This perspective illuminates Mai Misra’s conceptualization as a goddess-figure, just as Shikotar Ma is to her worshippers.

The parallel positioning of Mai Misra’s and Shikotar Ma’s devotional spaces facilitates visitors’ consecutive veneration of the two. This practice reinforces the connection between them, as does their identification as *sahelīs*. These spatial, ritual and terminological alignments ultimately lend to Mai Misra’s conceptualization in terms of a goddess such as Shikotar Ma. In this way, the battle between Mai Misra and Makhan Devi may simply represent one of Shikotar

Ma's duels with other goddesses of the region. A 1963 study of oral and devotional traditions surrounding "Vahanvati Shikotari" references the goddess's passage from Sindh to Gujarat where, "Like invaders, gods and goddesses, Shikotar defeated Vadavavati ma and Khodiyar ma, and thus she proved her ability. Then she was accepted as one of the local goddesses in Ralaj."²³⁶ The newly arrived Shikotar Ma, a "very young lady" and a "maiden ma who [was] not married," battled the local goddesses Vadavavati Ma and Khodiyar Ma to prove her worthiness of worship.²³⁷ Along these lines, Mai Misra's defeat of the Makhan Devi 'avatar' of Shikotar Ma represents such a battle in which a newly arrived goddess-figure contests another in that territory to prove her efficacy and to establish her own veneration in that locale. Vahanvati Shikotari's young age and unmarried status in her origin story represents another parallel between her and the seven-year-old Mai Misra, affirming that the latter is conceivable in terms of a goddess such as the former.

Additional devotional perspectives link Mai Misra with not only Shikotar Ma, but with Khodiyar Ma, referenced in the above myth of Vahanvati Shikotari. In Jambur, a short trek away from the bustling shrine of Hazrat Saiyid Ahmad Qadiri "Nagarchi Pir," stands a small shrine of the Sidi saint Ma Asiyana, one of many female Sidi saints understood to be sisters (*bahan*) or *sahelīs* of Mai Misra.²³⁸ Ma Asiyana is also called by the names Vaghwali Ma or Savajwali Ma ("Lion Mother"), as she is said to have appeared to local Hindus in the form of a six- or seven-year-old girl walking beside a lion.²³⁹ This image recalls Durga Ma atop her lion vehicle, tacitly associating the saint with the goddess. The Sidi woman caretaker of Ma Asiyana's shrine names

²³⁶ Pushker Chandervaker, "Vahanvati Shikotari," *Midwest Folklore* 13:1 (1963), 47.

²³⁷ Pushker Chandervaker, "Vahanvati Shikotari," 48.

²³⁸ From a visit to Junagadh on April 5, 2019.

²³⁹ From a visit to Jambur on April 7, 2019.

Khodiyar Ma as a *bahan* and *sahelī* of Mai Misra. Sidis in Jambur thus honor the goddess, as evidenced by a miniature temple (*mandir*) of Khodiyar Ma beside a tree near Sidi residences.²⁴⁰

Both Muslim Sidis and Hindus sacrifice a goat to Khodiyar Ma, though Hindus do not consume the flesh offering. Referring to this practice, the shrinekeeper elaborates, “Hindus do as much as we [Sidis] do. Yours, ours - [it’s] all one. ...*Jetlu apra karne thai ’ne etlu-j a loko kare. ...Tamaru hamaru baddhi eka-j.*”

The shrinekeeper then includes Makhan Devi in the discussion, mentioning that Sidis sacrifice food offerings first to her, then to Mai Misra, and finally to Mai Misra’s brother Dariya Pir. These reflections on Sidis’ food offerings to the Hindu goddesses Khodiyar Ma and Shikotar Ma (as Makhan Devi) in Jambur, compounded with the knowledge of Sidis’ presentation of fish and roti to the latter in Kuda, underscore the incorporation of Hindu goddesses into the foundational myth of Mai Misra, into her extended family of *sahelīs* and into Sidi devotional practice.²⁴¹

Despite Mai Misra’s and Shikotar Ma’s status as *sahelīs*, evidenced by the spatial positioning of their shrines and venerational practices linking them, Mai Misra’s foundational myth juxtaposes the two figures in such a way as to render them diametrically opposed. It contrasts a cruel and destructive Makhan Devi with a compassionate and order-restoring Mai

²⁴⁰ She explains that the saint “Datar Bapu” or Sayid Ali Mira Datar had established Khodiyar Ma as Mai Misra’s sister. An high-ranking Sidi Rifai Sufi (*khalifā*) in Mumbai reports that Bava Habash’s shrine is beside Mira Datar’s in Unjha, a spatial arrangement that affirms some connection between the Sidi saints and Mira Datar. From a meeting in Mumbai on April 2, 2019.

²⁴¹ Further multi-sited research is necessary to reveal how widespread these practices and perspectives are amongst Gujarati Sidis beyond Bhavnagar and Jambur. Juxtaposition with goddess worship amongst Hindu Siddis in Karnataka will provide a more complete picture of Hindu goddess worship in the African diaspora in India, illuminating ways in which displaced Africans and their descendants participated in local religious traditions and developed their own. This will contribute significantly to research in the history of religions in the context of both South Asia and the African Diaspora as areas of study.

Misra who restores peace to the terrorized inhabitants of Ratanpur. How then does Makhan Devi, the havoc-wreaking sorceress, derive from Shikotar Ma, a ‘mother’ goddess revered alongside Mai Misra by Hindus and Muslim Sidis alike?

Chandervaker, the author of the aforementioned 1963 study, notes, “The average Gujarati regards Shikotar as a malicious goddess who can create many obstacles if she is not properly worshipped and if offerings are not made to her.”²⁴² He traces references to the goddess in thirteenth and fourteenth century Gujarati literature and cites an instance in the work of the medieval Gujarati poet Kavi Shamal in which Shikotar is identified as a “Dakin - a she-demon who deceives men in order to eat them.”²⁴³ These indications of Shikotar Ma’s potential malevolence align with Makhan Devi’s characterization in Mai Misra’s foundational myth.

The sorceress Makhan Devi in the saints’ origin narrative adorns herself with the blood of her human victims. This bloodlust is encoded in a reference to Shikotar in the Prakrit text *Srivalkaha* (1362) in which a merchant seeks Shikotari’s insight as to why his four hundred ships have not left the port of Bharuch.²⁴⁴ The goddess reveals that various deities were detaining the ships, and that sacrificing a hero of thirty-two virtues would remedy the problem.²⁴⁵

²⁴² Chandervaker, “Vahanvati Shikotari,” 50.

²⁴³ Chandervaker, “Vahanvati Shikotari,” 45-46.

²⁴⁴ Chandervaker, “Vahanvati Shikotari,” 45-46.

²⁴⁵ While connecting the goddess Shikotar with human sacrifice, this passage locates an exchange between the merchant and the goddess at the port of Bharuch. In the Sidi foundational myth, Makhan Devi interacts with the Sidi ancestor-saints in Ratanpur, Bharuch, and departs its landlocked forests to cross the Gulf of Cambay separating Bharuch from Bhavnagar where her temple stands at the seaside in Kuda. These references associate Shikotar Ma and Makhan Devi with seaborne travel from Bharuch. Interestingly, the above text was composed in 1362, just twenty-one years prior to the death of Bava Gor in Gujarat as recorded in the *Mirat-i Ahmadi*. The text’s composer was therefore a contemporary of the Sidi ancestor-saints.

Just as Sidis and Hindus in Jambur sacrifice a goat to Khodiyar Ma, some Gujarati sailors offer the same to Shikotar Ma.²⁴⁶ This reflects the goddess' preference for blood, aligning her with ancient traditions of blood sacrifice to fierce goddesses such as Kali, Camunda, or the popular South Indian village goddess Mariyamman.²⁴⁷ Chandervaker observes that, aside from the few sailors who offer goats to Vahanvati Shikotar, the practice of sacrificing animals to this goddess has generally faded.²⁴⁸ Instead, worshippers present vegetarian offerings of coconuts, boiled milk, cake, and cooked rice mixed with ghee and jaggery. This reflects the adoption of Sanskritized sensibilities amongst urban Hindus, as the goddess, whose "status has been raised... has also become popularized in the higher strata of Hindu society."²⁴⁹

As her resolution of the four hundred ships' inertia in the above excerpt suggests, "Vahanvati Shikotar ...is the goddess of those whose occupations take them to sea - sailors and fishermen who are concerned with Vahanvatu or sailing of ships."²⁵⁰ Such professionals consider her goddess of the waters and protectress from associated dangers, illuminating lost sailors' way to coastal villages with the light shining from her temple.²⁵¹ The latter point underscores the prevalence of temples to Shikotar along the Gujarat seacoast, especially the littoral of the Gulf of Cambay which served as "an important port for western India from the ninth to the sixteenth century."²⁵² The image of Shikotar's temple as a lighthouse finds its way into the foundational

²⁴⁶ Chandervaker, "Vahanvati Shikotari," 50.

²⁴⁷ David Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 145-146. In fact, Shikotar Ma's temple in Kuda also features a painting of the goddess Camunda.

²⁴⁸ Chandervaker, "Vahanvati Shikotari," 50.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 50. See also Harald Tambs-Lyche, *Power, Profit, and Poetry: Traditional Society in Kathiawar, Western India* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributors, 1997), 127.

²⁵⁰ Chandervaker, "Vahanvati Shikotari," 44.

²⁵¹ Chandervaker, "Vahanvati Shikotari," 44, 48-49.

²⁵² Chandervaker, "Vahanvati Shikotari," 45.

myth of Mai Misra, as told in Bhavnagar, in which the excessive light shining from Makhan Devi's oil lamps in Gujarat reflected across the Arabian Sea to disturb the inhabitants of Mecca.

Like Vahanvati Shikotar's propitiation by seafarers, Sidis associate Mai Misra with the sea. A *jikar* drawn from the Ahmedabad repertoire describes Mai Misra's arrival in India by sea: "O *āe Māmā dariyā kī lehr / O āe Māmā samandar kī mauj*. O came, Mother, [by] the waves of the sea. O came, Mother, [by] the waves of the ocean." The introductory line of a devotional song performed by Sidi women in Ratanpur identifies both Ratanpur and the ocean as abodes of Mai Misra: "*Mai Sahib Madi Ratanpurwali samudariye men rehnewali*. Mai Sahib Mother of Ratanpur, who lives in the ocean."²⁵³ Another *jikar* calls out to Mai Misra, using the sea and ocean as her epithets:

O Dariyewālī re Māmā, Samandarwālī re Māmā Oh Sea/River Mother, Ocean Mother

O Kalaswālī re Māmā, Cundarīwālī re Māmā Oh Water-Pot Mother, Oh Veil Mother²⁵⁴

These songs associate Mai Misra with the ocean and sea, even indicating that she dwells within them. The *jikar* also identifies Mai Misra with her water-pot (*kalas*) and veil (*cundarī*), items which feature ubiquitously in *urs* rituals honoring her and which are traceable to her foundational myth, in which she confiscates Makhan Devi's water-pot and casts her own veil into the sea. Mai Misra's identification as a "Sea/River Mother" characterized by her *kalas* and *cundarī* places her within the domain of Hindu goddesses, who are also called mother ("*Mām/Mātā*"), are associated with rivers (i.e., the Ganges, the Sarasvati) and may be embodied, especially during Navratri, in a jar-form (*ghaṭasthāpana*) involving a clay or metal water-pot (*ghaṭ* or *kalas*) that

²⁵³ Personal communication with daughter of Ratanpur's lead ritual musician (*nangasi*) in Mehsana on October 14, 2019.

²⁵⁴ From the Ahmedabad corpus of devotional songs..

may be covered in cloth or a sari.²⁵⁵ The creation of Mai Misra's *kalas* is central to the veneration of Mai Misra during the *urs*, discussed in the following chapter; below, this chapter analyzes how the incorporation of Mai Misra's *kalas* in the *Kalaswālī Khicrī* ceremony suggests the veneration of a lineage goddess (*kuldevī*).

Makhan Devi's characterization in the Sidi foundational myth and veneration by Sidis at the temple of Shikotar Ma in Kuda reveals the sorceress as an 'avatar' of Vahanvati Shikotar in the narrative. Mai Misra's and Makhan Devi's conflict reflects less the conquest of one monolithically-construed religion over another, and more a competition for primacy between two goddess figures. Their battle demonstrates the ambivalence of *śakti*, and Mai Misra's victory the ascendancy of the life-giving aspect of *sakti* over its life-taking aspect. Basu contextualizes this ambivalence of *sakti* with reference to another recension of Mai Misra's foundational narrative as told in Pakistan, in which Makhan Devi offers buttermilk from a clay pot to eighteen Sidi ancestor-saints, seven sisters and eleven brothers, as they travel. "This buttermilk, narrators stress, was poisonous and those who drank from it would lose control over their own lives. They would first be enslaved and finally killed by Makhan Devi."²⁵⁶ Mai Misra refuses to drink the buttermilk and defeats the sorceress in an ensuing fight. Identifying the pot as "a powerful South Asian symbol of the female womb, generally" and its contents, milk, as "the foremost female life-giving substance," Basu deduces, "The power of women seems to lie in their capacity to manipulate their procreative resources [*sakti*] in two opposed ways - in a destructive, death-bringing way as exemplified by the sorceress; or in a constructive, liberating, life-giving manner

²⁵⁵ David Gordon White, *Kiss of the Yogini: "Tantric Sex" in its South Asian Contexts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). 32. Rodrigues, *Ritual Worship*, 87.

²⁵⁶ Basu, "Theatre of Memory," 256.

as exemplified by the African ancestress.”²⁵⁷ Mai Misra and Makhan Devi as goddess-like figures thus inhabit opposing poles of the spectrum of *sakti*’s potential.

While Mai Misra appears as a seven-year-old in both versions of the tale, the Bhavnagar storyteller identifies the saint as Sidi yet positions her as a mother to all Indians regardless of ancestry, religion, or caste. This complex image of the saint as both mother and prepubescent virgin bespeaks her conceptualization in terms consonant with the Rajput lineage goddess (*kuldevī*). The following section analyzes the ways in which Mai Misra’s origin narrative aligns with the foundational myth of the Rajput *kuldevī*, positioning Mai Misra as a lineage goddess in terms similar to Rajput goddesses or even her “*sahelī*” Khodiyar Ma.

Mai Misra’s Representation as a *Kuldevī* in her Foundational Myth

Lindsey Harlan in the second chapter of the 1992 study, *Religion and Rajput Women*, analyzes the dual characterization of the Rajput *kuldevī* (lineage goddess), protectress of the *kul* (kinship branch).²⁵⁸ The goddess’ foundational myth depicts her as a virgin warrior who, often assuming the form of an animal, fiercely defends or otherwise nurtures the *kul*’s progenitor on the battlefield or training ground. While generally subscribing to this martial ideal of the *kuldevī*, Rajput women tend to superimpose domestic conceptions of protection and nurturing upon the *kuldevī*’s warrior image. This results in a paradoxical conceptualization of the *kuldevī* as an unmarried, virgin goddess who yet protects and nurtures the *kul* as a devoted wife (*pativrata*) would her own family.²⁵⁹ “The iconography of the goddess,” Harlan observes,

²⁵⁷ Basu, “Theatre of Memory,” 257.

²⁵⁸ Harlan, *Religion and Rajput Women*, 52-90.

²⁵⁹ Harlan, *Religion and Rajput Women*, 70-71.

“metamorphoses in the process. The snake or kite becomes a richly adorned *pativrata*”, represented in the attire of a bride.²⁶⁰

The foundational myth detailing the *kuldevī*'s relationship with the *kul*'s male progenitor establishes “the core of *kuldevī* worship” and “the *kul*'s sacred genealogy” of descent from that progenitor.²⁶¹ The goddess in this context appears entirely antithetical to the image of the devoted wife. “As a warrior goddess, she is not the mere consort of a male deity; she appears unattached and unconstrained. ...[T]he *kuldevī* is directly identified with Durga, whose very power derives from her status as a virgin unrestrained by male control.”²⁶² This aspect of the *kuldevī* associates her with “the Great Goddess” (*Mahādevī*) Durga, slayer of the buffalo demon. The *kuldevī*'s assumption of an animal form expresses her status as unattached and unrestrained, dissociating her from social norms directing women's behavior. For example, Harlan cites the story of the *kuldevī* Karni Mata who assumes the form of a lion to frighten away her groom.²⁶³

The representation of the Rajput *kuldevī* in her foundational myth aligns with the characterization of Mai Misra in her origin narrative. As a seven-year-old, Mai Misra's primary association with men in the myth is with her older brothers Bava Gor and Bava Habash. Mai Sahib is unrestrained by them, leading her brothers and their army in pursuit of an opponent whom she herself ultimately defeats. In this way, the narrative characterizes her as a virgin warrior, unattached to a male partner and unconstrained by any male ‘superiors,’ who achieves the success of her brothers' mission.

²⁶⁰ Harlan, *Religion and Rajput Women*, 71. Harlan glosses *suhagin* as *pativrata* on page 65.

²⁶¹ Harlan, *Religion and Rajput Women*, 70.

²⁶² Harlan, *Religion and Rajput Women*, 71.

²⁶³ Harlan, *Religion and Rajput Women*, 71.

The sacred genealogy of the Rajput *kul* begins with its male progenitor and his bond with the goddess who ensures martial victory. The goddess extends her nurturance and protection from the progenitor to the *kul* descending from him, perpetuating the latter as its *kuldevī*. Tambs-Lyche asserts that the *kuldevī* of a Rajput king “is like a sister to the king; like a sister she protects him, but has powers to perpetuate the patriline that no human sister can have.”²⁶⁴ Mai Misra is the younger sister of Bava Gor, who is called by the epithets “king” and “emperor” (i.e., “*Ratanpurī Rājā*” and “*Gorī Bādshāh*”). The legal statements examined earlier in this chapter identify Bava Gor and Bava Habash as the forebears of the Sidi community. Mai Misra in her foundational narrative thus mirrors the virginal warrior goddess whose relationship with the *kul* progenitor establishes her as *kuldevī* of his descendants.

Unlike the Rajput *kuldevī*, however, Mai Misra does not assume an animal form at any point in the narrative.²⁶⁵ The previous section introduced Ma Asiyana, considered a sister (*bahan*) of Mai Misra. Her epithets *Sāvajwālī Ma* and *Vāghwālī Ma* (“Lion Mother”) refer to her appearance to local Hindus in Jambur as a young girl striding alongside a lion. This image evokes the “unattached” and “unrestrained” virgin goddess Durga astride her lion vehicle (*vāhan*). Mai Misra, however, neither morphs into nor rides any animal in her origin narrative. Nevertheless, her foundational myth aligns with that of the Rajput *kuldevī*, characterizing her in like terms. Unconstrained by a male partner, the unmarried youth Mai Misra leads her brothers’

²⁶⁴ Tambs-Lyche, *Power, Profit, and Poetry*, 270.

²⁶⁵ Nevertheless, the Sidi Sufi tradition does associate select animals with certain saints. These animals may appear in a vision with a saint, be enshrined alongside the saints, or, like the saints themselves, may be able to bestow boons or possess devotees.

army to victory, supporting the male progenitors of the Sidi *jamāt* in the establishment of their ‘kingdom’ in Ratanpur.

Clear parallels emerge between Mai Misra and a popular goddess of Gujarat, her “companion” Khodiyar Ma, historically venerated by some Rajput lineages.²⁶⁶ Neelima Bhatt in her contribution to *Inventing and Reinventing the Goddess* (2014) details the contemporary worship of Khodiyar Ma as the *kuldevī* of the vast majority of the *leuvā paṭel* agrarian caste in Saurashtra.²⁶⁷ Despite her widespread popularity amongst various communities in Gujarat over the centuries, Bhatt notes that Khodiyar Ma “is not a transcendent and mythical pan-Indian goddess glorified in classical Sanskrit texts fighting battles on the cosmic stage.”²⁶⁸ Oral narratives indicate instead that Khodiyar Ma

“is a deified woman who is believed to have lived in the latter half of the first millennium CE. ...She performed miracles and often gave specific signs to her devotees who established many *sthanaks* (places) of her worship in Saurashtra even during her lifetime. ...She soon began to be worshipped along with her sisters (with her in the middle) as the folk goddess of the region.”²⁶⁹

Khodiyar Ma is thus an apotheosized woman whom various groups, from royal Rajputs to the agrarian *leuvā paṭel* caste and others, adopted as a *kuldevī*.

Mai Misra likewise is a sanctified woman adopted as a *kulpīr* (lineage saint) of the Sidi community. Mai Misra’s foundational narrative suggests her efficacy as a Sufi saint, including victory over ‘evil’ and the performance of miracles. Like the establishment of Khodiyar Ma’s

²⁶⁶ See for example Tambs-Lyche, *Power, Profit, and Poetry*, 82.

²⁶⁷ Neelima Shukla-Bhatt, “The Leap of the Limping Goddess: Ai Khodiyar of Gujarat,” in *Inventing and Reinventing the Goddess: Contemporary Iterations of Hindu Deities on the Move*, ed. Sree Padma (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014), 178.

²⁶⁸ Shukla-Bhatt, “The Leap of the Limping Goddess,” 181.

²⁶⁹ Shukla-Bhatt, “The Leap of the Limping Goddess,” 181-182, 184.

places of worship throughout Saurashtra, Mai Misra’s “seats” (*baiṭhak*) dot the landscape of Gujarat. The following Gujarati *garbā* song performed by Sidi women in Ratanpur details the expanse of Mai Misra’s shrine network:

<i>Sonā nā kalse jhūlo Māī Sāhib Mā</i> <i>Cālo dhīme dhīme Mā</i>	Sway in a golden <i>kalas</i> , Mai Sahib Ma Walk slowly, slowly Ma
<i>Ratanpur ser mām vaselā Mā</i> <i>Ḍūṅgar ūpar jhūlo Māī Sāhib Mā</i> <i>Cālo dhīme dhīme Mā</i>	Mother dwelling in Ratanpur city Sway atop the hill, Mai Sahib Ma Walk slowly, slowly Ma
<i>Bharuch ser mām vaselā Mā</i> <i>Lālbāzār mām jhūlo Māī Sāhib Mā</i> <i>Cālo dhīme dhīme Mā</i>	Mother dwelling in Bharuch city Sway in Lalbazar, Mai Sahib Ma Walk slowly, slowly Ma
<i>Sonā nā kalse jhūlo Māī Sāhib Mā</i> <i>Cālo dhīme dhīme Mā</i>	Sway in a golden <i>kalas</i> , Mai Sahib Ma Walk slowly, slowly Ma
<i>Surat ser mām vaselā Mā</i> <i>Rāmpurā mām jhūlo Māī Sāhib Mā</i> <i>Cālo dhīme dhīme Mā</i>	Mother dwelling in Surat city Sway in Rampura, Mai Sahib Ma Walk slowly, slowly Ma
<i>Amdāvād ser mām vaselā Mā</i> <i>Patthar Kuvām mām jhūlo Māī Sāhib Mā</i> <i>Cālo dhīme dhīme Mā</i>	Mother dwelling in Ahmedabad city Sway in Patthar Kuva, Mai Sahib Ma Walk slowly, slowly Ma
<i>Sonā nā kalse jhūlo Māī Sāhib Mā</i> <i>Cālo dhīme dhīme Mā</i>	Sway in a golden <i>kalas</i> , Mai Sahib Ma Walk slowly, slowly Ma
<i>Jāmnagar ser mām vaselā Mā</i> <i>Sonīwaḍī mām jhūlo Māī Sāhib Mā</i> <i>Cālo dhīme dhīme Mā ...</i>	Mother dwelling in Jamnagar city Sway in Soniwadi, Mai Sahib Ma Walk slowly, slowly Ma... ²⁷⁰

²⁷⁰ Recited in Mehsana on October 14, 2019.

The opening verse of this song combines the lyrics of two Gujarati *garbā* songs, “*Sonā No Garbo Śire Ambe Mā, Cālo Dhīre Dhīre*” and “*Sonā Hiṇḍole Jhūlo Mārī Ambā*”; the Sidi *garbā* song adopts the melody of “*Sonā No Garbo Śire Ambe Mā.*” Sidis’ creative rendering of Gujarati *garbā* songs performed in honor of Ambe Ma as veneratory songs for Mai Misra, performed during Mai Misra’s *Khicṛī* ceremonies in Ratanpur, provides evidence for Sidis’ tacit conceptualization of Mai Misra in terms of a goddess.

Yet the most significant overlap between Khodiyar Ma, Mai Misra, and the veneration of Rajput lineage goddess is their association with a group of seven. Harlan elaborates on *kuldevī* worship among Rajputs in Mewar,

“...*kul* members inevitably understand their *kuldevīs* as belonging to a group of seven goddesses. They conceive each *kuldevī* as the central figure in the heptad. The identity of the other goddesses changes from *kul* to *kul*, but the convention of a group of seven remains constant. ...In fact in Rajasthan as elsewhere the seven local goddesses are often equated with the Saptamatrikas, the “Seven Mothers” who are found in Sanskritic tradition from Vedic through Puranic times.”²⁷¹

Bhatt likewise observes that Khodiyar Ma’s venerated alongside her six sisters, among whom she stands as foremost, represents “a local form of the ancient cult of *sapta matrika* [seven mothers]” whose “authentic image is as a collective.”²⁷² The motif of the goddess collective also applies to the representation of Mai Misra. Mai Misra is the primary woman saint of the Sidi Sufi tradition, entombed in Ratanpur and enshrined throughout Gujarat. Yet she is associated with a cohort of seven female companion (*sahelī*) saints, whose tombs, shrines, or sacred wells further extend the network of Sidi saint shrines in Gujarat. Mai Misra and her seven *sahelīs* comprise a

²⁷¹ Unless otherwise noted, the quotations in this paragraph are drawn from Harlan, *Religion and Rajput Women*, 82.

²⁷² Shukla-Bhatt, “The Leap of the Limping Goddess,” 186.

cohort of eight which parallels the model of the Great Goddess with her seven *śaktis*, the *saptamātrkās*.²⁷³

As Harlan and Bhatt observe, the motif of the collective is more important than the individual identities of the other members of the heptad. While Mai Misra is the most widely venerated woman saint of the Sidi Sufi tradition, her seven *sahelīs* are largely seen as their namesake - companions of Mai Misra, who stands out as foremost among them.²⁷⁴ Most people are therefore less likely to recall the names of all seven *sahelīs* when asked. The keepers of a particular *sahelī*'s shrine would know the name of that *sahelī* and would likely have a more developed devotional relationship with her than others would.²⁷⁵ This would also hold true for those who venerate a particular *sahelī* as the *kulpir* (lineage saint) of their *aṭak* (clan). In general awareness of the *sahelīs* as a collective and in devotional practice, the number seven matters more than any standardized list of seven names.

Mai Misra's origin narrative not only characterizes her as a goddess but aligns with the foundational myth of the Rajput *kuldevī*. The domestic contexts in which Rajput women invoke the *kuldevī* superimposes upon the warrior goddess of the foundational myth the image of the *pativrata*, the devoted wife and mother who protects and nurtures the family and, by extension, the *kul* in a role analogous to her worshippers who are wives and mothers themselves. The following section addresses the ways in which this domestic conceptualization of the *kuldevī* appears in the veneration of Mai Misra.

²⁷³ Foulston and Abbott, *Hindu Goddesses*, 110.

²⁷⁴ From a meeting with Rumanaben in Ahmedabad on January 7, 2019.

²⁷⁵ From a meeting with Rumanaben in Ahmedabad on January 7, 2019.

Mai Misra as Kuldevī: The Kalaswālī Khicrī

Mai Misra's *kalas* (water-pot), introduced above, reflects a popular aspect of the material culture of Hindu goddess veneration. The nine-day Navratri festival features the ritual installation of a jar-form of Durga.²⁷⁶ This jar embodiment of the goddess involves a clay or metal water-pot called a *ghaṭ* or *kalas* that is filled with water, representing the fertile womb of the goddess as cosmic creatrix.²⁷⁷ The *ghaṭ* is topped with a coconut and may be covered in a red cloth, or even a sari and jewelry in some locations.²⁷⁸ The wide-bellied jar that is clothed, garlanded and bedecked with jewelry resembles a pregnant woman adorned in her bridal attire.²⁷⁹ The epithets identifying Mai Misra by her water-pot and veil gesture toward this ritual jar-installation (*ghaṭasthapanā*); this gynomorphic mode of embodying the goddess is applied in the Sidi Muslim context to aniconically represent Mai Misra during her death anniversary celebrations. The method of construction and ritual installation of Mai Misra's *kalas* closely parallel the ritual embodiment of a Hindu goddess in a jar-form (*ghaṭasthapanā*), rendering Mai Misra's *kalas* the primary aspect of the material culture of her veneration that reveals her conceptualization in terms of a goddess.

Mai Misra's *kalas* is not the only aspect of the devotional culture surrounding Mai Misra that is associated with female fertility. As detailed in the previous chapter, Sidi families generally

²⁷⁶ Rodrigues, *Ritual Worship*, 39.

²⁷⁷ Vasudha Narayanan, "Royal *Darbar* and Domestic *Kolus*: Social Order, Creation, Procreation and Re-Creation," in *Nine Nights of the Goddess: The Navratri Festival in South Asia*, eds. Caleb Simmons et al., (Albany: SUNY Press, 2018), 291; Rodrigues, *Ritual Worship*, 262.

²⁷⁸ Neelima Shukla-Bhatt, "Celebrating Materiality: Garbo, a Festival Image of the Goddess in Gujarat," in *Sacred Matters: Material Religion in South Asian Traditions*, eds. Tracy Pintchman and Corinne Dempsey, (Albany: SUNY Press, 2015), 93.

²⁷⁹ Rodrigues, *Ritual Worship*, 262.

host Mai Misra's *Khicṛī* ceremony on behalf of a daughter prior to her wedding. The bridal *khicṛī* ceremony evidences the ritual's associations with fertility. Mai Misra's temperament in her origin narrative suggests an equilibrium of hot (aggressive) and cool (nurturing) qualities, rendering the saint paradigmatic of South Asian cultural ideals of femininity.²⁸⁰ These thermodynamics apply to the saints' charisma or energetic potency (*barkat*) and procreative potential: thus, the balanced Mai Misra is invoked to cool an overheated female reproductive system, while Bava Habash, a hot-tempered saint, is invoked to stoke an overly cool male reproductive system.²⁸¹ In the former case, the consumption of the consecrated dish of *khicṛī* transfers Mai Misra's equilibrium to the female consumer, bringing the latter's procreative resources into homeostasis.

Mai Misra's *Khicṛī* ceremony evokes certain aspects of Hindu goddess mythology and devotional practice in its structure and association with fertility. In one version of her origin narrative, Mai Misra sets sail for India with her adopted sisters and companions (*sahelīs*).²⁸² Seven Sidi women representing Mai Misra's *sahelīs* are the first to consume the dish of *khicṛī* during the ceremony. The appearance of this motif in the context of Mai Misra's origin narrative and the structure of her *khicṛī* ritual, both demonstrate the enrooting of her veneration in the religious culture of goddess worship in western India, as well as her conceptualization in terms of a *kuldevī*.²⁸³

²⁸⁰ Basu, "Hierarchy and Emotion," 90-91; Basu, "Theatre of Memory," 256-257.

²⁸¹ Basu, "Hierarchy and Emotion," 90-92, 94-95.

²⁸² Basu, "A Gendered Indian Ocean Site," 234-235.

²⁸³ While the heptad of *sahelīs* in the *khicṛī* ceremony reflects the seven-goddess cohort associated with *kuldevī* worship in Gujarat and Rajasthan, notions of ritual kinship with Muslim ancestor-saints governs Sidi women's embodiment of Mai Misra's seven *sahelīs* during the ceremony, as discussed in Chapter One. The number seven is also important in Islamic contexts.

The seven *sahelīs* dress the dish of *khicṛī* with ample amounts of ghee and occasionally sugar in some locations (consider, for example, the *Śakkarwālī Khicṛī*); some may serve the *khicṛī* with small side dishes of plain curd. Mai Misra’s cool-minded “sister” saints are generally remembered as being addicted to sugar, an association which links sweetness of taste with coolness of temperament.²⁸⁴ Dairy products like ghee and curd also evoke mother’s milk, accentuating the *khicṛī*’s cooling effect on the female reproductive system. After the *sahelīs* have cleared the dish of *khicṛī*, other women may consume any leftover *khicṛī* as consecrated food (*niyāz*).²⁸⁵ As the seven women symbolically embody Mai Misra’s sister-saints, who in turn reflect the goddess heptad motif, the distribution of the leftover *khicṛī* as consecrated food reflects the distribution of food (*prasād*) that has been offered to a deity in Hindu devotional contexts.

The sweetness of the tray of *khicṛī* to which sugar has been added, and the ritual’s relationship with female fertility, together suggest a conceptual overlap with one Navratri tradition associated with the goddess Vahanvati Ma. Gujarati Hindu women in Ahmedabad report that during Navratri, one tray of unsalted, sweet vegetarian dishes may be offered to Vahanvati Ma from each household headed by the male relatives in a family. The central tray in the spread is called the *khaṇḍ* (“piece; part”), the others *akhaṇḍ* (“unbroken; the whole”). A raffle is taken of names of married women in the family who have not yet borne children; the woman whose name is called must eat the entire central tray of food. She is expected to bring her

²⁸⁴ Basu, “Theatre of Memory,” 251-252.

²⁸⁵ Basu, “Hierarchy and Emotion,” 95.

new baby with her the following Navratri. This parallel suggests the adherence of the ideological framework for Mai Misra's *khicrī* ritual to the cultural paradigms of the region.²⁸⁶

Sidi brides in Ahmedabad may observe the *Kalawālī Khicrī* ceremony before their wedding, which features the installation of Mai Misra's *kalas*. Enrobed in Mai Misra's *cundarī*, garlanded with flowers, and olfactorily serenaded with incense sticks, the *kalas* occupies a special seat among the assembly of participants. Through its incorporation of the *kalas*, this particular *khicrī* ceremony best demonstrates the grounding of Mai Misra's veneration in the religious culture of goddess worship in Gujarat. Rumanaben identifies the *Kalawālī Khicrī* ceremony as a *sthāpanā* (installation), while a woman who assembled the *kalas* and led ritual activity during a *Kalawālī Khicrī* ceremony describes the installation as "seating" Mai Misra in the assembly.²⁸⁷ The term *sthāpanā* connotes Hindu ritual contexts involving the installation of an image of a deity. For example, the family of a Hindu bride may invite a priest to perform a *Ganesh Sthāpanā* to initiate the corpus of pre-wedding rituals. The *sthāpanā* involves the installation of an image of the god Ganesh in the home, an act described as "seating" (H., *biṭhānā*, to seat) the deity. As a pre-wedding *sthāpanā* performed by Muslim Sidi women, the *Kalawālī Khicrī* involves an installation of the *kalas* as an aniconic material medium suggestive of the saint Mai Misra in this Islamic devotional context.

²⁸⁶ See Jazmin Graves, "Mai Misra's Khicari," 5-6 for a general overview of parallels between Mai Misra's *Khicrī* ritual and a type of *zar* ceremony performed by Muslim women in Sudan. At the same time, the components of Mai Misra's *Khicrī* also align with those of a devotional ritual performed by Shia women in Hyderabad, the *dastarkhān*. See Diane D'Souza in *Lived Islam in South Asia*, 196-197. These overlaps point to common elements of Muslim women's devotional practices in distinct settings in the Indian Ocean world.

²⁸⁷ From participant-observation in the ceremony and discussions with both in Ahmedabad on December 20, 2018.

The installation of the *kalas* as a symbolic embodiment of Mai Misra during the *Kalaswālī Khicṛī* ceremony suggests Mai Misra’s conceptualization in terms of a lineage goddess. Prior to a son’s wedding, some Hindu families in Ahmedabad perform *Mātājī nī Sthāpanā* (Gujarati, “Installation of the Mother [Goddess]”), installing an image of the *kuldevī* worshipped within the family’s patriline along with a jar-form of the goddess called a *maṭkī* or *ghaḍo* (Hindi, *ghaṭ*; Sanskrit, *ghaṭa*) in Gujarati.²⁸⁸ The *ghaṭasthāpana* conveys the goddess’ generative potential as cosmic creatrix and fertile earth by assembling a gynomorphic image of her, emphasizing her womb, from component parts that evoke her manifestations in nature as earth and riverine goddesses.²⁸⁹ Accordingly, “the symbols and prayers that accompanied the *ghaṭa* rituals aimed to induce fertility”.²⁹⁰ The jar installation’s direct association with female fertility reveals the importance of the Gujarati Hindu groom’s pre-wedding *Mātājī nī Sthāpanā*. The event symbolically embodies the family’s lineage goddess in her jar-form to induce the fertility of the bride about to enter the household. The inclusion of the *kalas* in the *Kalaswālī Khicṛī* ceremony thus amplifies the ceremony’s intended influence on the fertility of the bride on whose behalf it is performed.

The symbolic embodiment of Mai Misra in the form of a *kalas* that is ‘seated’ before the assembly of women participating in the *Kalaswālī Khicṛī* parallels the installation of a *kuldevī* in her jar-form during a Hindu groom’s pre-wedding rituals. The embodiment of either sacralized feminine entity in a jar-form reveals an equivalency between the concept of lineage saint (*kulpīr*) and lineage goddess (*kuldevī*) in the context of Mai Misra’s veneration. Rumanaben notes that

²⁸⁸ From a meeting in Ahmedabad on December 28, 2018.

²⁸⁹ Rodrigues, *Ritual Worship*, 86, 158, 262.

²⁹⁰ Rodrigues, *Ritual Worship*, 138.

the way in which Sidis construct the *kalas* in Saurashtra and Kutch resembles Hindu *ghaṭ* traditions.²⁹¹ This observation indicates reflexivity regarding the rootedness of Sidi ritual practice in the religio-cultural landscape of Gujarat.

The *Kalaswālī Khicṛī* ceremony features an additional element suggestive of the devotional culture of Hindu goddess worship in Gujarat. After the participants have eaten the *khicṛī*, they perform *dhammāl*. Participants almost always perform *baiṭhī* (seated) *dhammāl* during the *khicṛī* ceremony, yet during the *Kalaswālī Khicṛī*, the seated *dhammāl* performance graduates to *kharī* (standing) *dhammāl*. The standard *kharī dhammāl* sequence features a new element in this ritual context: the bride hoists the *kalas* atop her head as she leads the counterclockwise procession of other women and girls playing *dhammāl*.

The *dhammāl* ecstatic dance invokes the Islamic heritage of the Sidi devotional tradition. Rumanaben explains that its counterclockwise rotation intentionally enacts pilgrims' circling the Ka'ba during *hajj*. She associates Sidi *dhammāl* with the dance of the Abyssinians (Habshis) praising the Prophet as recorded in hadith. She explains that Bava Habash ("Father [from] Ethiopia") brought this tradition with him to India, and that playing *dhammāl* is central to Sidis' expression of their unique identity: "We circle around playing *dhammāl* for the sake of our identity. *Hamārī pahcān ke liye ham cakkār lagāte dhammāl khelke.*"). Sidi *dhammāl* is a performance of Sidis' heritage, bequeathed by Abyssinian Muslim ancestor-saints, as a Muslim community of eastern African ancestry.

²⁹¹ From a meeting with Rumanaben in Ahmedabad on October 13, 2019.

Nevertheless, the late father of the present *naṅgāsī* has drawn a parallel between Sidi *dhammāl* and the *garbā* dance Hindus perform in honor of the goddess during Navratri in Gujarat.²⁹² A perforated clay pot called a *garbo* is placed at the center of a counterclockwise rotating circle of dancing women, who may also carry such pots atop their heads as they dance.²⁹³ Containing a lit lamp whose flame casts starlike shapes through the pot's perforations, the *garbo* represents the universe as the cosmic womb of the goddess: the name of this pot and its associated genre of song and dance derives from the Sanskrit noun *garbha* meaning womb. Its symbolism is thus akin to that of the *ghaṭ*. Both the *garbo* clay pot and the clay or metal *ghaṭ* represent the goddess' generative potential and feature in the material culture of the Navratri festival in Gujarat. The incorporation of the *kalas* into the standing *dhammāl* sequence of the *Kalaswālī Khicṛī* ceremony reinforces this parallel between the Hindu *garbā* dance honoring the goddess and *dhammāl* performed in veneration of Mai Misra – who is symbolically embodied as a goddess would be – during the *Kalaswālī Khicṛī*. That Ratanpur Sidi women perform a *garbā* song replacing the goddess name “Ambe Ma” with “Mai Sahib Ma” accentuates these observations of the enrooting of Mai Misra's veneration in the religious culture of goddess worship in Gujarat.

Conclusion

This chapter surveys Sidi devotional songs, oral narratives, and the material culture and structure of Sidi devotional rituals as they illuminate Mai Misra's tacit conceptualization in terms of a Hindu goddess, and the multivocality of the Sidi Sufi devotional tradition. The chapter

²⁹² Shroff, *Voices of the Sidis: We're Indian and African*, 2005.

²⁹³ Shukla-Bhatt, “Celebrating Materiality,” 92-94.

parses legal statements composed by Sidi community leaders that position Sidis and their ancestor-saints as Muslims, yet articulate the multivalence of the community's identity and its devotional tradition. The language of these statements positions Bava Gor as a “*kuldevtā*” (lineage god) of the Sidi community in whose honor rituals of worship (*pujāvidhi*) incorporating ‘Swahili prayers’ are performed. These statements evidence the multivocality of the tradition, and lay the foundation for the chapter's analysis of the representation of Mai Misra in devotional songs, oral narratives, and ritual contexts in ways suggestive of a goddess.

This chapter alights on the Rajput *kuldevī*, her membership in a cohort of seven sister goddesses, and her representation in her foundational myth to reveal the ways in which Mai Misra's origin story depicts her in terms of a *kuldevī*. The foundational myth of the Rajput *kuldevī* construes the goddess as a virgin warrior, while Rajput women's belief and worship conceptualize her as a *suhāgin*. Similarly, Mai Misra's origin narrative remembers her as an unmarried seven-year-old girl who defeats a demoness, while the material culture surrounding Mai Misra's veneration, especially during her *urs*, reveals her representation as an auspicious bride.

Mai Misra's *kalas* is a distinctive element of the material culture of the Sidi Sufi tradition which features ubiquitously in her death-anniversary observances in Gujarat and Mumbai. The *Kalaswālī Khicṛī* ceremony of a Sidi bride in Ahmedabad best demonstrates the rootedness of Mai Misra's veneration in the religious culture of Hindu goddess worship in western India. It recalls the jar-installation that some Hindu families in Gujarat may perform in honor of a groom's lineage goddess, demonstrating an equivalency between Mai Misra's status as a lineage saint (*kulpīr*) and veneration in terms of a lineage goddess (*kuldevī*). The incorporation of the

kalas in the standing *dhammāl* segment of the ceremony evokes the *garbo* pot of the Gujarati *garbā* dance performed in worship of a Hindu goddess during Navratri.

The *Kalaswālī Khicrī* ritual underscores Mai Misra's representation in terms of a goddess in Sidi devotional songs, and her association with seven companions suggestive of the goddess heptad motif that appears in the worship of the goddess Khodiyar Ma in Gujarat and Rajput lineage goddesses of Rajasthan in northwestern India. The material culture of Mai Misra's veneration thus evidences the enrooting of the Sidi Sufi tradition in the religious culture of western India and recalls a history of Afro-descendant women's integration into the Sidi community through bonds of ritual kinship with the African Sufi saint Mai Misra entombed in Gujarat.

3. Mai Misra as *Malungu*: Mai Misra's *Kalas* and the Perpetuation of the Sidi Community

Introduction

The second chapter of the dissertation studies the characterization of Mai Misra in terms of a lineage goddess (*kuldevī*) in her foundational narrative and in the *Kalaswālī Khicṛī* ceremony performed in Ahmedabad. This chapter surveys Mai Misra's *kalas* rituals performed during the *urs* of Bava Gor. These events highlight the nuptial significance of a Sufi saint's *urs* as construed in South Asia. For example, Mai Misra's *Māmgnī* in Ratanpur celebrates the saint's engagement, which never resulted in marriage during her lifetime. This ceremony reflects Mai Misra's *kuldevi*-like status as both a perpetual virgin and auspicious bride.

The chapter proceeds to what in some locations comprises the first step in the ritual installation of Mai Misra's *kalas* during the *urs*: filling the *kalas* with water (Guj., “*kaḷaś nuṁ pāṇī bhavā*”) from a well. A description of this ritual event in Kumbharwada, a village in Ghogha, Bhavnagar, introduces the reader to two material media important to the *urs* rituals of Mai Misra's *kalas*. These are the *cakkī*, a millstone used to grind grains which will be used to create *bojā*, a sacred drink associated with the foundational narrative of the ancestor-saints and prepared with the water of the ritually-installed *kalas*.

While the method of preparing the *kalas* is indigenous to India, the method of preparing its contents, *bojā*, suggests origins for the drink that are beyond the culinary landscape of Gujarat. An analysis of the term *bojā* and the variations in its preparation highlights the physical vessel of Mai Misra's *kalas* as a site of cultural confluence that bespeaks the African diasporan heritage of the Sidi community and its devotional tradition.

The chapter proceeds to the *kalas* rituals performed at the memorial shrines of Jicha Ma and Mai Misra in Vadva, Bhavnagar. Participants fill Mai Misra's *kalas* with water from the enshrined well of Jicha Ma, then engage in the ritual preparation of *bojā* while enclosed in the shrine of Mai Misra. The gender dynamics of these rituals highlights the significance of *bojā* to the life cycle stage of motherhood symbolized by the *kalas*.

Just as Mai Misra's *kalas* is a multivocal symbol reflexive of the *ghaṭ* installation of a Hindu goddess, *urs* processions in which Sidi women carry Mai Misra's *kalas* atop their heads mirror a Gujarati Hindu pre-wedding rite called 'Gotrījo.' The *Gotrījo* involves a procession of the bride's natal family with a type of *ghaṭ*. This event demonstrates a link between the bride's paternal lineage (*kuṭumb*), including ancestors, and the patrilineal *kuldevī*. The *Gotrījo* custom illuminates Mai Misra's veneration in terms of both an 'ancestor' and *kuldevī*, and sheds light on the *kalas* a symbol of Mai Misra's perpetuation of the Sidi community via the orchestration of ritual and natural kinship ties connecting community members and ancestor-saints.

As participants march in ritual procession to the well in Kumbharwada, they chant the *jikar*, "*Ghaṭ Bharūṃgī Āj* (I Will Fill the Pot Today)." The refrain of this *jikar* highlights the ritual event of filling Mai Misra's *kalas*, while its verses employ a stylistic technique called the *śikh-nakh varṇan* (head-to-foot description) to depict Mai Misra as a bride. The performance of this *jikar* underscores the *kalas* as a symbolic embodiment of Mai Misra as an auspicious bride. This *jikar* generates an image of the saint to facilitate believers' remembrance of her, a devotional practice which is the primary aim not only of the recitation of *jikar*, but of any ritual event commemorating the saints. Remembrance leads to rapture, facilitating the mediation of

Mai Misra's charisma (*barkat*) through the *kalas*, its bearer, and its liquid medium, *bojā*, to the Sidi community which partakes of the *kalas*' contents.

The symbolism of the *kalas* and its contents, suggesting the womb of the ritually embodied Mai Misra, indicates that the *kalas* rituals represent Mai Misra's perpetuation of the Sidi community. The act of 'cooling' Mai Misra's *kalas* by distributing its contents represents the ritual transference of the saint's charisma or blessings (*barkat*) to devotees through the consumption of *bojā*, the contents of the *kalas*-womb. This parallels the notion of natural transmission of *barkat* from the Sidi ancestor-saints to their 'descendant'-devotees, as the womb-symbolism of the *kalas* installed during the *Kalaswālī Khicṛī* suggests the perpetuation of the Sidi community in terms of natural kinship ties generated through female fertility. In this regard, Mai Misra is 'mother' of the Sidi community.

Two devotional songs (*jīkar*) incorporate Swahili lyrics that preserve the lamentations of the kinless and childless; the narrator of one of these songs calls out to '*malungu*.' The chapter reads a Sidi devotional song (*gīt*) in Hindi, positioning Mai Misra as a source of help, as a response to the Swahili songs. Analysis of these devotional songs suggests that the veneration of Mai Misra by forcibly dispersed Africans and their descendants in India, especially women, may have allowed for the reconstitution of community among the kinless and childless in Gujarat. The gendered *urs* rituals of Mai Misra celebrate the saint, symbolically embodied by the *kalas*, as a source of blessings read as ritual and natural kinship ties connecting Afrodescendants in community. The nuptial symbolism and role of women in Mai Misra's *urs* rituals indicates that these events commemorate, along with Mai Misra and her companion saints, the countless unnamed women of the African diaspora in India.

The Soul of the Sufi Saint as Bride of God: The Nuptial Significance of the *Urs*

The death anniversary (*urs*) celebrations of the Sidi ancestor-saints take place in Rajab, the seventh month of the Islamic lunar calendar.²⁹⁴ The *Mirāt-i Aḥmadī* records the fifteenth day of Rajab in 785 AH (1383 CE) as Bava Gor’s death date. Sidis at the tomb of Bava Gor in Ratanpur and at his memorial tomb in Ahmedabad generally celebrate Bava Gor’s *urs* on the twelfth of Rajab.²⁹⁵ The *urs* events begin with the *Sandal* on the eleventh of Rajab, which involves the application of sandalwood paste to the saints’ tombs and the performance of *dhammāl*. The day of the *urs* in Ratanpur features an event called Mai Misra’s Engagement (*Sagāī* or *Māmgnī*). The *Māmgnī*, unique to Ratanpur, sets the nuptial theme of the *urs* events associated with Mai Misra.

Otherwise, the *urs* festivities of locales throughout Gujarat and Mumbai feature the rituals of Mai Misra’s *kalas*. The *kalas* events invariably involve ritual processions in which generally unmarried young women carry the *kalas* to or from shrines or other sites of the *urs* festivities.

²⁹⁴ The twenty-seventh day of Rajab marks the Prophet’s ascension, highlighting this month’s significance. In Jamnagar, the *urs* of Bava Gor is celebrated in the fourth month of the Islamic lunar calendar; the eleventh day of this month is the death anniversary of Abdul Qadir Gilani. See Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), xxvii.

²⁹⁵ In 2020, the *urs* in Ratanpur was celebrated on the eleventh of Rajab. The exact date of observance of Bava Gor’s *urs* during the month of Rajab varies in different locales throughout Gujarat and Mumbai. The observance of Bava Gor’s *urs* on the twelfth may reflect the subsumption of the memory of Baba Haji Rajab, a predecessor in the Rifai lineage of Bava Gor, in the traditions surrounding the latter. The *Mirāt-i Aḥmadī* records 12 Rajab 670 AH (1272 CE) as the date of Baba Haji Rajab’s death in Patan, where his *urs* is annually observed on this date. Ahmedabad’s lead ritual specialist remembers “Sidi Rajab,” whose given name in the Rifai order was “Haji Baba Rehan,” as a *murśid* (teacher) from whom Bava Gor took *pyālā* (initiation); Ratanpur’s *naṅgāsī* remembers Haji Baba Rehan inversely as a *murīd* (initiate) of Bava Gor, and both saints as “*pīr-bhāī*,” brothers under the Rifai *pīr*. Communication in Ahmedabad on March 3, 2019, in Patan on October 21, 2019 and in Ratanpur on October 22, 2019.

Mai Misra's *kalas* rituals include filling the *kalas* with water from a well or with *bojā*, and 'cooling' the *kalas* by distributing its contents of *bojā* as *niyāz*.

On the day of the *Māṃgnī*, guests from the shrines of Sultanji Daud or Baba Rustam in Pariej offer engagement gifts (*māṃgnī*) to Mai Misra at her shrine. They carry these gifts on silver trays atop their heads while circling the outside of Mai Misra's shrine as Sidis play *dhammāl*. This occasion commemorates Mai Misra's engagement to Sultanji Daud who, according to the caretaker of Mai Misra's shrine in Ratanpur, was a Habshi and was martyred in war before his and Mai Misra's wedding could take place.²⁹⁶ Traditionally, the *māṃgnī* gifts would be brought from Sultanji Daud's *dargāh* to Mai Misra's during the *urs*, though over time the tradition included the *dargāh* of Baba Rustam, Bava Gor's 'brother,' whose caretaker brings the *māṃgnī* gifts to Mai Misra every other year.²⁹⁷ The caretaker of Mai Misra's shrine describes the presentation of engagement gifts as "*māṃgnī caḍhānā*," positioning the *māṃgnī* as a ritual offering, like other material media presented to the saints at their shrines. The *māṃgnī* belongs to the genre of offerings specific to Mai Misra.

As a commemoration of Mai Misra's engagement ceremony, the *Māṃgnī* represents the true spirit of an *urs*; the term literally refers to a marriage or a marriage ceremony, and celebrates

²⁹⁶ Communication at Mai Misra's shrine in Ratanpur on April 29, 2019.

²⁹⁷ Baba Rustam's shrine is located in Pariej and is a ten minute drive away from Sultanji Daud's shrine. The proximity of Sultanji Daud's *dargāh* to Mai Misra's suggests the plausibility of a historical affinal alliance between Habshi families in these locations. However, a plaque over Sultanji Daud's tomb identifies him as a Saiyid rather than a Habshi. An interlocutor at Sultanji Daud's shrine observes another inconsistency, imparting that the *māṃgnī* comes not from Sultanji Daud but from Haider Shah Bava, the fiery (*jalālī*) 'elder brother' of Bava Gor who is buried near Sultanji Daud. (Yet Bava Gor is always the eldest of his 'brothers' according to the Sidi tradition.) Communication at Sultanji Daud's shrine on October 22, 2019.

the death of a Sufi saint as his marriage with God.²⁹⁸ Scholar of Sufism Annemarie Schimmel identifies the origin of this association between death and union with God: "...the idea of the bride soul, whose one and only Beloved is God Himself, has led to the custom of designating death as '*urs*, 'wedding' - a spiritual wedding in which the soul is finally reunited with her primordial Beloved."²⁹⁹ As a commemoration of the death of a woman, Mai Misra's *Māmgnī* uniquely demonstrates the conception of the *urs* as the wedding of a Sufi saint's soul with God. Devotees in Ratanpur observe Mai Misra's *Māmgnī* to recreate her engagement ceremony, which never led to a wedding due to her fiancé's premature demise.

The earliest observances of a deceased saint's *urs* involved his disciples, who would "gather round his grave, and read the *fatiha*, and offer food, incense, lights, et cetera, especially on the 12th of *Rabi 'u'l-awwal*," a date marking the birthday of the Prophet.³⁰⁰ Regarding a deceased Sufi saint, the *fātiḥā* signifies "prayers offered up in the name of saints" or "oblations and... offerings to saints with prayer." Given this, Platts records a tertiary definition of the term '*urs*' as "offerings to a saint; oblations." While frankincense (*lobān*) and light (*diyā-battī*) are offered daily to the Sidi ancestor-saints at their shrines, consecrated items of food (*niyāz*) and sacred drinks particular to the saints (*pyālā*) may be distributed during the *urs*. On the day of the *Māmgnī*, rose *śarbat* is distributed in Ratanpur.³⁰¹

²⁹⁸ Basu, "A Gendered Indian Ocean Site," 247. Platts, *A Dictionary of Urdu*, 760. Aditya Behl, *Love's Subtle Magic: An Indian Islamic Literary Tradition, 1379-1545* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 284. See also Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, 240.

²⁹⁹ Schimmel, *My Soul is a Woman*, 110.

³⁰⁰ Platts, *A Dictionary of Urdu*, 760. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, xxvii.

³⁰¹ Basu notes that the *śarbat* is made from sugar gifted to Mai Misra from Sultanji Daud's shrine during the *urs*. See Basu, "A Gendered Indian Ocean Site," 248.

The *urs* of the ancestor-saints also features the performance of *dhammāl/gomā*. This accords with the marital symbolism of the *urs*; Behl highlights the overlap between the *urs* and the *gavana* or going-away ritual (*vidāy*) of a bride, in which she departs from her natal home and joins her husband's household: "The event resonates both with the death anniversaries of Sufi shaikhs... and with the common poetic symbolism of bridal songs, which depict with great pathos the departure of the bride from her father's house."³⁰² The offering of the *māmgnī* gifts, which include items ranging from beautiful sandals to Colgate toothpaste, evokes the Gujarati Hindu custom called *āṇu*, during which guests visit a bride's natal home to view a stunning display of the items she will take with her to her husband's house after the wedding.³⁰³ During Mai Misra's *urs*, the offering of the *māmgnī* is compounded with the performance of *dhammāl*, affirming the associations between the departure of a bride and of the soul of a deceased saint.

As explored in the previous chapter, multivocality is a characteristic feature of the Sidi devotional tradition, its material culture, its rituals, and even of the conceptualization of its ancestor-saints. The nuptial dimensions of the Sufi saint's *urs*, emphasized in the case of Mai Misra's *Māmgnī*, are also significant in regards to Mai Misra's tacit conceptualization in terms of a goddess. A brief consideration of the foundation myth and iconography of the South Indian goddess Kanyakumari exemplifies this point. Kanyakumari ("unmarried, virgin girl") is thwarted from marrying Shiva on her wedding day, so that she could instead vanquish a demon.³⁰⁴ The

³⁰² Behl, *Love's Subtle Magic*, 284.

³⁰³ Observation in a Hindu household in Ahmedabad on February 3, 2019. Basu notes that the gifts exchanged between Mai Misra's and Sultanji Daud's shrines during their respective *urs* celebrations are commonly given during Muslim engagement ceremonies. See Basu, "A Gendered Indian Ocean Site," 247-248.

³⁰⁴ Foulston and Abbott, *Hindu Goddesses*, 201-203.

myth connects her “unmarried state” and “celibacy” to the retention of her “formidable power” (*śakti*).³⁰⁵ Thus, the icon of Kanyakumari is “perpetually dressed in her wedding finery”, demonstrating the two forms of the Goddess in which *śakti* is most manifest: the virgin girl and the auspicious bride.³⁰⁶ Like Kanyakumari, Mai Misra was betrothed but her marriage was never consummated; like the stone image of the eternal virgin dressed as perpetual bride, Mai Misra is celebrated as a bride, and even symbolically represented as one via the *kalas*, during the *urs*. The representation of Mai Misra in her foundational myth as unmarried seven-year-old child transforms into auspicious bride in her veneratory rituals, indicating her ritual potency (*śakti*) read as charisma (*barkat*) in the context of a Sufi saint.³⁰⁷

The Diasporan Dimensions of *Bojā*

A large tree stands at the center of a courtyard in Khumbharwada, a quiet, sleepy village in Ghogha. A circular platform encloses the base of the tree; atop the platform, a miniature *cillā* of Sidi Mukhta, Bava Gor’s bodyguard, watches over the courtyard, guarding the way to Mai Misra’s shrine. A sign above the entrance of the shrine boasts its status as “*Gādī Nam. 1* (Seat No. 1)” memorializing Mai Misra’s “first seat” or dwelling place in Gujarat; residents repute the locale to be her first port of arrival in India. A green *galef* bedecked with gold leaf patterns and a gold border covers an object on the floor of the shrine directly facing the entrance. The *galef* reveals a green millstone (*cakkī*), with red thread tied around its handle and rim; the *galef* and

³⁰⁵ Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses*, 202.

³⁰⁶ Foulston and Abbott, *Hindu Goddesses*, 201-203.

³⁰⁷ For the interpretation of Mai Misra as *śakti* see Basu, “Redefining Boundaries,” 67.

thread indicate the significance of the millstone as a material medium associated with the ancestor-saints.³⁰⁸

The shrinekeeper, Sabbirbhai, dates the *cakkī* to the lifetime of the saints, and explains that it is used to grind seven grains that will then be boiled in water to make *bojā*. The water used to prepare the *bojā*, Sabbirbhai explains, is “living water” (*zindā pānī*) which will be collected from a well near the settlement.³⁰⁹ The first day of Mai Misra’s *urs* celebrations in Ghogha thus features the ritual of filling the *kalas* (Guj., “*kaḷaś nuṁ pāṇī bharvā*”). This involves a procession to the well after sunset, where Sabbirbhai will fill Mai Misra’s *kalas* with water, assemble and adorn the *kalas* installation, and after a ritual procession back to the shrine, place it on a raised ledge beneath Mai Misra’s *cillā* (here, a niche covered by a *cundarī*) inside the memorial shrine.

Basu describes Mai Misra’s *urs* in Karachi, which also involves clay pots, like Mai Misra’s *kalas*, in a ritual performance called

“‘The Weight of the Mother’ (*Mai jo bhoja*). Asked for the meaning of ‘weight’ in the expression from which the performance derives its name, people pointed to a row of twenty-one clay pots (*matka*) covered with red cotton cloths that were stored in a corner next to the tomb of Mai Mishra. This is weight, *bhoja*, they said.”³¹⁰

Basu’s interlocutors in Karachi assert that the name of Mai Misra’s *urs* performance derives from its central feature, the clay pots containing ‘*bhoja*.’ Basu translates the name of the

³⁰⁸ Richard Eaton studies the role of the *cakki* in disseminating Sufism in the Deccan. That is, the Chishti Sufis of Bijapur were the primary composers of a genre of Dakhani folk poetry called *cakki-nama* (grindstone songs) conveying Islamic teachings, including the Sufi practice of remembrance of God (*dhikr*). Women sang these *cakki-nama* while performing the domestic chore of grinding grain. See Eaton (1978): 157-164.

³⁰⁹ Personal communication in Ghogha on March 16, 2019.

³¹⁰ Basu, “Theatre of Memory,” 255-6.

commemorative event, “*Mai jo bhoja*,” as the “Weight of the Mother.” This seems to aptly describe the experience Basu recounts of seven women who each balance three clay pots atop their heads as they gracefully walk in procession or stand still for nearly two hours during the *urs*.³¹¹

Rumanaben notes that the aspirated initial consonant in the term ‘*bhoja*’ is a mispronunciation: its correct pronunciation is ‘*bojā*’.³¹² Elderly women living in the Sidi residential compound surrounding Bava Gor’s shrine in Vadva, Bhavnagar provide an origin story for *bojā*.³¹³ An itinerant holy man (*faqīr*), Bava Gor used to wander the neighborhoods of Bharuch and collect alms from different households. Some gave wheat, others gave rice; some gave millet, others gave lentils; and yet others gave sorghum. So Bava Gor collected all of these grains in his bag and gave them to his sister, Mai Misra, upon returning home. “What should I make?” he asked her. She replied, “Make porridge (*rāb*) out of this.” Sidis call this dish *bojā*. The women explain that Mai Sahib has her *khicrī* made of mung beans and rice, Bava Gor has his *bojā*.

Traditionally, *bojā* is made of seven grains. These grains vary according to the preference of the makers, and may include pigeon peas, chickpeas, mung beans, moth beans, red lentils, rice, whole wheat, or pearl millet.³¹⁴ One of the three women who maintain Mai Misra’s shrine

³¹¹ Basu, “Theatre of Memory,” 256, 262-263.

³¹² Rumanaben affirms that the term is *boja*, not *bhoja*, whose aspirated initial consonant renders the two words distinct. Communication in Ahmedabad on October 18, 2019.

³¹³ Communication in Vadva, Bhavnagar on March 16, 2019.

³¹⁴ Rumanaben contests the inclusion of pigeon peas and chickpeas in *bojā*. (Personal communication with Rumanaben on July 3, 2020.)

in Vadva, adds that *bojā* contains dates, which are pitted and soaked; the grains are dried in the sun and ground. Rumanaben in Ahmedabad discusses the method of preparing *dāne kā bojā* (grain *bojā*): seven grains are washed, soaked, dried, ground in the *cakkī*, and then cooked.³¹⁵ The resulting liquid is neither too thick nor too thin, she describes. Because the first step in the process requires soaking the grains, they must be kept in a clean space to dry for months. She warns that males must not enter the space, as the *bojā* is actually Mai Misra's as is her *khicṛī* and is not Bava Gor's by name as the Bhavnagar *bojā* tradition maintains.³¹⁶ Just as seven *sahelīs* ritually consume Mai Misra's *khicṛī*, seven *sahelīs* grind the seven grains using the *cakkī*.³¹⁷ While women grind the grains, men are responsible for cooking the *bojā*, according to the tradition taught by Bava Gor and preserved in Bhavnagar.

The ingredients and method of preparing *bojā* suggest that this term is a regional pronunciation of the word 'boza'. The substitution of the consonant 'j' for 'z' commonly features in local variations of spoken Hindi. For example, Rumanaben explains that a goat sacrificed during the *urs* is called a 'bujī' and that this is a Swahili word.³¹⁸ The Swahili word for 'goat' is 'mbuzi' and for a particularly large goat is 'buzi'.³¹⁹ The substitution of 'z' with 'j' leads to Sidis'

³¹⁵ Communication with Rumanaben in Ahmedabad on April 21, 2019 and October 13, 2019.

³¹⁶ Allowing only women to touch or occupy the same space as the *bojā* grains suggests its association with Mai Misra, as only women may enter Mai Misra's shrine in Bhavnagar and her tomb in Ratanpur, and only women are allowed to touch her *cillā* in Ahmedabad (unless men are otherwise instructed by the women in charge). Mai Misra's *khicṛī* is likewise a private ritual performed by women only.

³¹⁷ Communication in Bhavnagar on October 23, 2019.

³¹⁸ Communication in Ahmedabad on January 29, 2019.

³¹⁹ From A.C. Madan, M.A., "Annotated Vocabulary of the Dialect of Swahili Commonly Spoken in Zanzibar City" (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1903). Accessed at: https://archive.org/stream/swahilienglishdi00madarich/swahilienglishdi00madarich_djvu.txt.

pronunciation of the term *buzi* as *buji*. Similarly, *bojā* is a variant pronunciation of the term ‘*boza*’.

Boza is an 8,000 to 9,000 year old drink which was first produced in Turkey and is considered to be the predecessor of beer.³²⁰ A 2013 study describes the raw materials, taste and texture of *boza*:

“Boza is a traditional cereal beverage made by fermentation of cooked, strained and sugared cereal slurry. The term *boza* refers to millet (*Persian*) but, in practise, flour or semolina or cracked grains of wheat, maize, rice or their mixtures are also used as raw materials. The end product is a fairly thick liquid with pale yellow appearance, and a mixed sweet and sour taste that is characteristic for boza.”³²¹

The authors of a 2002 study thus summarize the five-step process of preparing *boza*: “(i) preparation of the raw materials, (ii) boiling, (iii) cooling and straining, (iv) sugar addition, and (v) fermentation.”³²² The first step involves cleaning, cracking and sifting the cereals; some preparation methods prefer these cereals’ flours.³²³ The ingredients are then boiled for one to two hours into a pulp which is cooled overnight; some methods prefer “marble vessels in order to accelerate cooling.”³²⁴ Granulated sugar and a starter culture are added to the pulp, which “is left to ferment in wooden barrels” for approximately twenty-four hours.³²⁵ The resulting product “is

³²⁰ Muhammet Arici and Orhan Daglioglu, “Boza: A Lactic Acid Fermented Cereal Beverage as a Traditional Turkish Food,” *Food Reviews International* 18(1), (2002), 40.

³²¹ Jussi Loponen and Juhani Sibakov, “Sourdough and Cereal Beverages,” In *Handbook on Sourdough Biotechnology*, eds. M. Gobbetti and M. Gänzle (New York: Springer, 2013), 265-266.

³²² Arici and Daglioglu, “Boza,” 41.

³²³ Arici and Daglioglu, “Boza,” 41.

³²⁴ Arici and Daglioglu, “Boza,” 41-42.

³²⁵ Arici and Daglioglu, “Boza,” 41, 43.

a valuable fermented food that contributes to human nutrition” due to “its lactic acid, fat, protein, carbohydrate, fiber, and vitamin contents.”³²⁶

The contents and preparation of *boza*, according to the above study, and Sidi *bojā* significantly overlap. The Bhavnagar origin story for *bojā* indicates that Bava Gor would prepare grains, which had been randomly given during alms collection, into a type of porridge or gruel (*rāb*) that Sidis call *bojā*. The use of seven grains in the traditional *dāne kā bojā* reflects the practice of mixing grains such as wheat, maize or rice to prepare *boza*. For the latter, raw ingredients are cleaned, cracked or sifted, or their flours are used; similarly, the seven *bojā* grains are washed, soaked, dried and ground into flour using a *cakkī*. Both substances are boiled: *boza* boils for one to two hours, while Sidis in Bhavnagar boil *bojā* for approximately twenty minutes.³²⁷ Both products are then cooled; the use of a marble container to support the cooling process of *boza* reflects the choice of the clay pot (*maṭkī*) for *bojā*, a vessel commonly used in Gujarati homes to store drinking water and keep it cool. There is no indication that Sidi *bojā* is strained or that sugar or a starter culture are added to it, all steps which feature in the preparation of *boza*; however, dates, which have a high sugar content, may be added to *bojā*. Both substances are left to ferment, *boza* for twenty-four hours and *bojā* for approximately forty-eight. The fairly thick consistency of *boza* recalls Rumanaben’s comment on the texture of *bojā*, which is neither too thick nor too thin. Finally, the reported health benefits of *boza* as a fermented food validates its preparation by Bava Gor. As a mendicant saint given to fasting and prayer, Bava Gor and the

³²⁶ Arici and Daglioglu, “Boza,” 40.

³²⁷ Observation in Bhavnagar on March 17, 2019.

other members of his entourage in Ratanpur would have benefited from *bojā* as a source of nutrition culled from randomly given alms.³²⁸

The production of a type of *boza* by Sidis in western India supports the notion that “Boza and similar beverages are produced with different recipes and methods in various countries.”³²⁹ This includes the continent of Africa, where *boza* is produced in Egypt, Nigeria, Kenya and other countries. Egyptian *boza*, called *bouza*, is consumed as beer due to its alcohol content, which can reach 7% by volume.³³⁰ Likewise, “[b]oza is called bousa or bouza in Nigeria and some other African countries [where] it is similar to beer due to its high alcohol content.”³³¹ Despite the consumption of *boza* as beer in these countries, the Turkish Boza Standard outlines that “ethyl alcohol content should not exceed 2% by volume in both sour and sweet boza.” Nevertheless, whereas *boza* “consumption was initially widespread” in Islamic countries, its high alcohol content led to its prohibition in the eighteenth century.³³² *Boza* “is still produced and consumed widely in Anatolia, South Russia, East European countries, Middle East and Northern Persia.”³³³

Bojā’s nominal and material association with Mai Misra suggests that the drink may have arrived in India via Egypt. Not only is it called Mai Misra’s *Bojā* outside of Bhavnagar, it is also

³²⁸ In fact, Rumanaben recalls that *boja* was prepared to satisfy hunger and thirst in earlier generations. Personal communication on July 3, 2020.

³²⁹ Arici and Daglioglu, “Boza,” 41.

³³⁰ Arici and Daglioglu, “Boza,” 39.

³³¹ Arici and Daglioglu, “Boza,” 41. A 1992 study measures the alcohol content of Egyptian *bouza* at 3.8-4% and that of Kenyan *bousa*, an opaque beer, at 2-4%. See A. I. Sanni, “The Need for Process Optimization of African Fermented Foods and Beverages,” *International Journal of Food Microbiology* 18 (1993): 86, 91.

³³² Arici and Daglioglu, “Boza,” 40.

³³³ Arici and Daglioglu, “Boza,” 40.

kept in Mai Misra's *kalas* during the *urs*. Mai Misra's advent from Egypt and the presence of a wheat-based *boza* in Egypt called *bouza* points toward a possible Egyptian precedent for Sidis' seven-grain *bojā*.³³⁴ Bava Gor and his entourage arrived in India four centuries prior to the censure of *boza* as an inebriant in Islamic countries. However, the alcohol content of Sidi *bojā* may be as negligible as that of the standard Turkish *boza*. *Bojā* consumption is not associated with alcoholic inebriation, which is repudiated in Muslim Sidi communities, especially during the *urs*.³³⁵ *Bojā*'s associations with Mai Misra may suggest an Egyptian precedent for the preparation of *bojā*, while the cultural trappings of the tradition distance it from the alcoholic *bouza* of contemporary Egypt.

An alternative to the traditional seven-grain *bojā* is *kajūr* (date) *kā bojā*, which is prepared from dates.³³⁶ As Ahmedabad's shrine no longer has a working *cakkī* or an appropriate space to prepare the *bojā* grains, its *urs* celebrations feature *kajūr kā bojā*. The dates are soaked in water, strained, and mixed with jaggery; dates are boiled in water to produce *bojā* at the shrine of Bava Gor in Dongri, Mumbai.³³⁷ A Sidi woman washes the clay pot into which the date and jaggery mixture will be poured; women then fill the pot as they sing Mai Misra's *jikars*. Like the preparation of Mai Misra's *khicrī*, filling the pot with *bojā* is a private (*pardewālī*) ritual activity;

³³⁴ Sanni, "The Need for Process Optimization," 86.

³³⁵ For example, a mixture of rosewater or seawater, cows' milk and *attar* (alcohol-free fragrance) is sprayed during the *urs* in Ahmedabad as a precaution against malevolent spirits and those who are in a state of ritual impurity, such as menstruating women or drunken people. Communication with Rumanaben in Ahmedabad on April 21, 2019.

³³⁶ This paragraph is drawn from communication with Rumanaben on April 21, 2019 and October 13, 2019 in Ahmedabad, and personal communication on July 3, 2020.

³³⁷ Communication in Dongri, Mumbai on March 31, 2019.

men or women in a state of impurity may not enter the room.³³⁸ The *bojā* is kept in the shrine for two days until it sours. The day following the Sandal is Bava Gor's *urs*; the next day is Mai Misra's *urs*. By this day, the *bojā* is ready; two pots are filled with *bojā* and assembled according to the ritual requirements of Mai Misra's *kalas* installation. Two unmarried Sidi women then place one *kalas* each atop their heads, both covered by a single ceremonial cloth and garlands, and transport them on foot in a ritual procession from Bava Gor's shrine to the *dargāh* of Sidi Bashir. There, the assembly 'cools' the *kalas* with a performance of *baiṭhī dhammāl* and the distribution of *bojā* as *niyāz*.

Although the material culture of the *urs* associates *bojā* with Mai Misra, the Bhavnagar origin story for *bojā* associates the drink with Bava Gor. The *jikar* "*Makkā Madīnā Bojā Pīyemge* (Mecca Medina, We Will Drink *Bojā*)" explicitly mentions *bojā* and provides an additional association with Bava Gor. Rumanaben explains that the *jikar*'s reference to Mecca and Medina is a reminder that dates (*kajūr*) come from Arabia. Date *bojā* encourages the remembrance of Mecca and Medina, from whence the saints departed for India according to their foundational narrative. One of the three caretakers of Mai Misra's shrine in Vadva, Bhavnagar cites this *jikar*, calling *bojā* "a gift from the house of God" ("*khudā ke ghar se bakhśīs*").³³⁹

Despite Bava Gor's arrival in India from Mecca or Medina, his surname Nobi encodes his origins in Nubia, or present-day Sudan. The surname may associate him with the Nuba of Kordofan, one of two "mountain-dwelling communities [which] are considered 'indigenous

³³⁸ Rumanaben warns that if anyone in a state of impurity comes into contact with the pot, the *bojā* will spoil and produce maggots. For this reason, the doors of the shrine are kept closed on the day of the *Sandal*, the first day of the *urs* observances in Ahmedabad.

³³⁹ Communication in Bhavnagar on October 23, 2019.

peoples' and suspected to more closely represent the original stock of the people of the ancient Sudanese kingdoms of the Nile."³⁴⁰ These communities "seem to possess more knowledge of food fermentation than other groups" in Sudan.³⁴¹ The fermented foodstuffs of Sudan include "alcoholic fermented date products developed" "primarily along the Nile banks in the Northern Province, bordering Egypt."³⁴² A date wine called *sherbot* is among the three most important traditional fermented drinks of the region.³⁴³ "*Sherbot* is a light, spiced wine, more commonly considered a drink for feminine get-togethers. The wine is better known as a drink for the occasion of the Big Bairum (*i'id-kebir*) of the Muslims when sheep are slaughtered as sacrifice."³⁴⁴ The drink is made by boiling and straining dates to produce date syrup, to which a cloth pouch of ground ginger and cinnamon is added once the syrup cools to room temperature. The spiced syrup is then tightly sealed in an earthenware jar and left to ferment for one to three days.

The similarities between the contents, preparation and occasion for consumption of Sudanese date *sherbot* and Sidi date *bojā* are evident. The preparation of both drinks involves the same raw materials, dates and water, with the exclusion of spices in *bojā* and jaggery in *sherbot*.³⁴⁵ Both drinks require nearly the same processing period (one to three days for *sherbot*,

³⁴⁰ Hamid A. Dirar, "Commentary: The Fermented Foods of the Sudan," *Ecology of Food and Nutrition*, 32 (1994): 209.

³⁴¹ Dirar, "Commentary," 209.

³⁴² Mohamed Z. Ali and Hamid A. Dirar, "A Microbiological Study of Sudanese Date Wines," *Journal of Food Science*, 49 (1984): 459.

³⁴³ Ali and Dirar, "A Microbiological Study," 459.

³⁴⁴ Dirar, "Commentary," 216.

³⁴⁵ Bees' honey may be added to *nebit*, another of the three most important Sudanese date wines. Dirar, "Commentary," 216.

and two days for *bojā*), and the fermentation vessel in both cases is a clay pot. The consumption of *sherbot* in women's gatherings, and the origins of the drink in the Northern Province of Sudan bordering Egypt, draws to mind *bojā*'s association with Mai Misra. The popularity of *sherbot* during Eid in Sudan and the accompanying sheep sacrifice recalls *bojā*'s singular appearance in the Sidi Sufi devotional calendar during the *urs*, which in Ahmedabad features the sacrifice of one or more *bujī* (goats). As if corroborating the overlap between Sudanese *sherbot* and Sidi *bojā*, Rumanaben calls date *bojā* "*śarbat*" on one occasion and describes date *bojā* as "date *śarbat*" (*kajūr kā śarbat*).³⁴⁶ The association of *bojā* with Bava Gor, especially date *bojā* with Bava Gor's places of advent (Mecca and Medina), aligns with the striking parallels between date *bojā* and Sudanese *sherbot* to suggest possible origins for *kajūr ka bojā* in Nubia, brought to Gujarat by Bava Gor.

A third correspondence with term *boza* suggests coastal East African origins for a sacred drink (*pyālā*) consumed in remembrance of Sidi Mukhta during the *urs*. Oral narratives told in the days leading up to the Karachi *urs* identify Sidi Mukhta as "hot-tempered (*jalali mastana* - a 'mad *faqir*') carrying a clay pot filled with *bhang*, an intoxicating drink consisting of hemp, milk, and spices."³⁴⁷ Basu explains that prior to the placement of "the pots of Shidi Mukhta" upon women's heads, a sequence called "*Pyala Shidi Mukhta*" is performed in which seven men and four women representing eleven brother saints consume "a substitute for *bhang* from a clay pot."³⁴⁸ Sidis in Ahmedabad consume Sidi Mukhta's *pyālā* of *bhām̃g* in milk on the day after

³⁴⁶ Communication in Ahmedabad on October 13, 2019 and personal communication on July 3, 2020.

³⁴⁷ Basu, "Theatre of Memory," 257.

³⁴⁸ Basu, "Theatre of Memory," 261, 262.

Mai Misra's *urs*. Unlike *bojā* and other types of *niyāz*, prayers are not offered to consecrate Sidi Mukhta's *pyālā*, since Islam forbids intoxicating substances.³⁴⁹ Sidis then 'play' on burning coals in front of Sidi Mukhta's shrine to the exuberant rhythms of *dhammāl*; the burning coals reflect Sidi Mukhta's hot-tempered (*jalālī*) nature. The relationship between Sidi Mukhta's *pyālā* and *bojā* emerges: according to a dictionary of Swahili spoken in Zanzibar in the early twentieth century, *boza* refers to "an intoxicating preparation of *bhang*."³⁵⁰ This suggests that the *pyālā* of Sidi Mukhta consumed during the *urs* may preserve a *boza* tradition from Zanzibar.

The physical vessel of Mai Misra's *kalas* is a site of cultural confluence. The *bojā* it contains is not featured among the indigenous fermented foods of Gujarat.³⁵¹ Instead, it bespeaks the diasporan heritage of the Sidi community, bequeathed by its saints and ancestors hailing from East Africa, Egypt and Nubia via Arabia. While the method of preparing this drink perpetuates traditions from abroad, the ceremonial method of preparing its container, the *kalas*, is indigenous to India. These material media, drawn from the worship of Hindu goddesses and from the fermented food traditions of Africa and central Asia, converge in the *urs* of the Sidi ancestor-saints, observed by Afro-South Asians in Sindh, Pakistan, and in Gujarat and Mumbai in India.

³⁴⁹ Communication with Rumanaben in Ahmedabad on October 18, 2019.

³⁵⁰ Madan, "Annotated Vocabular," accessed at: https://archive.org/stream/swahilienglishdi00madarich/swahilienglishdi00madarich_djvu.txt

³⁵¹ See Jyoti Prakash Tamang, *Ethnic Fermented Foods and Beverages of India: Science, History and Culture* (Singapore: Springer, 2020). This preparation of *bhāṅg*, milk and spices also recalls a drink prepared for Holi and Mahashivratri. See McKim Marriott, "Holi: The Feast of Love," in *The Life of Hinduism*, eds. John Stratton Hawley and Vasudha Narayanan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 99-112.

Filling the *Kalas* and Preparing *Bojā* in Bhavnagar

In Vadva, Bhavnagar, the “living waters” used to prepare *bojā* are drawn from a well inside of the shrine of Jicha Ma near the shrines of the Sidi ancestor-saints. Jicha Ma is remembered as a woman who served at the royal court in Bhavnagar. Her integrity was so unquestionable that she threw herself into a well in indignation at a false accusation of theft.³⁵² Jicha Ma, who lives under the waters of the well, may reveal herself through lights shining from the water. She is not regarded as a saint in the same way as Mai Misra but is considered a ‘grandmother’ to whom a supplicant may appeal to forward an unanswered prayer to Mai Misra. Although she was not one of the seven contemporaries or *sahelīs* of Mai Misra, Jicha Ma may also be called a *sahelī* (friend) of Mai Misra.

The following vignette presents a glimpse from the 2019 *urs* in Vadva, Bhavnagar, during which participants filled Mai Misra’s *kalas* at Jicha Ma’s well and prepared *bojā* inside of the shrine of Mai Misra.³⁵³

After circling the courtyard in front of the Bava Gor’s shrine, participants walked in procession to the shrine of Jicha Ma. Everyone played *dhammāl* and recited *jikars* joyfully and vigorously as they marched. They then entered Jicha Ma’s shrine. It was intensely hot inside. The shrine was filled so thoroughly with clouds of incense smoke that its sanctum as well as everyone and everything therein were barely visible through screens of white smoke. Someone sprinkled the rosewater-milk-*attar* mixture around. As *dhammāl* resounded, four or five women entered *hāl*, ‘playing’ vigorously in the small space around the well. Two fully adorned

³⁵² Tale recounted in Bhavnagar on October 23, 2019.

³⁵³ Participant observation in Bhavnagar on March 17, 2019.

kalases sat beside Jicha Ma's shrine. A third one was then filled with water from Jicha Ma's well.

Participants marched back to the shrine of Bava Gor, where they circled the courtyard before entering Mai Misra's shrine. Women gathered inside, and the doors were closed behind them. In a space near the doors, across from Mai Misra's small memorial tomb, two men prepared *bojā* on an open-fire stove (*culhā*). The room blazed with intense heat; everyone's eyes watered from the dark smoke spreading throughout the room from the steady strokes of the ceiling fan. Eventually, the windows were opened and the fan was turned off. Young boys and men drummed as a woman led the participants in a call-and-response *baiṭhī dhammāl* performance of the one-line *jikar* : “*E pakāenge, pakāenge, Māī Misrā kā bojā pakāenge*. O we will make, we will make, we will make Mai Misra's *bojā*.” After some time, the tempo of the *dhammāl* increased, amplifying the intensity of the ritual as the cooking fire blazed. The women chanted the *jikar*, accompanied by drums and the Mai Misra rattle, until the *bojā* was done approximately twenty minutes later. After this, everyone exited the shrine.

Despite *bojā*'s nominal association with Bava Gor in Bhavnagar, its ritual preparation at this site reflects the primacy of female saints to the Sidi *bojā* tradition. The waters used to prepare the *bojā* are sourced from the well inside of Jicha Ma's shrine, in which this grandmotherly intermediary of Mai Misra is understood to dwell. The performance of *dhammāl* inside of the shrine, the shrine's fumigation with *lobān*, and women's experience of *hāl* therein all indicate the invocation and veneration of Jicha Ma. These waters are transported in procession to the courtyard of Bava Gor's shrine, which is circled counterclockwise with *dhammāl*. This indicates invocation and veneration of Bava Gor, along with other male saints enshrined beside him, including Sidi Mukhta, Bava Habash, Nagarchi Pir and Dariya Pir. The *kalases* are then carried to Mai Misra's shrine. Signs beside its door forbid men's entry into this

space honoring a female saint, over which three women alternately preside as caretakers, distinguishing Mai Misra's shrine as a feminine-gendered space.

Mai Misra's shrine in Bhavnagar houses her *khicṛī* ceremonies, a private (*pardewālī*, "curtained") ritual that women perform behind closed doors (and, ideally, closed windows), absent any male observation. The ritual acts of grinding the grain for *bojā* and filling Mai Misra's *kalas* with *bojā* mirror aspects of the *khicṛī* ceremony. Just as seven "sahelīs" ritually consume the dish of *khicṛī*, seven "sahelīs" sit together to grind the grains in a *cakkī*.³⁵⁴ Like the *khicṛī* ceremony, filling the *kalas* with *bojā* is a *pardewali* ritual which women perform in private as they sing *jikars*. Cooking the *bojā* is an intermediary ritual act between the two steps of grinding the grains and filling the *kalas*. It incorporates some aspects of the *khicṛī* as well, with one key distinction: the presence of men. It is *pardewali* as it takes place behind closed doors within Mai Misra's shrine among predominantly female participants, but men and boys are present in the shrine. Though they participate in the capacity of *dhammālīs*, a woman leads other women during the call-and-response *jikar* performance during *baiṭhī dhammāl*, underscoring female leadership in the gendered space of the shrine. Furthermore, *baiṭhī dhammāl* is common to the *khicṛī* ceremony, with the exception of the *Kalaswali Khicṛī*, reinforcing the general sense of continuity between the feminine-gendered aspects of the *khicṛī* and *bojā* traditions.

The most striking break in the parallels between Mai Misra's *Khicṛī* and the preparation of *bojā* is that, in addition to male *dhammālīs*, two men perform the central ritual act of cooking the *bojā* (*bojā pakānā*). The performance of a *jikar* that names the *bojā* as Mai Misra's within

³⁵⁴ Personal communication in Bhavnagar on March 16, 2019 and with Rumanaben on July 3, 2020.

Mai Misra's shrine as the *bojā* is cooking suggests the invocation of the saint to consecrate the substance that will fill her *kalas*. The women's singing of *jikar* as men and boys drum and men make the *bojā* reveal a unique, collaborative element to the ritual of preparing *bojā*. This ritual foregrounds men's role in transforming raw ingredients sourced from women's ritual contexts (the seven *sahelīs*' ground grains and the water from Jicha Ma's well) into a finished product which will be deposited in Mai Misra's *kalas*. A ritual procession will then transport the finished product to the shrine of Sidi Mamu in Bhavnagar, a male-gendered site, where it will be 'cooled' through the performance of *dhammāl* and delivered to the larger community.³⁵⁵

Men's and women's varying degrees of involvement in the process of preparing the raw materials for *bojā*, cooking the *bojā*, and filling and cooling Mai Misra's *kalas* associate the *kalas* rituals of the *urs* with marriage and motherhood, stages of a woman's life cycle symbolized by the water-pot (*ghaṭ/kalas*).³⁵⁶ Basu notes that in narratives about Mai Misra and Sidi Mukhta told before the Karachi *urs*, the pot appears "as a powerful South Asian symbol of the female womb generally, contain[ing]... the foremost female life-giving substance, milk."³⁵⁷ In one tale, Sidi Mukhta transforms his clay pot of *bhang* into milk, an event in which Basu discerns immense significance to the symbolism of the *urs*:

"By invoking metonymical links to motherhood and fertility, the milk manipulated by the man, Shidi Mukhta, is revealed further as the procreative female potential that is brought to bear fruit by the intervention of masculinity and the contribution of male substances. Consequently, *bhoja*, weight, the name of the drama, may be taken to mean 'fruits of female fertility.'"³⁵⁸

³⁵⁵ Similarly, the *kalas* is transported to the shrine of Sidi Bashir, a male ancestor-saint, in Ahmedabad.

³⁵⁶ Rodrigues, *Ritual Worship*, 89, 262.

³⁵⁷ Basu, "Theatre of Memory," 257.

³⁵⁸ Basu, "Theatre of Memory," 257.

In this way, Basu deduces that *bojā*, the contents of the *kalas*, refer to the “fruits of female fertility” - a notion which conjures the image of a pregnant belly such as the round, wide-bodied *kalas* evokes.³⁵⁹ Women’s roles foregrounded in the ritual acts leading up to cooking the *bojā* represent women’s preparation for marriage and motherhood. Men’s role in cooking the *bojā* aligns with Basu’s analysis of “the intervention of masculinity” to bring “the procreative female potential... to bear fruit.” As the waters filling the *ghaṭ* represent the female womb, the blazing fires enclosed in Mai Misra’s shrine and tended by men catalyze the processing of the raw materials from the world of women into a finished product. The *bojā* thus matures and cools inside of the shrine, representing gestation.

Thereafter, the “fruits of female fertility” are delivered to the community with a ritual procession, usually to the shrine of a male saint, and by ‘cooling’ the *kalas* with a *dhammāl* performance and the distribution of its contents, *bojā*. Basu observes that, in the Karachi *urs*, seven women carrying clay pots and who represent brother and sister saints, “are adorned in the colours of bride and groom. The procession could [therefore] be a marriage party - a bridegroom returning home from his marriage with his new bride.”³⁶⁰ ‘Cooling’ the *kalas* during the *urs* personifies the *kalas* as a bride/mother who delivers its child (*bojā*) into the arms of the community. Cooling the *kalas* usually takes place in the masculine-gendered space of a male saint shrine, emblematic of the patriline into which the child gains membership.

³⁵⁹ Rodrigues, *Ritual Worship*, 262.

³⁶⁰ Basu, “Theatre of Memory,” 264.

Filling the *Kalas* and the Remembrance of the Saints

One of the three Sidi women who maintain the shrine of Mai Misra in Vadva, Bhavnagar, highlights the immense potency of the *kalas* in this regard. She asserts that any young woman who carries it will be able to get married - that is, any obstacles preventing her from marrying will be removed.³⁶¹ This explains why, outside of Ratanpur, unmarried young women carry Mai Misra's *kalas* during the *urs*. The *kalas*, adorned with garlands and a red *cundarī*, symbolically embodies Mai Misra as a bride during the *urs* festivities. The bridal imagery of the *kalas* extends to the woman carrying it: as she places the *kalas* atop her head, the skirt of the fabric flowing out from the base of the *kalas* veils the woman's head to suggest the adornment of a bride. The *kalas*-bearer's hennaed hands and vibrant clothing, which may even include a red veil, especially Mai Misra's red tie-dyed (*bāmdhnī*) *cundarī*, reinforces the bridal imagery of the *kalas*.

Both the *kalas* and the woman carrying it become vessels for Mai Misra's charisma (*barkat*). Like the contents of the *kalas* become the liquid medium of *barkat* which will transfer to devotees through consumption, the young woman experiences the transference of *barkat* from Mai Misra to her own person via the material medium of the *kalas*. The performance of *dhammāl* supports this process by inviting the presence of Mai Misra into the gathering. The *kalas*-bearer may fleetingly experience Mai Misra's presence (*hāzirī*) while carrying the *kalas*, a moment of interaction between saint and devotee which facilitates the transference of *barkat* to the physical vessels of the *kalas* and its bearer.

³⁶¹ Communication in Bhavnagar on March 17, 2019.

The *jikar* “*Ghaṭ Bharūṃgī Āj* (I Will fill the Pot Today)” associates Mai Misra’s *kalas* with the saint’s representation as a bride, and gestures toward the symbolic value of the *kalas*-bearer herself as a vessel for the saint’s *barkat*. *Urs* participants in Ghogha perform this *jikar* while marching to a well Mai Misra’s *kalas* will be filled. This is also one of the *jikars* performed during the *dhammāl* segment of Mai Misra’s *Khicṛī* in Ahmedabad. The Ahmedabad rendition is as follows:

<i>Ghaṭ bharūṃgī āj, Gelī Mā</i>	I will fill the pot today, Geli Ma
<i>Ghaṭ bharūṃgī āj</i>	I will fill the pot today
<i>Tere khiṃgaṛiāle bāl, Mārī</i>	Your curly hair, Mother
<i>Ghaṭ bharūṃgī āj</i>	I will fill the pot today
<i>O ghaṭ bharūṃgī āj, Gelī Mā</i>	O I will fill the pot today, Geli Ma
<i>Ghaṭ bharūṃgī āj</i>	I will fill the pot today
<i>Tere sir pe kasumbe rumāl, Mārī</i>	Red kerchief on your head, Mother
<i>Ghaṭ bharūṃgī āj</i>	I will fill the pot today
<i>O ghaṭ bharūṃgī āj, Gelī Mā</i>	O I will fill the pot today, Geli Ma
<i>Ghaṭ bharūṃgī āj</i>	I will fill the pot today
<i>Tere hāthoṃ meṃ baṃgariyām, Mārī</i>	Bangles on your hands, Mother
<i>Ghaṭ bharūṃgī āj</i>	I will fill the pot today
<i>O ghaṭ bharūṃgī āj, Gelī Mā</i>	O I will fill the pot today, Geli Ma
<i>Ghaṭ bharūṃgī āj</i>	I will fill the pot today
<i>Teri camak camak cāl, Mārī</i>	Your glittering gait, Mother

Ghaṭ bharūṅgī āj

I will fill the pot today³⁶²

The women walking in the ritual procession to the well in Ghogha collectively embody the female narrator of the *jikar* who proclaims, “I will fill the pot today,” using the first person feminine singular conjugation of the verb *bharnā* (to fill). In the above recension of the *jikar*, the narrator begins and ends each stanza with this phrase, repeating it three times. In Ghogha, this phrase is repeated five times in one stanza, often substituting the word *ghaṭ* with its synonym, *kalas*:

E ghaṭ bharūṅgī āj, Gelī Mārī

O I will fill the pot today, Geli Ma

Ghaṭ bharūṅgī āj

I will fill the pot today

E kalas bharūṅgī āj, Gelī Mārī

O I will fill the pot today, Geli Ma

Kalas bharūṅgī āj

I will fill the pot today

Tere khiṅgariāle bāl, Mārī

Your curly hair, Mother

Ghaṭ bharūṅgī āj

I will fill the pot today³⁶³

Such repetition emphasizes the importance of this action. The context in which the women in Ghogha sang this song underscores it as a direct and literal reference to the ritual act of filling Mai Misra’s *kalas*.

The only verse which differentiates each stanza is that which describes an aspect of Mai Misra’s appearance. Stanza by stanza, the *jikar* illustrates a vision of Mai Misra, beginning at her head and ending at her feet. This stylistic technique is called a *śikh-nakh varṇan* (head-to-foot

³⁶² Nazir Ali Jairazbhoy’s and Amy Catlin-Jairazbhoy’s recording of this *jikar* accessed at the Archives and Research Center for Ethnomusicology in Gurgaon, Haryana in June 2017. The transcription and translation are my own.

³⁶³ Recorded in Ghogha on March 16, 2019 during participant observation. The transcription and translation are my own.

description) and is the hallmark of the *premākhyān* genre of Hindavi Sufi poetry mentioned in the introduction of the dissertation.³⁶⁴ Mai Misra’s description begins with her curly hair (“*khiṁgariāle bāl*”). While curly hair is a common motif in heroines’ descriptions in the *premākhyān*, Mai Misra’s hair reveals her African ethnic origins. To Sidis, curly hair signifies the inheritance of the ancestor-saints’ *barkat* across the generations and is a defining feature of the community, articulated as a caste identity marker.³⁶⁵ This *jikar* therefore celebrates the curly hair of Mai Misra, the mother of the Sidi community. The *jikar* then proceeds to Mai Misra’s adornments: she wears a red headscarf (*rumāl*) and bangles. Jaibunissaben recalls that older women of previous generations used to wear a red kerchief to commemorate Mai Misra’s “*kasumbe rumāl*.”³⁶⁶ The *jikar* then reaches Mai Misra’s feet in praise of her “glittering gait,” implying her sporting of sparkling anklets. This depiction of Mai Misra wearing a red headscarf, bangles and anklets suggests the attire of a bride. This reflects the wedding symbolism of the *urs* and aligns with the imagery and symbolism of the *kalas*, the central motif of this *jikar*.

The head-to-foot description in the *jikar* sketches a glimpse of Mai Misra for the listener, priming its audience for the experience of Mai Misra’s presence (*hāzirī*). The Sufi romances evidence this effect of the head-to-foot description on the poem’s protagonist, in which the head-to-foot description of the heroine is a divine revelation of the Qur’anic attributes of God to the

³⁶⁴ See Manjhan, *Madhumalati*, xiv, xviii.

³⁶⁵ See Kaur, “Culture, Identity, and Rhythms of Resistance”, 187. Basu, “Ritual Communication,” 237-238. Only women with curly hair are considered “true Sidi” and are allowed to ritually represent Mai Misra’s seven female companions in the *Khicrī* ceremony. See Basu, “A Gendered Indian Ocean Site,” 251-252.

³⁶⁶ Communication in Ahmedabad on October 13, 2019. Curiously, Habshi “nobles and retainers [are depicted] wearing distinctive domed hats, generally red with a brim in contrasting color” in 16th century Mughal paintings and 18th century art from Kutch. See Robbins & McLeod: 254-256.

hero, who enters an altered state of consciousness.³⁶⁷ When entering *hāl* in reaction to the performance of Sufi devotional music, a person might twirl in ecstasy, sensing the nearness of God and the presence of the Sufi saints; the “soul (*dil*) leaves [the] body and [he or] she experiences visions” of the saints.³⁶⁸ In the same way that the description of the beloved in the Sufi romance triggers an ecstatic experience in the protagonist, the *jikar* above generates an image of Mai Misra to facilitate the participant’s experience of the saint’s presence (*hāzirī*).

The Ghogha rendition of this *jikar* foregrounds the causal relationship between the description of Mai Misra and the resultant experience of *hāl*. One stanza declares:

<i>E ghaṭ bharūṅgī āj</i>	O I will fill the pot today
<i>Gelī Mā ko yād karūṅgī āj</i>	I will remember Geli Ma today
<i>Tere khiṅgaṛiāle bāl, Mārī</i>	Your curly hair, Mother
<i>Ghaṭ bharūṅgī āj</i>	I will fill the pot today

The second verse references the Sufi devotional practice of remembrance (*zikr*) from which the *jikar* genre of Sidi devotional music derives its name. The fact that the stanza positions the act of filling the *kalas* alongside remembrance of “Geli Ma” implies that the latter is also an act to be performed in that ritual context. Basu concurs, “For the Shidi [of Pakistan], ritual knowledge is closely interwoven with remembering the ancestors. ‘To remember the saints’ (*bava ki yad*) is a valued activity members of the community engage in when performing ‘*urs* celebrations.’”³⁶⁹

³⁶⁷ Manjhan, *Madhumalati*, xviii. Behl, *Love's Subtle Magic*, 223, 226-227.

³⁶⁸ Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger, *In Amma's Healing Room: Gender and Vernacular Islam in South India* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 211-213, 215-216.

³⁶⁹ Basu, “Theatre of Memory,” 246.

Rumanaben reflects that ritual action, such as eating Mai Misra's *khicrī*, must be performed in a state of silent remembrance.³⁷⁰

The recitation of *jikar*, as the name of the genre suggests, fosters the ritual act of remembrance which in turn facilitates the experience of *hāl*. Examples of this causal relationship between remembrance and *hāl* abound. Participants sang “*Ghaṭ Bharūṃgī Āj*” on the way to the well in Ghogha; Sabbirbhai's wife entered *hāl* upon reaching the well.³⁷¹ However, *hāl* may also be achieved as a consequence of remembrance, without the aid of *jikar*. A helper at the shrine of Nagarchi Pir in Jambur, for example, was casually conversing in the frankincense smoke-filled shrine of Mai Parsa, a *sahelī* of Mai Misra. Upon mentioning the name of his family's *kulpīr* (lineage saint), he suddenly entered *hāl*.³⁷² During a *Kalaswālī Khicrī* in Ahmedabad, a woman spontaneously entered *hāl* while silently consuming *khicrī*.³⁷³ These occurrences support Rumanaben's observation of the role that remembrance plays in invoking the saints' presence.

The above *jikar*'s invocation of Mai Misra by the epithet Geli Ma, “The Intoxicated Mother,” references the ecstatic state which the *jikar* itself may trigger.³⁷⁴ During the *dhammāl* segment of *Khicrī* rituals in Ahmedabad, women appear stunned, on the verge of tears, before entering *hāl*; Rumanaben describes this cathartic state of *wajd* (‘ecstasy, religious transport’)

³⁷⁰ Communication in Ahmedabad on December 19, 2018.

³⁷¹ Observation in Ghogha on March 16, 2019.

³⁷² Observation in Jambur on April 7, 2019.

³⁷³ Participant observation in Ahmedabad on December 20, 2018.

³⁷⁴ ‘Intoxicated’ is a common descriptor for Sufi saints whose blissful immersion in love for God renders their behavior as that of one drunken, senses lost to the world around them; some of the *jikar* represent the Sidi ancestor-saints in such terms. Eaton, *Sufis of Bijapur*, 243. See Basu and Werbner (eds.), *Embodying Charisma*, 9, 13-14, especially Part 3 of the volume.

resulting from one's yearning for the saints' presence and rejoicing that they have come.³⁷⁵ This emotional valence at the transitional point between remembrance and *hal* lends another shade of meaning to the lyrics, "I will fill the pot today." The term *ghaṭ* is ubiquitous in Hindi devotional poetry as a metaphor for the body, heart, and mind.³⁷⁶ The narrator of the *jikar* proclaims that she will fill the *ghaṭ* and remember Geli Ma. The connection between remembrance as an internal action the external expressions of *hal* indicates that these lyrics apply not only to filling Mai Misra's *kalas* with its contents, but to filling the body of the devotee with Mai Misra's *barkat* by virtue of the saint's presence (*hāziri*).

The analysis above purports that the *kalas*-bearer is as much a recipient of *barkat* via the *kalas* as the liquid contents therein. At the *urs* in Ahmedabad, for example, two young women each carrying Mai Misra's *kalas* repeatedly experienced *hāl* while walking next to one another in procession to Sidi Bashir's shrine, where the *kalases* would be 'cooled'.³⁷⁷ The procession stopped each time so that Rumanaben could sprinkle their faces with water and interrupt the *hāl* so the women could proceed. The above analysis suggests that the women's *hāl* owes to their remembrance of the saint as they carried her *kalas*.³⁷⁸

³⁷⁵ Communication in Ahmedabad on December 19, 2018. This will be examined more closely in the following chapter.

³⁷⁶ I am grateful for this observation shared by the late Allison Busch in personal communication. See the first entry of the term '*ghaṭ*' in Syamasundara Dasa, *Hindi Sabdasagara* (Kasi: Nagari Pracarini Sabha, 1965-1975), 1378.

³⁷⁷ Observation in Ahmedabad on March 31, 2018.

³⁷⁸ The experience of one of these *kalas*-bearers supports the belief that the immense potency of the *kalas* transfers onto its bearer. After the Ahmedabad *urs* in March 2018, one of the *kalas*-bearers had married by January 2019 and subsequently gave birth to her first child in September of the same year. Garlanded at her 'baby shower' (*God Bharāī*) during her seventh month of pregnancy, she would have appeared much like the wide-bodied *kalas* she had carried during the *urs* and her *Kalawālī Khicrī* ceremony.

The *kalas* embodies Mai Misra and signifies the transference of her “blessings” or “charisma” (*barkat*) to the *kalas*-bearer and to devotees who partake of its contents. Above, this chapter has outlined a comparison between *bojā* and the sacred drink (*pyālā*) of Sidi Mukhta during the *urs*. The *pyālā* of ritual initiation forges a bond of ritual kinship between the ancestor-saint, teacher, and initiate, transferring the spiritual power of the teacher to the disciple; likewise, the transmission of *barkat* from the contents of the *kalas* to those who imbibe it suggest bonds of ritual kinship linking Mai Misra as an ancestor-saint with the Sidi community. These *barkat*-based connections, for example, are believed to be evident in the phenotypic identity marker of curly hair, itself believed to be an indicator of natural kinship with the saints via shared African heritage. Mai Misra’s *kalas* rituals underscore these notions of natural and ritual kinship that established the basis for community formation amongst dispersed Africans in Gujarat.

The Gotrījo Rite

The *urs* processions transporting Mai Misra’s *kalas* mirror a pre-wedding rite performed by some Gujarati Hindu families: the *Gotrījo*.³⁷⁹ A married woman whose husband is a member of the bride’s paternal lineage (*kuṭumb*) is selected to carry a clay pot (*maṭkī*) on her head from the bride’s home to a neighbor’s home and back. A priest performs “*maṭkī kī puṣā* (worship of the clay pot)” by reciting the Ganapati mantra before an icon of Ganapati Dada (Ganesh). Five markings (*tilak*) of kokum powder and rice are then applied to the pot. The married woman selected to carry the pot then proceeds with a group of five other women to a pre-selected

³⁷⁹ The following description is drawn from participant observation in Ahmedabad on February 7, 2019 and communication with participants in Ahmedabad on Feb 21-22, 2019 and October 10, 2019. The *Gotrījo* takes place after the Ganesh *sthāpanā* and *grhśānti* rituals are performed at the natal home of the bride.

neighbor's home. The *maṭkī*-bearer is ornately dressed and walks with her husband, the hems of their clothes bound in a knot as on their wedding day. The group of women sing wedding songs to the drumming of other participants as they walk.

At the neighbor's house, they again perform *maṭkī ki puja* by marking the *maṭkī* with five *tilaks* and by putting a little kokum powder inside of the *maṭkī*, as well. Then, the neighbors fill the *maṭkī* with water. Traditions vary regarding the number of *maṭkīs* to bring and the substance with which it is filled. One *maṭkī* may be filled with water or grain; or two *maṭkīs* may be brought and both filled with water, or one filled with grain and another with water. The neighbor places some jaggery into the mouths of her visitors, a goodwill gesture of hospitality that will likely give the *maṭkī*-bearer a quick burst of energy for the strenuous task ahead of her.

The bearer then stacks the *maṭkīs* atop her head; if she has been given grain and water, the lower jar should be filled with grain and the upper jar with water. At this point, it would be much more challenging to secure these heavy vessels in place on her head than when they were empty. She lays a red, traditional Gujarati tie-dyed (*bāmdhni*) veil atop her head to provide a supportive foundation for the *maṭkīs*. The mother of the bride places a coconut in the mouth of the uppermost pot, and the coconut is covered with a small white cloth. Male participants in the procession hold a larger white cloth over the *ghaṭ* installation and female participants sing as the bearer carries the installation back to the bride's natal home, where it is set in front of the icon of Ganesh.

The arrangement of clay pots carried by the bearer in the *Gotrījo* rite resembles the jar-installation of a goddess. The mother of the bride, who tops the jars with a coconut, describes

this arrangement as “*Mātājī kā swarūp*,” “the image of the Mother (goddess).” This label directly associates the *Gotrījo* jar installation with the jar-form of the goddess.

The procession to and from the neighbor’s house with the *Gotrījo* jar installation parallels various aspects of Mai Misra’s *kalas* rituals. One overlap is the bearer’s donning of red *bāmdhnī* cloth before carrying the *Gotrījo* jar installation. Sidi women call this fabric “Mai Misra’s *cundarī*” and may also wear a *bāmdhnī*-patterned veil while carrying the *kalas*.³⁸⁰ The bearer of the *Gotrījo* installation was dazzlingly dressed; similarly, Mai Misra’s *kalas*-bearers are often beautifully adorned. The most significant parallel between the *Gotrījo* and Mai Misra’s *kalas* processions are the ritualized acts of filling the jars at one site then setting the filled jars in a consecrated space. In both contexts, participants depart with drumming and song to a preordained location where the jars are filled. The act of filling the jars is ritualized; in the case of the *Gotrījo*, the jars are ‘worshipped’ with kokum and rice while in the context of the *kalas*, the ritual space at the well is sanctified with *loban* and *dhammāl*. After assembling the filled jars to create an aniconic representation of “the image of the Mother”, the jars are returned to the household temple (*mandir*) or the saint shrine where they are temporarily installed.

According to one interlocutor, the *Gotrījo* is an ancestral tradition that is only found in Gujarat.³⁸¹ Another name for the *Gotrījo* is “*Gotar no Bhāv*.” *Gotar* is a regional pronunciation of the term ‘*gotra*,’ defined in Hindi as “an exogamous sub-division of a caste group.”³⁸² The

³⁸⁰ A Gujarati Hindu bride wearing red bridal attire accentuated with this pattern visits her new husband’s *kuldevī*’s temple in his ancestral village. She explains the appeal of *bāmdhnī* as a traditional pattern to wear on correspondingly traditional occasions. Communication in Veda, Gujarat on February 23, 2019. Sidi brides may likewise wear an ornate *bāmdhnī*-patterned veil with their bridal attire.

³⁸¹ Communication in Ahmedabad on February 7, 2019.

³⁸² McGregor, *The Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary*, 277.

mother of the bride for whom the *Gotrījo* was observed equates *gotra* with *kuṭumb*; she defines the latter as the patriline and associates the *gotra* or *kuṭumb* with the paternal ancestral village.³⁸³ The definitions of the terms ‘*bhāv*’ in “*Gotar no Bhāv*” and ‘*swarūp*,’ in “*Mātājī kā swarūp*,” overlap: the former refers to “being, existence; natural state, character or quality” and the latter to “own form or shape; essential properties; character, nature.”³⁸⁴ “*Gotar no Bhāv*” therefore translates to “the Essence of the Patriline.”

These references to the bride’s *gotra* or *kuṭumb* highlight their centrality to the meaning of the *Gotrījo* rite. The clay jar (*maṭkī*) used in this ritual is called a ‘*gotraj*.’³⁸⁵ Over time, the jar will absorb the water it contains. The *gotraj* can then be given to another bride in the *kuṭumb* for her own *Gotrījo*. If this does not occur within one year of the previous *Gotrījo*, then the *gotraj* is used as a vessel to store drinking water. As the suffix ‘-j’ denotes ‘born of’ or ‘born from’, the clay jar is considered to be ‘born from the patriline,’ just like the brides for whom the *Gotrījo* is performed. The passing of the *gotraj* from one bride to the next within the *kuṭumb* reveals the common identity of both the vessel, symbolically, and the young women biologically as members of that patriline. The *Gotrījo* rite calls on the bride’s paternal ancestors to support the upcoming marriage.³⁸⁶ They are believed to walk with the participants during the procession, and to weigh most heavily on the woman bearing the *Gotraj*. As this woman carries the *gotraj*, she carries a symbolic embodiment of the goddess (“*Mātājī kā swarūp*”) that is inherent to the

³⁸³ Communication on October 10-11, 2019.

³⁸⁴ McGregor, *The Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary*, 766, 1050.

³⁸⁵ Communication in Ahmedabad on February 21-22, 2019.

³⁸⁶ Communication in Ahmedabad on October 10, 2019.

kuṭumb (“*gotra-j*”). This indicates that the *Gotrījo* jar-installation symbolizes the *kuldevī*, whose jar-embodiment in this context also evokes the ancestors (“the essence of the patriline”) bound to her veneration.

The jar-installation constructed during the *Gotrījo* links participants with their patrilineal ancestors and their lineage goddess. Likewise, the *kalas* represents the matrix of ritual and natural kinship ties linking Sidi community members to one another and to the ancestor-saints. A major contrast between the *Gotrījo* and the *urs* processions is that an unmarried woman is usually chosen to carry Mai Misra’s *kalas*: as it is believed that the symbolic potency of the she carries transfers onto her, facilitating marriage and motherhood. The *urs* rituals in this way highlight women’s roles in perpetuating community through the “blessings” (*barkat*) of Mai Misra. Basu observes that “elements of kinship and marriage [in the *urs*] serve as mnemonic devices for remembering women of the African diaspora.”³⁸⁷ Mai Misra’s *kalas* rituals memorialize the countless unnamed women of the African diaspora who have reinscribed these *urs* procession routes onto the soil of Gujarat for generations, while carrying ‘the weight of the Mother.’

Mai Misra as *Malungu*: Two Swahili Voices

Analysis of the songs and rituals of the Sidi devotional tradition thus open a window to the history of the African diaspora in India. This section analyzes the themes of two devotional songs (*jikar*) that incorporate Swahili lyrics, and reads two other devotional songs, one *jikar* and

³⁸⁷ Basu, “Theatre of Memory,” 264.

one *gīt*, in response to the Swahili *jikars*.³⁸⁸ These devotional songs encode the experiences of dispersed Africans in Gujarat and their seeking assistance at the tombs of Bava Gor and Mai Misra.

The *jikars* with Swahili lyrics narrate the voices of the childless and kinless:

<i>Sīnā wāṭoṭo mbānī</i>	I have no children at home
<i>Madad Gorī Śāh kī mbānī</i>	Help in Gori Shah's home
<i>Terā Allāh belī ā, terā khudā belī ā</i>	Allah, your friend; God, your friend
<i>O sīnā wāṭoṭo mbānī</i>	Oh I have no children at home
<i>Hoyā Allāh, Sālminī</i>	Oh Allah, Salmini
<i>Sālminī miskīnī</i>	Poor Salmini
<i>Sālminī yā malūngū</i>	Salmini, oh <i>malungu</i>
<i>Sīne māmā sīne dūgū</i>	I have no mother, I have no brother
<i>Sīne māmā sīne dūgū</i>	I have no mother, I have no brother
<i>Sīne māmā yā malūngū</i>	I have no mother, oh <i>malungu</i>

These two songs highlight the preservation of the Swahili language in Sidi devotional songs texts. Their first-person narration suggests that these songs record not only the spoken Swahili of Sidis' ancestors, but their experiences and beliefs. Rumanaben surmises that Salmini was a *namgāsī*, since his name appears in the *jikar* like a signature.³⁸⁹ In the above *jikar*, Salmini is

³⁸⁸ The first *jikars* are from the Ahmedabad repertoire and the *gīt* is performed during Mai Misra's *Khicrī* in Ratanpur. I have transliterated the Swahili lyrics according to Rumanaben's pronunciation of the words; the diacritics do not reflect Swahili orthographic conventions.

³⁸⁹ Communication in Ahmedabad on October 18, 2019.

paired with the term *miskānī*, a noun meaning ‘lowliness, poverty’; I read this as the adjective *miskān*, (“lowly, meek, poor, needy”), lengthened with a final *-ī* to rhyme it with the name it characterizes. Thus, Salmini is lowly and poor. The only clue he gives as to why he is in this condition is in the full sentences he repeats several times in Swahili, “I have no mother, I have no brother.” This recalls the loss of kinship ties imposed by forced migration.

Africans living in Gujarat in a state of slavery or servitude found a remedy for the loss of kin at the shrine of Bava Gor in Ratanpur, where they organized community based on ritual kinship with the ancestor-saints, undergirded by notions of natural inheritance of the saints’ spiritual potency, and eventually developed natural kinship ties through the formation of community.³⁹⁰ The solution to Poor Salmini’s situation becomes clear against this backdrop. Salmini, who has no mother and brother, calls out to Allah and to *malungu*. Could he be referring to the *malungā*, the chordophone instrument of African origin Sidi *faqīrs* play while singing devotional songs and giving blessings during the practice of *bastī* (mendicancy)?³⁹¹ The first *jīkar* gestures toward an answer.

The narrator, speaking in the first person in Swahili, laments, “I have no children at home (*Sīnā wāṭoto mbānī*).”³⁹² Rumanaben explains that *wāṭoto* means ‘a Sidi’s son’ (“*Sidī kā beṭā*”) and that the narrator of the *jīkar* is a mother, in this case Mai Misra, who is calling her son

³⁹⁰ Basu, “Theatre of Memory,” 248-251; Basu, “Redefining Boundaries,” 62-63. Basu quoted in Shroff, “Sidis and Parsis,” 260-262.

³⁹¹ Catlin-Jairazbhoy, “Sacred Pleasure,” 77-83.

³⁹² Rumanaben alternates between the Swahili word *watoto*, a plural noun for children, and *maṭoto*, her pronunciation of the Swahili singular noun *mtoto*, child; she pronounces both words with the Indic retroflex ‘t’ instead of the dental ‘t’ of Swahili. In the ARCE recording 1:386-387:05. Rumanaben provides a list of Swahili words that her elders would use, including *wāṭoto/wāṭoṭī* for the Hindi *larkā/larkī* (boy/girl). Communication in Ahmedabad on October 13, 2019.

home.³⁹³ Yet the Swahili sentence in the *jikar* does not feature any command or request to a child; its grammatical elements are a first person singular negation of the verb ‘to have’ (*sina*), a plural noun meaning children (*watoto*), and a noun for ‘home’ (*nyumba*) in the locative case (*nyumbani*, ‘in the home’), absent the first part of its first syllable (rendered “*mbani*”). In the context of the second *jikar*, the Swahili speaker’s repeated lament, “I have no children at home,” followed by the plea for help (“*madad*”) implies the speaker’s request for assistance with creating bonds of natural kinship through childbirth. This and the domestic emphasis of the *jikar* suggests that the speaker is a woman desiring to conceive.

Like Salmini, the unnamed woman in the first *jikar* identifies Allah as a source of support. Yet, she locates the help of God in the home of Bava Gor. The verses, “Help in Gori Shah’s home / Allah, your friend; God, your friend,” read as an appeal to Bava Gor for help through his connection with God, his friend, underscoring the meaning of the term *wali* (saint) as it connotes ‘friend of God.’³⁹⁴ Another *jikar* echoes this theme:

<i>Makuā le le Makuā</i>	Take it, Makua, take it
<i>O Makuā le le Makuā</i>	Oh take it, Makua, take it
<i>Dom Gorī Badśāh Makuā le le</i>	Victory to Gori Badshah, Makua take it
<i>Āsarā Allāh kā Makuā le le Makuā</i>	The help of Allah, Makua, take it, Makua

³⁹³ In the ARCE recording 1:386-387:05.

³⁹⁴ Platts, *A Dictionary of Urdu*, 1201. Platts also defines “*Allāh belī*” as “God preserve you!” See Platts, *A Dictionary of Urdu*, 77.

This *jikar* invites a person from the Makua ethnic group to take the help of Allah, proclaiming the victory of Bava Gor.³⁹⁵ In the second *jikar*, Salmini calls out to Allah as well as ‘*malungu*’. The three *jikar* studied here parallel one another in theme and in the devotional framework they provide, as they pinpoint help for the kinless and childless in Allah, through the mediation of Bava Gor. The Swahili speaker Salmini’s cry to ‘*malungu*’ therefore suggests his invocation of Bava Gor.

The first *jikar* establishes that help for the kinless, particularly the woman without child, may be found in the home of Gori Shah. This refers to the tomb-shrines atop Gori Pir hill in Ratanpur. The following devotional song, performed by women in Ratanpur, identifies the *dargāh* of Mai Misra in Ratanpur as the site of relief from bodily distress ranging from hunger and thirst to disability and infertility:

<i>Māi Sāhib Mārī Ratanpurwālī</i>	Mai Sahib Mother of Ratanpur
<i>Samudariye mem rahnewālī</i>	Dweller in the ocean, the sea
<i>Pyāsā jo āve Mā tamārī dargāh</i>	To the thirsty one who comes, Ma, to your shrine
<i>Pyāse ko pānī pilāyo morī Mārī</i>	Give water, my Mother
<i>Māi Sāhib Mārī Ratanpurwālī</i>	Mai Sahib Mother of Ratanpur
<i>Samudariye mem rahnewālī</i>	Dweller in the ocean, the sea
<i>Bhūkhā jo āve Mā tamārī dargāh</i>	To the hungry who comes, Ma, to your shrine
<i>Bhūkhe ko bhojan karāyo morī Mārī</i>	Give a meal, my Mother

³⁹⁵ This southeastern African ethno-linguistic group is attested in the Sidi clan (*aṭak*) name, Makua. See Edward Alpers, “Recollecting Africa: Diasporic Memory in the Indian Ocean World.” *African Studies Review* 43:1 (2000), 92.

<i>Māī Sāhib Mārī Ratanpurwālī</i>	Mai Sahib Mother of Ratanpur
<i>Samudariye meṁ rahnewālī</i>	Dweller in the ocean, the sea
<i>Vañjiyā jo āve Mā tamārī dargāh</i>	The barren one who comes, Ma, to your shrine
<i>Vañjiye ghar pālnā jhulāiyo morī Mārī</i>	Rock a cradle in her home, my Mother
<i>Māī Sāhib Mārī Ratanpurwālī</i>	Mai Sahib Mother of Ratanpur
<i>Samudariye meṁ rahnewālī</i>	Dweller in the ocean, the sea
<i>Khoṛiyāl jo āve Mā tamārī dargāh</i>	The lame one who comes, Ma, to your shrine
<i>Khoṛiyāl ko kāyā dilāiyo morī Mārī</i>	Rejuvenate, my Mother

This devotional song, composed in Hindi, highlights the Ratanpur tomb-shrine of Mai Misra, as a space of nourishment, healing, and revival. This devotional song positions Mai Misra as a giver of food and drink to the needy, personified by Poor Salmini, and as the one who will make cradles swing in the home of the woman without children. This song responds to the needs expressed by the Swahili lyrics of the *jikars* above. The chapter now closes with a discussion of what *malungu* may have meant for the Swahili speakers who composed those *jikars*.

Historian Rhonda Gonzales indicates that the term ‘*mulungu*’ “derives from a proto-Bantu verb that loosely meant ‘to become fitting, straight, or right.’”³⁹⁶ In many attestations, it refers to the concept of a creator entity. For early Northeast Coastal Bantu speakers generally, this creator was powerful yet aloof, one with whom humans could not interact.³⁹⁷ Instead, “there

³⁹⁶ Rhonda M. Gonzales, “Chapter Three: Ruvu Societies and Worldview,” *Societies, Religion, and History: Central East Tanzanians and the World They Created, c. 200 BCE to 1800 CE*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 8. Accessed at <http://www.gutenberg-e.org/gonzales/index.html>. Gonzales places an asterisk before this term, indicating that it is a reconstructed linguistic form. This etymology informs the name of the *malunga* musical bow. Catlin-Jairazbhoy, “A Sidi CD?,” 187.

³⁹⁷ Gonzales, “Ruvu Societies,” 11-13.

were other ethereal forces that would respond ...and, in fact, demanded relationships.”³⁹⁸ For example, “...Lugulu people perceived God as the owner of the universe and ...if they conceived of a way of communicating with said God it is through ancestors, who in their understanding were ‘nearer’ to God.”³⁹⁹ Other than ancestors, “territory/nature spirits” comprised a second category of spirits that “predominated in early Niger-Congo people’s consciousness.”⁴⁰⁰ The Ruvu people of central east Tanzania identified “**mulungu*, [as] a spirit force associated with forested and vacated areas.”⁴⁰¹ The term is homonymous with *mulungu* as ‘creator.’

Adding to the complexity, the Ruvu likely also considered *mulungu* as “ancestors who long ago lived in the area”.⁴⁰² These spirits “demanded supplication in the places in which they dwelled” which included forested areas.⁴⁰³ Gonzales elaborates,

“When people moved into its domain, it was understood that **mulungu* expected formal honoring or it might have responded by causing problems for trespassers. Recent Ruvu speakers frequently characterized **mulungu* as sick or hot in nature, and they often implicated it in periods of regional disease and death.”⁴⁰⁴

The conceptualization of *mulungu* as spirits of the land who had perhaps lived on that territory long ago and who demanded veneration from newcomers who enter that territory begins to shed light on how a Swahili speaker familiar with this concept might have conceived of the African saints entombed in the forests of Ratanpur.⁴⁰⁵ The characterization of *mulungu* as ‘hot’ and

³⁹⁸ Gonzales, “Ruvu Societies,” 13.

³⁹⁹ Gonzales, “Ruvu Societies,” 21.

⁴⁰⁰ Gonzales, “Ruvu Societies,” 15.

⁴⁰¹ Gonzales, “Ruvu Societies,” 22.

⁴⁰² Gonzales, “Ruvu Societies,” 24.

⁴⁰³ Gonzales, “Ruvu Societies,” 22.

⁴⁰⁴ Gonzales, “Ruvu Societies,” 23.

⁴⁰⁵ Five Sidi clan names correspond to ethno-linguistic groups from mainly Tanzania and Mozambique, but also including South Africa and the Swahili coast. See Lodhi, “Wedding Customs of the Sidis of Gujarat,” 172-173.

potentially illness-causing corresponds with the idea of hot-tempered (*jalālī*) saints like Bava Habash or Sidi Mukhta, whom Basu notes are “easily angered, difficult to deal with and may even become harmful for those who do not respect them enough.”⁴⁰⁶

A closer look at Gonzales’ analysis of lineage ancestor veneration in the Bantu-speaking world further clarifies the broad characterization of *mulungu* as nature spirits who, for the Ruvu, were likely ‘ancestral’ in the sense of their having lived on the land prior to the current inhabitants. Gonzales details,

“...ancestors ‘owned’ the land on which descendants lived. They were guardians of the land. Their power to interact with the living thus played an important role in society’s ability to sustain its communities. If ancestors were not pleased, they could, for instance, intervene in life by impeding female and male fertility... [P]roper ancestor veneration resulted in desired outcomes...”⁴⁰⁷

This construal of ancestors as owners and guardians of the land aligns with the *jikars*’ representation of Bava Gor as “Ratanpuri Raja” and “Gori Badshah,” and their frequent references to the hills of Ratanpur where the saints are entombed.⁴⁰⁸ The association between ancestors and human fertility emerges in the above *jikars*’ entreaties for help from Allah, Bava Gor, Mai Misra, and *malungu* with the conditions of being kinless or childless.

The ways in which Sidis venerate the ancestor-saints also align with Bantu practices of supplicating ancestral spirits. Modes of supplication include “dancing and drumming... [which] would have been honorific acts of communication with associated spirits” were “widespread

⁴⁰⁶ Basu, “Theatre of Memory,” 251.

⁴⁰⁷ Gonzales, “Ruvu Societies,” 18.

⁴⁰⁸ Of course, this would be a multivocal symbol, as the shrine of the Sufi saint is also construed in terms of a royal court, with the saint believed to exercise spiritual authority (*vilāyat*) over the territory. See Behl, *Love’s Subtle Magic*, 7.

Bantu religio-ritual customs”.⁴⁰⁹ Gonzales cites Janzen’s study of the central and southern African *ngoma* traditions; the Sidi devotional tradition with its ecstatic *dhammāl* or *gomā* dance energized by polyrhythmic drumming and performed in veneration of enshrined saints expresses this paradigm of ancestral veneration. Gonzales also observes, “In early Bantu worldviews, words activated medicine and inspired other powerful forces.”⁴¹⁰ The Sidi devotional songs reflect the importance of language in these veneratory rituals, bearing the power to ‘activate medicine,’ which includes substances prepared for protection that were often stored in calabashes.⁴¹¹ The *bojā* contained in Mai Misra’s *kalas*, over whose contents prayers have been offered and during whose rituals of preparation and distribution *jikar* have been sung, exemplifies this concept.

Conclusion

The *urs* in Indian Sufi thought represents the wedding of the soul of the departed saint to God. The veneration of Mai Misra, a female Rifai Sufi and Sidi ancestor-saint, during the *urs* at her *dargāh* in Ratanpur perpetuates this symbolism by commemorating her engagement to Sultanji Daud through a celebration known as Mai Misra’s *Māmgnī* or *Sagāī* (Engagement Ceremony). While the *Māmgnī* is unique to Ratanpur, Mai Misra’s *Kalas* rituals are observed ubiquitously during the *urs* in Gujarat and Mumbai.

⁴⁰⁹ Gonzales, “Ruvu Societies,” 19.

⁴¹⁰ Gonzales, “Ruvu Societies,” 21.

⁴¹¹ Gonzales, “Ruvu Societies,” 19.

Mai Misra's *Kalas* rituals amplify the nuptial symbolism of the *urs* and localize the significance of the macrocosmic Ratanpur *urs* events in the microcosmic shrine-based communities within the network of Sidi saint shrines in Gujarat and Mumbai.⁴¹² These rituals reveal the role of Sidi women in perpetuating the community under the auspices of Mai Misra, the orchestrator of ritual and natural kinship ties between community members and the saints. Unmarried Sidi women who carry the *kalas* in ritual procession to sacred spaces, often the shrines of male saints, replicate a woman's passage through the doorway of marriage to the life cycle stage of motherhood. Placing various unmarried Sidi young women in esteemed roles as *kalas* bearers who lead the entire community in procession, these rituals honor the memories of unnamed Afrodescendant girls and women who, arriving or born in India, became brides and mothers who perpetuated the Sidi community.

Sidi women carrying Mai Misra's *Kalas* during the *urs* mediate the transmission of Mai Misra's charisma/blessings (*barkat*) to the Sidi community through *bojā*, the liquid medium within the womb of the *kalas*. While the method of assembling the *kalas* evokes the jar-installation of a goddess, the contents of the *kalas* indicate the African diasporan heritage of the Sidi Sufi devotional tradition, rendering the *kalas* an acutely multivocal symbol. As this chapter demonstrates, the primary aim of the *dhammāl* performance and of devotional rituals is the remembrance of the saints. Remembrance catalyzes mediumship (*hāl*) in all of its degrees, from

⁴¹² The analysis of these rituals at different sites in the Sidi saint shrine network yields insight into the history of each unique cluster of the Sidi community of Gujarat. For example, Mai Misra's *kalas* procession in Ahmedabad, along with the other ritual processions of the *urs*, reflect the unique historical heritage and *urs* practices of Ahmedabad's Sidis, who venerate the Habshi elites of medieval Ahmedabad as ancestor-saints. See Graves, "Filling the Pot."

fleeting moments of transport (*wajd*) to full expression of embodiment of the presence (*hāzirī*) of the saints.

Kalas-bearers' experience of *hāl* during *urs* processions facilitates the transmission of Mai Misra's *barkat* to the contents of the *kalas* and onward to those who imbibe it. This suggests ritual kinship ties loosely reminiscent of the *pyālā* of initiation and conceived in the embodied terms of natural kinship. Two devotional songs (*jikar*) with Swahili lyrics exemplify the import of such rituals to Africans devastated by the terms of forced migration. The narrators of these songs lament being kinless and childless, and request help from Allah and the saints. Analysis of the etymology and usage of the term *malungu* attested in one of the songs suggests the ways in which dispersed Africans may have conceptualized the saints entombed on the forested hills of Ratanpur. This positions Sidi *dhammāl/gomā* as a ritual means of propitiating the saints, broadly conceived as ancestors of the land, for assistance.

The Hindi lyrics of a devotional song (*gīt*) performed by Sidi women in Ratanpur position Mai Misra as a source of help, reinforcing how important venerating her would have been for the destitute and dispersed. Mai Misra's *kalas* rituals perpetuate ritual kinship ties and symbolize the perpetuation of natural kinship ties through marriage and childbirth (which they are believed to facilitate). These two modes of kinship represent the primary means by which by dispersed Africans and their descendants forged community at the shrines of the Sidi ancestor-saints.

4. Mai Misra as Mother: Spirit Mediumship at the Parsi *Cillā* in Mumbai and the Diasporan Dimensions of Sidi *Dhammāl/Gomā*

Introduction

This chapter examines devotional life at a memorial shrine of Bava Gor in Mumbai patronized largely by a community of Parsi devotees. Ritual activity at this shrine includes spirit mediumship sessions (*baiṭhak*) that occur at the start of every Islamic lunar month, and annual *urs* festivities which also incorporate mediumship sessions.⁴¹³ The chapter demonstrates the ways in which the *urs* observances at this shrine draw from Sidi *urs* traditions, such as Mai Misra's *Kalas*, while readapting them to fit the needs of this distinct devotional community. Spirit mediumship plays a critical role in shaping devotional life at this shrine, from its ritual activities to the very contours of the circle of devotees.

Whereas the *pyālā* of ritual initiation determines ritual kinship with the saints amongst Sidis, devotional commitment to the saints under the guidance of their mediums is an initiatory process that engenders lifelong, ritual bonds with the Sidi ancestor-saints amongst Parsi devotees. In the absence of shared African heritage, 'natural kinship' with the saints in this context entails the saints' 'gifting' of children to devotees, which creates a 'family' of devotees connected by genealogical kinship and linked to 'father' and 'mother' saints by ritual bonds construed in terms of a parent-child dynamic. The spirit mediums at the center of this devotional community and its ritual activity orchestrate these bonds of ritual and natural kinship as they mediate the presence of the saints.

⁴¹³ Kelly Pemberton offers a description of women's performance of a mediumship ritual called *baiṭhak* at the shrine of Shaikh Saddu in Amroha. See Pemberton, *Women Mystics and Sufi Shrines in India* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2010), 61-62.

This chapter engages Shroff’s foundational studies of “the Parsi *cillā*” and Bellamy’s research on positively- and negatively-evaluated modes of spirit embodiment associated with Muslim shrine Husain Tekri in Jaora, to analyze spirit mediumship at the Parsi memorial shrine of Bava Gor. The chapter draws its data from participant-observation at this shrine conducted from 2017 to 2019, as well as interviews conducted with its spirit mediums, including its non-Sidi, Sunni Muslim caretaker (*mujāwar*) and ritual authority figure (*gādī vāras*), his oldest daughter, two Parsi women, and one Sidi woman.⁴¹⁴ The chapter examines mediums’ descriptions of the onset of their spiritual abilities and their gradual acclimation to the physical challenges of mediumship, to consider what their transformations communicate about the terms of ritual kinship at this shrine, in relation to the larger discourse on ritual initiation in the Sidi devotional tradition.

Considered in tandem with Bellamy’s and Shroff’s analyses, especially the connections Shroff draws with Janzen’s canonical study of continental African *ngoma* traditions, the chapter examines devotion to the Sidi ancestor-saints amongst this small cross-section of the Parsi diasporan community as it illuminates how African diasporans organized community based on notions of ritual and natural kinship with African Sufi saints entombed in Gujarat. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the African diasporan dimensions of the instruments of Sidi *dhammāl/gomā*.

⁴¹⁴ Formal interviews were conducted on March 29, 2019, April 2, 2019, and October 30, 2019. Informal interviews were held on August 11-16, 2017. In the chapter, I quote extensively from one Parsi medium of Mai Misra, who prefers to remain anonymous.

Building the Body of Mai Misra: Mai Misra's *Ghaṭ*

Mai Misra's *Ghaṭ* involves the installation of a life-sized *kalas* in front of the left side of the memorial tomb of Bava Gor. The following is a description of the *ghaṭ* installation at the Parsi shrine during the 2018 *urs*:

Between the late-afternoon and evening calls to prayer, the Ratanpur Sidi *gomā* group performed *baiṭhī dhammāl*. Yasin Bava, the shrine's caretaker and lead ritual specialist, led devotees in the installation of Mai Misra's *ghaṭ*. Most of the devotees participating in this process were Parsi women.

The floor on the left side of the memorial tomb of Bava Gor was washed with rosewater (*ghusl*). A wooden pedestal was placed in the space, and a large, green satin cloth was laid over it. Yasin Bava dipped his hand in a sandalwood paste that he had prepared using two types of *attar*, the reddish-brown *hīna* (henna) *attar* and the green "*jannat-e-firdaus* (garden of paradise)." He placed handprints of sandalwood paste on the green satin cloth.

A large silver-plated water pot (*ghaṭ*) was set atop the pedestal. It was smeared with sandalwood paste, and a red thread was tied around its mouth. In the same fashion, smaller pots of decreasing size were placed above it, one by one; the last was topped with a silver-plated coconut. The pots were decorated with silver jewelry, including anklets, and flower garlands. Fruits such as dates, coconuts, apples and pineapples were spread around the base of the installation atop the green cloth. New articles of clothing were placed over the fruits. Then the pots were veiled with approximately five red *cundarīs*, and the structure was garlanded. The offerings of fruit were covered with rose petals, over which golden satin cloths were laid. A garland was placed around the base of the installation, creating a circular enclosure into which rose petals were strewn.

Once the installation was complete, *dhammāl* stopped. The performers drank Bava Gor's *pyālā* of "*Ghāvā*." They offered the *pyala* to Heena ji, a Sidi woman from Mumbai who cares for the shrine of Ghaibun Shah Bava and is a medium of Mai Misra, and to me.

Devotees placed satin embroidered cloths (*galef*) and woven sheets of flowers (*caddar*) on the memorial tomb of Bava Gor and on the actual tomb of Makbul

Bava, the grandfather of Yasin Bava with whom this Parsi community's devotion to Bava Gor had begun. Men assembled in a queue, placing their hands on each other's shoulders, and sanctified the space with *lobān*. Meanwhile, women lit oil lamps (*battī*) in honor of Bava Gor and other Sufi saints and Qur'anic figures. Sweets were placed on a low wooden table at the head of the *cillā*, to be blessed. Mullah ji recited prayers (*fātihā*).

After the prayers, *kharī dhammāl* began and *hāl* ensued. Yasin Bava collapsed on the ground in *hāl* and, surrounded by men assisting him (*makāndār*), crawled toward the *dhammāl* performers.⁴¹⁵ Heena ji "played" in *hāl*, thumping one fist against the top of her head. She moved rhythmically, firmly embracing a woman who was trying to tie Heena ji's scarf; it took two women many attempts to secure the scarf, wrapping it around Heena ji's face and tying it at her back. A Parsi woman who is a medium of Mai Misra sat meditatively, crying at the foot of the *ghaṭ*.

Finally, the Parsi medium and Yasin Baba held audience (*baiṭhak*) with devotees. The Parsi woman lay on the ground in *hāl*, her body covered in a green satin sheet and her face uncovered. She waved her index finger to the rhythm of *dhammāl* as she received devotees' questions and salutations.

An elder female relative of the Parsi medium joined the *dhammāl* circle. Herself a medium, she stepped rhythmically toward the *ghaṭ* where she began to take *baiṭhak* lying on the floor. She tapped the floor to the beat of the *dhammal*, covered in a green satin sheet as she received devotees. When the *dhammāl* ended, she finished *baiṭhak* and came to. Someone offered her water, drank from the same cup and passed it along. The *niyāz* of sweets and dal-pulao [and] was distributed. As the night went on, devotees continued to prostrate at the foot of the *ghaṭ* and place rose petals at its base.⁴¹⁶

The installation of Mai Misra's *ghaṭ* at the Parsi *cillā* is a unique variation of the Mai Misra's *kalas* rituals observed ubiquitously during the *urs*. Mai Misra's *kalas* is generally constructed with one or two clay or metal pots whose mouths are tied with red thread. These pots may be filled with water, *sharbat*, or *boja*. Once the pots are stacked atop one another, they are

⁴¹⁵ The *makāndār* also act as interpreter between the medium and devotees. See Shroff, "Sidis and Parsis," 165-166.

⁴¹⁶ Participant observation on April 5, 2018. Beheroze Shroff describes this ritual in "Goma is Going On," 22-23.

topped with a coconut. The entire structure is covered with a red *cundarī*, secured in place by a red thread, and garlanded; the ‘head’ of the *kalas* may also be adorned with fragrant powder (*khusbū*). While the *kalas* is usually transported atop an unmarried woman’s head in a ritual procession during the *urs*, it may be installed on a metal tray of raw rice grains during the *Kalaswālī Khicrī* ceremony.

Mai Misra’s *ghaṭ*, installed at the Parsi *cillā* during the *urs*, follows this basic blueprint yet features grand flourishes. Instead of one or two pots, the *ghaṭ* is constructed from five silver-plated pots. It is topped not with a natural coconut, but a silver-plated coconut. Like the *kalas*, the mouths of these pots are tied with red thread. However, each pot is smeared with sandalwood paste - as is the satin cloth at the base of the installation - and is adorned with silver jewelry and garlands. Five rather than one *cundarī* veil the structure, as if one for each pot; the veils are not secured in place with thread. In addition to the garlands placed on each vessel beneath the veils, the entire structure and its base are garlanded.

The base of the installation also includes several novel features. Rather than a simple tray, the foundation of the installation consists of a wooden pedestal and satin cloth impressed with sandalwood paste handprints. Like the raw grains of rice on the tray beneath the *kalas*, several fruits are placed at the base of the life-sized *ghaṭ*. The fruits are topped with new articles of clothing, bangles, gold satin sheets, and mounds of fragrant rose petals.⁴¹⁷ The foundation of the *ghaṭ* signifies fertility and abundance, consonant with the standard symbolism of the jar-installation.

⁴¹⁷ Shroff, “Goma is Going On,” 22.

The liquid-based, womb symbolism of Mai Misra's *kalas* does not feature in Mai Misra's life-sized *ghaṭ* installation. The pots are not topped with water-filled coconuts, nor are they filled with a potable liquid substance. Furthermore, the installation is completely stationary: the absence of *bojā* predicates the absence of the ritual of 'cooling' the *kalas* with a procession to another site. Instead, the *ghaṭ* is disassembled the next evening, and the items at its base are distributed.⁴¹⁸ The absence of liquid in the pots and the impressive magnification of the size of the installation suggests that Mai Misra's presence, through her symbolic embodiment as a bride in the life-sized *ghaṭ*, is of primary significance to the community of devotees at this shrine. The *bojā* tradition, like the saints' *pyālā* such as Bava Gor's *Ghāvā*, are exclusive to the Sidi community, preserving and perpetuating its distinct African diasporan heritage.

With the guidance of the male *mujāwar*, mostly female devotees work together to construct the *ghaṭ*. This differs from the method of creating Mai Misra's *kalas* among Sidis, according to which usually only one person, such as a *mujāwar* (male or female) or a woman presiding over a *Khicṛī* ceremony, constructs the *kalas*. This difference suggests the significance of the *Ghaṭ* as a communal event in which the body of devotees at the Parsi shrine collectively build the 'body' of Mai Misra. This ritual represents a treasured opportunity for the devotional community to interact with and venerate Mai Misra. The *mujāwar* of the shrine mediates the presence of Bava Gor in *hāl* every month at the *cāndrāt baiṭhak*, providing a regular channel of communication between the saint and Parsi devotees. By contrast, the rules of ritual purity, family or work obligations, or other extenuating circumstances prevent women mediums in the community of devotees from participating in the *cāndrāt baiṭhak* on a regular basis. Therefore,

⁴¹⁸ Shroff, "Goma is Going On," 23.

Mai Misra's presence at the shrine is mediated to devotees much less than that of Bava Gor's. The annual *ghaṭ* ritual ensures that devotees will have a chance to collectively invite the saint's presence into the gathering as they assemble her symbolic 'body.'

Building the 'body' of Mai Misra not only provides a valuable opportunity for devotees to invoke, venerate and interact with the embodied saint, but provides a physical focal point for these activities. At shrines within the Sidi community, Mai Misra generally has her own space that is separate from other saints' spaces, even if located within the same shrine. In Ahmedabad, Mai Misra's *cillā* is an empty niche covered by a *cundarī* that is located within a shrine housing similar niches for other Sufi saints, all surrounding the memorial tomb of Bava Gor at the center of the space. In Bhavnagar, Mai Misra has a shrine to herself, housing a memorial tomb of her own. Men usually are not allowed to touch or enter Mai Misra's *cillā* unless advised by the female *mujāwar* or performing a ritual duty there, such as cooking *bojā*. By contrast, the Parsi *cillā* houses a memorial tomb of Bava Gor, without a separate space for Mai Misra; women place floral garlands (*serā/šero, veṇī*) especially used for a bride's adornment atop the memorial tomb of Bava Gor in honor of Mai Misra. With this, the installation of Mai Misra's *ghaṭ* at the left side of the tomb establishes a distinct space for the female saint. The pedestal at the base of the installation inscribes the parameters of the space, just as the *devī ghaṭ* may be cordoned off to distinguish the installation as a sacred space. Mai Misra's *ghaṭ* thus centralizes the saint's presence in a distinct physical location that becomes a focal point of participants' devotional experience during the first two days of the *urs*.

Just as installing the goddess' jar-form incorporates typical elements of *pūjā*, rendering the installation process itself an act of worshipping the goddess, devotees' construction of Mai

Misra's *ghaṭ* at the Parsi shrine provides an opportunity for them to venerate her in an interactive manner. To this point, Shroff observes that assembling the *ghaṭ* mirrors devotees' experience of *sawāl-jawāb* with the saint during *baiṭhak*.⁴¹⁹ Standing in line, devotees take turns holding the medium's hand while seeking counsel and comfort. This interactive experience with the embodied saint also features in the construction of the *ghaṭ*. Devotees take turns handling the material media that will collectively embody Mai Misra; each devotee's hand makes contact with these items that will become parts of the saint's symbolic body.

The veneration inherent in the installation of the *ghaṭ* begins with the contribution devotees make by procuring the items that will adorn it. Veneration continues in the act of applying sandalwood paste to the base and pots of the installation and offering fruit, clothing and flowers atop its base. For example, the granddaughter of the man who built the Parsi *cillā* recalls shopping for a red *cundarī* to lay over the *ghaṭ*, asking Mai Misra in her heart if she would like the *cundarī* she had selected for her.⁴²⁰ Given her grandfather's role in laying the foundations of this devotional community, this woman has been coming to the Parsi *cillā* since childhood, and has been building Mai Misra's *ghaṭ* with fellow devotees for years. Over the generations, Mai Misra's presence at the shrine has been markedly less than that of Bava Gor's: "We [devotees] get to meet her so infrequently. We meet Gori Baba more often." She explains, "She [Mai Misra] is a mother figure for most ladies, like Mother Mary." She interprets her experience of searching for a *cundarī* that would please Mai Misra when placed atop her *ghaṭ* as "doing things in a way that pleases her [Mai Misra], almost as if to give back." The offering of fruit atop the base of the

⁴¹⁹ Personal communication in Mumbai in April 2018.

⁴²⁰ Informal interview in Mumbai on April 6, 2018.

installation “represents abundance, prosperity and sweetness. What can you give them [the saints]? Flowers and *attar*, sweet-smelling things.”

These remarks reveal that the interactive process of assembling Mai Misra’s *ghaṭ* is a devotional experience that allows participants to give back in gratitude to the “mother” saint whose presence is infrequently physically manifest but immensely valued. This is consonant with the symbolism of the goddess’ jar-form, as the priest embodies the goddess using items that represent manifestations of her abundance in the natural world (i.e., fruit). Similarly, the coconut head of the goddess’ jar-form represents the head of the devotee sacrificially offered to the goddess as her own to complete her embodiment. Devotees’ offerings of fruit, clothing, jewelry, and even fragrant substances like rosewater, rose petals, and sandalwood paste to complete the *ghaṭ* installation all represent the sweetness and abundance which the mother saint has brought into their lives; these items are returned to her in gratitude so that they may construct her symbolic form. As elaborated earlier in the dissertation, this element of reciprocity is a key feature of the Sidi devotional tradition.

Devotees ‘embody’ Mai Misra in a most auspicious form as a radiant bride. They apply sandalwood paste to every pot, as turmeric paste and henna are applied to beautify the skin of a bride. They decorate each pot with jewelry and garlands and adorn the entire structure with red veils and a final garland. After lighting lamps and frankincense, offering satin embroidered cloths woven sheets of flowers atop the tombs, and reciting prayers, *kharī dhammāl* leads to the heights of “*majhā*... collective joy and ecstasy.”⁴²¹ Thus embodied, Shroff explains, “Mai Mishra is now believed to enter the ceremonies as a beautifully decorated bride. The intensified tempo of

⁴²¹ Shroff, “Goma is Going On,” 22. I have added diacritics.

drumming and dancing invites Sidis and spirit mediums of Mai Mishra and Bava Gor among them into a state of collective spirit possession.”⁴²² Mai Misra comes ‘swaying’ and ‘playing,’ invigorating the bodies of her mediums.

The *ghaṭ* is one level of embodiment that occurs during the *urs* at the Parsi *cillā*; the second level of embodiment takes place during the *baiṭhak*, when mediums of Mai Misra hold a question-and-answer (*sawāl-jawāb*) session with devotees. One Parsi medium sits contemplatively at the foot of the *ghaṭ* during *kharī dhammāl*, crying in a state of *hāl*; according to Jaibunnisaben, Rumanaben’s niece and caretaker of the Ahmedabad shrine, crying may indicate the presence of “Dariyewālī Mā” (“Sea Mother”), an epithet of Mai Misra.⁴²³ The medium’s experience of *hāl* at this site reflects the importance of the *ghaṭ* as it centralizes the energy (*barkat/karāmat*) of Mai Misra in a physical location where devotees may engage with it.

The *ghaṭ* installation becomes a temporary *cillā* of Mai Misra, where devotees may continue to interact with the saint’s embodied presence after the mediums cease to channel it. After the *baiṭhak*, devotees may sit around the *ghaṭ* reflectively; out of deference, they sit cross-legged or otherwise refrain from pointing their feet toward the installation. They may also prostrate at the foot of the installation and continue to place offerings of rose petals at its base. This evokes common ways of engaging with Mai Misra at her *cillā*: in Ahmedabad, for example, the *mujāwar* may place rose petals behind the veil of Mai Misra’s niche, and devotees may cling to the veil as if it were the saint’s skirt or touch its edge to their faces and kiss it, as if it were her hand.

⁴²² Shroff, “Goma is Going On,” 22.

⁴²³ Communication in Ahmedabad on December 30, 2018.

However, there are two points of contrast between these contexts of devotional interaction with Mai Misra. Amongst Sidis, devotees may carry the *kalas* and even set incense before it, but prostration to the *kalas* does not occur. Additionally, the faces of women in *hāl* are usually covered, as when women assisted Heena ji by tying her scarf around her face when she was in *hāl*. This allows the Muslim woman saint, of exalted status, to observe purdah and prevents devotees from conflating the identity of the woman in *hāl* with that of the saint.⁴²⁴ At the Parsi *cillā*, the body of the woman in *hāl* is covered, as is her head since she wears a scarf, but her face remains uncovered. Prostration at the *ghaṭ* and women's holding *baiṭhak* with exposed faces underscores the importance of direct interaction with the embodied saint to the devotional community at the Parsi *cillā*.

Mediating the “Miracle Healing Presence” of the Saints: Bava Gor’s *Sandal*

Installed on Thursday evening, the *ghaṭ* is disassembled on Friday evening. Bava Gor’s *Sandal* takes place on Saturday evening.⁴²⁵ While the *Ghaṭ* ceremony does not feature the ritual procession with a mobile *kalas* that is typical of Mai Misra’s *urs* festivities, the *Sandal* does incorporate a ritual procession. During the *Sandal*, three mediums of the saints are selected to lead devotees in a counterclockwise procession circling the shrine’s interior seven times. The first medium is the *mujāwar*, who channels the presence of Bava Gor in *baiṭhak*. The second may be one of his sons, who are mediums of Bava Habash.⁴²⁶ The medium of Mai Misra may be one of the *mujāwar*’s daughters; a Parsi medium; or Heena ji.

⁴²⁴ Communication with Rumanaben in Ahmedabad in August 2017.

⁴²⁵ See Shroff, “Goma is Going On,” 23 for a description of the *Sandal* ceremony.

⁴²⁶ I am grateful to Beheroze Shroff for sharing her knowledge of which mediums have been selected to participate in this ritual event over the years.

Each medium carries one tray (*thālī*) atop his or her head. The trays bear offerings with which to adorn the two tombs in the shrine: sandalwood paste scented with *attar*, satin embroidered cloths (*galef*), woven sheets of flowers (*caddar*), and garlands used to adorn the head of a bride (*serā*).⁴²⁷ A similar procession features in the *Sandal* ceremony in Ahmedabad, during which Sidi devotees carry trays of sandalwood paste, embroidered cloths, and garlands through the streets of the Old City to the *dargāh* of Bava Gor, where these items are offered to the saints enshrined therein. By contrast, the procession at the Parsi *cillā* takes place within the shrine. Yet what is most distinctive about the *Sandal* procession at the Parsi *cillā* is the preparation of the trays, and that mediums are required to bear them.

Mostly male devotees assist the *mujāwar* in the preparation of the trays for Bava Gor's *Sandal* ceremony; nevertheless, the trays are ceremonially prepared in a way that resembles Mai Misra's *kalas*. The contents of Bava Gor's tray are topped with a peacock feather brush (*morpīc/pīcī*), resulting in a slight peak at the top of the *thālī*. The *thālī* is then covered in a satin cloth and garlanded; a red cloth is always selected for the *thālī* borne by a medium of Mai Misra, the skirt of the *thālī* completely covering her face. Women stand on either side of her, guiding and supporting her as she walks. The *thālī*'s peak, its garland, and the red cloth veiling the head of Mai Misra's medium is entirely reminiscent of Mai Misra's *kalas*. In the appearance of the trays borne in procession, the events of the *Sandal* seem to incorporate aspects of Mai Misra's *kalas* tradition which do not feature in Mai Misra's *Ghaṭ* at this shrine.

The distinction that mediums carry trays during the *Sandal* appears to be unique to the *urs* rituals of the Parsi *cillā*. This requirement does not feature in the *Sandal* processions during

⁴²⁷ A type of garland offered to Mai Misra is called Mai Misra's *veṇī*. Sidi women decorate their hair with this type of garland during Mai Misra's *Khicdi* ceremonies.

the *urs* in Ahmedabad, whose tray-bearers usually do not experience *hāl*.⁴²⁸ However, the lead ritual specialist (*gādī vāras*) and spiritual leader (*sardār*) of the Sidi community of Gujarat carries Mai Misra's *kalas* in Ratanpur; he is known to experience *hāl* and administers the ritual initiation (*pyālā*) of Bava Gor. This suggests another overlap between the *Sandal* ritual at the Parsi shrine, and Mai Misra's *kalas* traditions. Women usually stand beside other women carrying Mai Misra's *kalas*, helping them support its weight or interrupting their states of *hāl* so that the *kalas* does not fall during the forceful movements of *hāl*. The tray-bearing mediums at the Parsi *cillā* are likewise supported by other devotees of the same gender. In this way, the selection of mediums to carry trays during the *Sandal* ceremony emphasizes the importance of spirit mediums to this devotional community. Shroff conveys the reflections of a devotee: "What the medium carries on the head are the wishes, the hopes and the faith of the devotees."⁴²⁹ Devotees' direct interaction with the saints through their mediums is central to ritual life at this shrine and is in fact the origin of this devotional community, forged through interactions between its forebears and Makbul Bava, the grandfather of the current *mujāwar* and medium of Bava Gor.⁴³⁰

The select role of mediums during the *Sandal* invokes an additional element of Mai Misra's *kalas* tradition. The *kalas* tradition usually involves a ritual procession to 'cool' the *kalas* and, often, the *kalas*-bearers experience of *hāl*. The latter facilitates the transference of the saint's *barkat* to the liquid medium contained in the *kalas*, which attendees then consume, transferring Mai Misra's *barkat* from the *bojā* to their physical bodies. Although the rituals of

⁴²⁸ These reflections are drawn from participant observation in Ahmedabad on March 29 and March 31, 2018.

⁴²⁹ Shroff, "Goma is Going On," 23.

⁴³⁰ Shroff details this history in "Spiritual Journeys: Parsis and Sidi Saints."

Mai Misra's *Ghaṭ* at the Parsi shrine do not involve a liquid medium, sandalwood paste resting in a silver-plated bowl on each tray serves as a semiliquid medium of the saints' *barkat* during the *Sandal* ceremony. With the performance of *khaṛī dhammāl*, the mediums circling the shrine enter *hāl*. The women supporting the medium bearing Mai Misra's tray may also be mediums themselves; the saint's presence (*hāzirī*) around this tray becomes inevitable.

The sandalwood paste on the trays of Bava Gor, Bava Habash, and Mai Misra become imbued with the saints' "miracle healing presence" radiated by the mediums bearing the trays; devotees then apply the paste to the memorial tomb of Bava Gor. Shroff observes, "some of it is distributed to devotees after the ceremony is over."⁴³¹ The devotees' application of the *barkat*-infused paste to the memorial tomb is another instance of reciprocity in the Sidi devotional tradition. It is a devotional act in which participants anoint the tomb with a fragrant substance as an offering, returning a measure of the saints' bounty to them in gratitude. A key feature of this reciprocity is that, after an offering is made, devotees may partake of it as a form of blessing; the *barkat*-infused sandalwood paste is then distributed amongst devotees. This follows the pattern of *bojā*, which is imbued with the saint's *barkat* atop the head of a *kalas*-bearer who experiences *hāl*, sanctified with prayer, and distributed to attendees. In this way, the sandalwood paste is a semiliquid medium on the *thāli* that functions like the liquid medium of *bojā* in the *kalas*.

The peacock feather brush on the tray likewise transmits the *barkat* of the saints. The brush is usually placed at the head of the saint's tomb, "from where it draws energy. It is then placed on the head and shoulders of the devotee so that healing energy and blessings are

⁴³¹ Shroff, "Goma is Going On," 23.

transferred from the saint into the body of the devotee.”⁴³² In this way, the placement of the brush on a tray atop the head of the medium signifies the transmission of *barkat* from the saints through the head of the medium. The contents and ceremonial preparation of the trays, the selection of mediums to carry them, and the ritual procession around the shrine underscore the way in which the *Sandal* ceremony at the Parsi *cillā* melds distinct aspects of the *sandal* and *kalas* traditions of the *urs* at the Sidi saint shrine. These scenes from the *urs* at the Parsi *cillā* demonstrate the extension of the Sidi Sufi devotional tradition beyond the community of Sidi devotees.

Spirit Mediumship and Kinship with the Sidi Ancestor-Saints

The above descriptions of Mai Misra’s *Ghaṭ* and Bava Gor’s *Sandal*, the main *urs* events at the Parsi memorial shrine of Bava Gor, underscore the importance of direct interaction with the saints to this devotional community. Devotees consult individually with spirit mediums and engage collectively with material media that impart the “miracle healing presence” (*karāmat*) of the saints. Spirit mediums are an integral part of ritual activity at this site. The analysis below demonstrates that spirit mediums are the central organizing principle of this devotional community. Living conduits for the “blessings” (*barkat*) and “miracle healing assistance” (*karāmat*) of the saints, they selflessly provide a physically taxing service that requires fortitude and endurance. This service generates bonds of ritual kinship, overlapping loosely with notions of natural kinship, that structure, strengthen, and sustain this devotional community.

⁴³² Shroff, “Goma is Going On,” 21.

In order to understand the role of the spirit medium in organizing the devotional community at the Parsi shrine, it is important to distinguish between ritual and natural kinship as it functions within the Sidi community, and the same as observed in this distinct context. Shared African ancestry with the saints defines natural kinship, which suggests phenotypical features (i.e., curly hair) and moral attributes (i.e., the qualities of Hazrat Bilal) indicative of natural inheritance of the saints' charisma (*barkat*). Ritual kinship entails formal initiation into the Sidi order of ritual specialists (*faqīr*) by taking the ritual cup (*pyālā*) of initiation of Bava Gor in Ratanpur from a Sidi teacher (*mursīd*). The initiate becomes a 'child' (*balkā/balkī*) of the teacher, while both are construed as 'children' of Bava Gor 'Dada' ('Grandfather').

Among Sidis, natural kinship precedes ritual kinship, which is an advanced degree of integration into the Sidi Rifai lineage (*silsilā*) for which someone who desires official sanction as a ritual specialist is encouraged to opt. Popular belief dictates that taking the *pyālā* of initiation increases spiritual ability, such as the ability to receive communication from the saints in the form of visions (*bashārat*) or the ability to conduct question-and-answer (*sāwāl-jāwāb*) while in *hāl*; it also affords the spiritual protection of the saints. Yet natural kinship, with its associated notion of the physical inherence of the saints' charisma (*barkat*), is also understood as a prerequisite for role of ritual specialist and has a number of bearings on devotional activity. The ability to perform *jikar* is seen as a "natural gift" (*qudratī bakhśīs*) of Sidis, as is the ability to perform the sacred *dhammāl* dance.⁴³³ Likewise, *hāl* appears to come randomly, even collectively, to Sidis during the *dhammāl* performance; while there may be certain persons to

⁴³³ Shroff unpublished documentary, *Sidis of Gujarat: Maintaining Traditions and Building Community*. See Shroff, "Spiritual Journeys," 263-264.

whom Mai Misra's presence habitually comes, many women may experience *hāl* during the *urs*. Based on this notion of natural kinship, the performance of *jikar* and *dhammāl* is the exclusive reserve of Sidis, who are invited to do so at the Parsi memorial shrine every year during the *urs*.

Yet ritual life at the Parsi shrine suggests that the gift (*bakhsīś*) of mediumship is available to devotees outside of the structures of natural kinship and formalized ritual kinship with the saints. This aligns with Bellamy's analysis of the concept of *salāmī* ("greeting"), which suggests a Muslim saint's "greeting" or blessing that allows an individual to embody the saint's presence and thereby conduct a "benevolent spirit possession-based healing practice".⁴³⁴

Bellamy observes that the physical stress of embodiment of a saint's presence (*salāmī*) may at first render it indistinguishable from expressions of malevolent modes of possession (*hāzirī*) until the saint speaks and clarifies the confusion.⁴³⁵ Introducing the parallels between Bellamy's analysis of *hāzirī* with the present study of spirit mediumship here lays the foundation for this section's concluding analysis of the role of spirit mediumship as the organizing principle of the devotional community at the Parsi shrine.

Mediumship at the Sidi saint shrine as the embodiment of benevolent saints, akin to the concept of *salāmī*, aligns in several ways with Bellamy's analysis of afflicted persons' embodiment of malevolent entities (*hāzirī*) at Muslim saint shrines. At Husain Tekri, the burning of *lobān* is the context for the performance of *hāzirī*; this along with prolonged contact with the memorial shrines (*cillā*) of the members of the Prophet's household (*ahl-e bayt*) such as Hazrat Ali, Hasan and Husain, supports the afflicted person's healing. The term *hāzirī* is also used to

⁴³⁴ Bellamy, *The Powerful Ephemeral*, 89-91, 155.

⁴³⁵ Bellamy, *The Powerful Ephemeral*, 89.

describe embodiment of the Sidi ancestor-saints at their memorial shrines (*cillā*) or tombs (*dargāh*), with *lobān* a facilitator of the process. In the case of the Parsi and even Hindu young women at the Parsi shrine in whom the beginning stages of mediumship are observable, direct interaction with the Sidi saints via consultation with their mediums and physical engagement with the material media symbolically embodying them (such as the memorial tomb or the jar-installation) cultivates the capacity to embody the presence of that saint.⁴³⁶ This recalls the ritual act of remembering the saints (“*bāvā kī yād*”) at the heart of the Sidi devotional tradition.

Bellamy distinguishes between two aspects of *hāzirī*: “open presence” (*khulī hāzirī*) and “hidden presence” (*gum hāzirī*).⁴³⁷ While the former denotes “a series of actions that share many characteristics with exorcism”, the latter indicates “a physically painful condition of being unwell that is not observable or known to anyone other than the sufferer.” Bellamy identifies *hāzirī* as the state of being a “*hāzirīwālā/ hāzirīwālī*, or a person primarily characterized by presence”; thus, “*hāzirī* represents states of being as well as ritual action”. Mediumship of the presence of the Sidi ancestor-saints likewise involves stages that, while incongruent with Bellamy’s definitions of “hidden” and “open” *hāzirī*, align with the respective private, experiential and public, performative aspects of these states.

Crying is a relatively private, personal aspect of devotional experience that is a visible sign of the beginning stages of mediumship ability. A Parsi medium of Mai Misra explains, “I used to just cry. They also know that, ‘Okay, these are the symptoms for this.’ So they knew,

⁴³⁶ Rumanaben connects devotional commitment to the saints and embodiment. Communication in Ahmedabad on January 7, 2019.

⁴³⁷ Bellamy, *The Powerful Ephemeral*, 26. Unless otherwise noted, quotations are drawn from this page.

‘Okay, this is the starting.’”⁴³⁸ The young woman’s crying was a “symptom” that mediumship ability was “starting.” Jaibunissaben, the caretaker of Bava Gor’s memorial shrine in Ahmedabad, identifies crying as an indicator of the presence of “Dariyewālī Mā (Sea Mother),” an epithet of Mai Misra.

Yasin Bava, the Sunni Muslim medium of Bava Gor, lead ritual specialist, and caretaker of the Parsi shrine, correlates crying with the presence of the saints: “You feel like crying. [That means] you are meeting them.”⁴³⁹ Rumanaben identifies this emotional state with the term *wajd*.⁴⁴⁰ She explains that one may experience *wajd* while performing devotions (*ibādat*) such as the five daily prayers. The intensity of this emotion may move the praying person to tears; women who appear to be on the verge of entering *hāl* may weep as they yearn for the saints’ presence and rejoice at their arrival. Whereas *wajd* defined as “a state of ecstasy, frenzy, or religious transport” is synonymous with *hāl*, *wajd* in the Sidi devotional tradition is a precursor to the fully-realized, outward display of embodiment of a saint’s “presence” (*hāzirī*) in the ecstatic trance of *hāl*.⁴⁴¹

Bellamy observes that embodying a saint’s presence as an expression of their “greeting” (*salāmī*) can appear indistinguishable from *hāzirī* as a negatively-evaluated mode of embodiment that involves pain; clarity arrives when the saint confirms that this is a “greeting.” Mediums of Bava Gor and Mai Misra report that, at the beginning of development as a medium, embodying

⁴³⁸ From an interview on March 29, 2019. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from the Parsi medium are drawn from this interview.

⁴³⁹ From an interview on October 30, 2019. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Yasin Bava are drawn from this interview.

⁴⁴⁰ Communication in Ahmedabad on December 19, 2018.

⁴⁴¹ Platts, *A Dictionary of Urdu*, 473, 1181.

the presence of the saints involves physical or mental discomfort. Heena ji, a Sidi medium of Mai Misra from Mumbai, describes the onset of her mediumship abilities at the young age of seven:

“The first time it came, I was very confused and I did not understand. I could not hear the people around me. I could only hear the *jikrī* and I felt very strange. I felt like something had come near me. And I cried a lot. I could not stay in control. In one second I would just forget myself.

Itnā hai ki first time jab āyā thā to matlab bahut uljhan hotī thī to samajh meṁ nahīm ātā hai. Matlab kān meṁ sunāī nahīm detā ājū bājū ke log. Sirf jikrī sunāī detī hai aur bahut ajīb feel hotā hai. Matlab aisā feel hotā hai ki koi cīz apne pās āye. Ye feel hotā hai. Aur is meṁ bahut ronā ātā hai. Maim bas meṁ nahīm rehtā. Phir ek second meṁ ham sab bhūl jāte haiṁ ki ham kyā haiṁ.”⁴⁴²

Heena ji reports the “symptom” of crying, along with an internal state of confusion. Peculiarly, she could only hear the devotional songs, whose lyrics as described in previous chapters invoke the presence of the saints; she felt something come near her, and lost control and awareness of herself. Heena ji adds that the identity of the embodied saint can only be ascertained by asking the person in *hāl*.

The Parsi medium of Mai Misra describes a similar experience when she began to develop mediumship abilities around the age of sixteen or seventeen:

“Initially, I used to just cry, and I didn’t know how to express myself or how to talk. Because it takes time. It’s not something that just happens. You need to get your body used to it - the frequency. Because another energy is entering your space, your body. So, it takes time. Once that happens, then there is ease. You need to be a little advanced spiritually to be able to take that energy within you. Otherwise it just goes haywire.”

⁴⁴² From an interview on April 2, 2019. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Heena ji are drawn from this interview.

The medium notes that she was unable to speak when her abilities first began. She introduces the idea of a gradual progression from the initial state of crying and confoundment to the ability to communicate the voice of the saint while in *hāl*. This process hinges on the body's adjustment to "another energy [that] is entering your space [and] your body." Her phrasing recalls Heena ji's description of sensing something near her; first entering one's "space," the sensed presence graduates to embodiment. This hypothesis supports Bellamy's analysis of *hāzirī* as a dual-staged phenomenon involving a personally experienced state ("*gum hāzirī*") and externally expressed activity ("*khulī hāzirī*").

The Parsi medium addresses the idea that embodying the saints may entail pain or discomfort and connects it to her hypothesis on spiritual development and gradual acclimation to embodying the saints. She describes someone who used to come to the shrine ten years prior:

"She used to get a *baiṭhak* [*hāl*], but she used to just scream. And she used to run around the *dargāh*. And then, you needed four, five people to just hold her down. So - this is my conception - if you are not even slightly spiritually inclined or you don't practice any spiritual modality, [and] your body is vibrating at that particular frequency, [then] it might reject [the *hāl*]. ...It could be also that the spirit that is entering her is a more *jalālī* [hot-minded] spirit and it doesn't know how to express, it could be anything. But this is my perception of it - if you've not allowed your body to vibrate at that frequency, it could not come out in a positive way, not in a gentle way."

The medium associates pain in *hāl* with lack of spiritual development, which she couches in terms of the body "vibrating at [a] particular frequency" that is not conducive to assimilating the energy of the saint. This is even more apparent in the case she cites of a new medium's embodiment of a *jalālī* (hot-minded) saint; Basu relates that *jalālī* saints are "easily angered, difficult to deal with and may even become harmful for those who do not respect them

enough.”⁴⁴³ Sidis associate the performance of miraculous feats of physical strength with the *hāl* of *jalālī* saints such as Bava Habash. According to popular belief, Bava Habash’s tomb is far away from Bava Gor’s and Mai Misra’s because *jalālī* saints prefer distance from others, to the point that they may hurl small children away out of aversion to them as potential sources of bodily waste. Shroff observes that the medium of Bava Habash at the Parsi shrine is likewise too *jalālī* to be touched: he keeps his distance from devotees and, rather than hold devotees’ hands as the medium of Bava Gor or Mai Misra usually does, he reaches out to them with the peacock feather brush.⁴⁴⁴ The intensity of such saints suggests that acclimating to their presence may presage pain for one who is not physically ready to assimilate that “frequency” of energy.

In addition to her mediumship role at the shrine, the Parsi medium practices alternative healing modalities and is a respected master teacher of Reiki energy work. The discourse of Reiki energy healing work emerges in her conceptualization of the process of adjusting to the presence of the saints so as to embody and mediate it. The following excerpt from a 2017 academic study of Reiki as an “agential external authority” and “object of . . .surrender” that “allow[s] for new forms of a transformed identity” among Reiki practitioners in Britain illuminates the underlying logic drawn from this discourse as it informs the Parsi medium’s understanding of *hāl*. Pertinent to this chapter’s ensuing analysis of the Sidi Sufi devotional tradition as an African diasporan religious practice, the author engages the concept of *ashe* (power; life force) in the Afro-Cuban religion, Ifá, to articulate the nature of Reiki energy:⁴⁴⁵

⁴⁴³ Basu, “Theatre of Memory,” 251.

⁴⁴⁴ From personal communication on July 8, 2020.

⁴⁴⁵ *Ashe* is a Yoruba term denoting, among many things, the life force of the *orishas*. The *Orishas* are spiritual forces that humans may embody and that are also associated with Catholic saints where Orisha traditions are practiced in the Americas. See Joseph M. Murphy, *Santería: African Spirits in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 175, 181.

“...*aché* is neither a thing nor a concept but rather a bit of both. ...Similarly, reiki is a thing in the form of energy and a concept relating to a ‘universal energy’ that is directed by practitioners. As a result of their training, Reiki practitioners direct reiki — an energy that has power as a life force — through the hands. This training, which is confirmed in the attunement or initiation ritual, can be considered a ‘consecration’ in the sense that, through the initiation, the practitioner achieves a certain relationship with reiki that allows him/her to be aware of its presence and interact with it.”⁴⁴⁶

Reiki involves directing ‘universal life force energy’ through the body, particularly the hands, into the body of another. Just as Reiki is “channeled” through the hands, the presence of the saint is likewise channeled through the medium, who sustains hand-to-hand contact with a devotee during *sawāl-jawāb*.⁴⁴⁷ Attunement to Reiki increases the initiate’s awareness of the presence of the energy and ability to interact with it. Likewise, the reflections of Heena ji and the Parsi medium suggests that awareness of the saints’ presence graduates to the ability to embody that presence and convey it to others through verbal communication.

This description of the process of attuning to Reiki energy and directing it to others highlights the underlying logic of the Parsi medium’s conceptualization of acclimating to the presence of a Sidi ancestor-saint. An initiation ritual or Reiki “attunement” is the process by which a Reiki master teacher activates a student’s ability to channel Reiki; the master will attune initiates to progressively more potent levels of Reiki energy to facilitate the student’s gradual

See also Helene Basu, “Afro-indische Besessenheitskulte im interkulturellen Vergleich (Sidi-goma in indien; zâr in Ostafrika; candomblé in Brasilien).” *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 127:1 (2002): 41-55.

⁴⁴⁶ Dori Beeler, “Reiki as Surrender: Evidence of an External Authority.” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 32:3 (2017), 471.

⁴⁴⁷ The terminology of “channeling” Reiki is used in the Parsi medium’s Reiki guidebook. For the use of this terminology with regard to spirit mediumship, see also Wayne Spencer, “To Absent Friends: Classical Spiritualist Mediumship and New Age Channeling Compared and Contrasted.” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 16:3 (2001): 343–60.

transition from beginner to master.⁴⁴⁸ The Parsi medium's guidebook for Reiki students explains that certain attunements help "the human mind to plug into certain specific frequencies"; these attunements "focus and amplify the [Reiki] energy" allowing the practitioner to "channel the energy in a much more intense and powerful manner." This suggests that Reiki attunements increase the frequency at which the mind of the practitioner is vibrating, expanding the practitioner's ability to channel Reiki in a more focused and meaningful way. The Parsi medium explains that channeling Reiki consistently advances the practitioner's spiritual development.⁴⁴⁹ Spiritual development in the context of the energy healing modality she practices involves successive attunements to higher energy frequencies, which in turn facilitates the ability to channel more focused, potent energy. She likewise equates spiritual development with the new medium's ability to easefully integrate the more intense "frequencies" of the energy of the saint and gently transmit those frequencies through the communicative interactivity of *hāl*: for example, she was unable to speak in *hāl* until her body adjusted.

While the Parsi medium articulates this process from the perspective of a Reiki practitioner, Sidis express the same ideas in terms that are emic to the Sidi devotional tradition. A Sidi man at the shrine of Nagarchi Pir in Jambur has used the term "*mūnkī hāzirī*" ("mute presence") to indicate a person's inability to speak while embodying a saint.⁴⁵⁰ He along with interlocutors in Ahmedabad associate this with the limitations of an uninitiated medium ("*kaccā* [unrefined; immature] *pyālā*") and express that taking the cup (*pyālā*) of ritual initiation from a Sidi teacher (*murśid*) to become a "*pakkā* [refined; mature] *pyālā*" will remedy the problem. This

⁴⁴⁸ Jenny-Ann Brodin Danell, "On the Boundaries of Medicine and Spirituality: Professionalization and Self-Regulation of Reiki in Sweden." *International Journal for the Study of New Religions* 4:1 (2013), 120.

⁴⁴⁹ From the Parsi medium's manual and personal communication on December 14, 2020.

⁴⁵⁰ From a meeting at the shrine of Nagarchi Pir in Jambur on April 7, 2019.

perspective associates ritual initiation in the Sidi Sufi tradition with refinement of spiritual abilities.

A Sidi ritual practitioner in Baroda explains that taking initiation (*pyālā*) from a teacher transfers spiritual power from the teacher to the initiate; aspiring initiates therefore seek a teacher with great spiritual efficacy (i.e., the teacher's prayers are heard).⁴⁵¹ He counsels that initiation fortifies the initiate's spiritual abilities, advancing them from "*kaccā*" to "*pakkā*", and provides spiritual protection; he likens engaging in spiritual work without initiation to handling dangerous chemicals without protective gear. This Sidi ritual practitioner's insights align with the Parsi medium's conceptions of spiritual development and advancement of mediumship ability. A Reiki master teacher attunes the student to higher frequencies of energy, amplifying the student's channeling ability and fostering the student's spiritual development. Likewise, taking the cup (*pyālā*) of ritual initiation from a Sidi teacher (*murśid*) transfers spiritual power to the initiate and hones the initiate's spiritual abilities; for example, one who could formerly only experience the saint's presence would be able to mediate the saint's presence to others through verbal communication. The Parsi medium observes that spiritual development eases the intensity of embodiment, especially of a fiery saint; the Sidi ritual specialist likewise asserts that initiation affords protection from volatile spiritual energies.

The Parsi medium reports that when she began to show "symptoms" of mediumship, such as crying and inability to speak, she was advised to "pray more often." This prescription offered at the onset of her abilities perhaps informs the intricate connections she draws between spiritual

⁴⁵¹ Communication in Baroda on December 12, 2018. He conducts a unique divinatory practice involving coconuts, through the auspices of the saint Bālā Pīr Dādā.

development, mediumship, and her mastery of energy healing modalities. As an actualized medium, she channels the “presence” not only of Mai Misra, but at times of Makbul Bava, the grandfather of Yasin Bava and the medium of Bava Gor with whom the Parsi memorial shrine and its devotional community began.⁴⁵² She also channels departed souls from among the community of Parsi devotees. Sidis who participate in ritual activities at the Parsi shrine have recently invited her to take *pyālā*, yet Yasin Bava maintains that the medium’s spiritual “gift” (*bakhśiś*), granted to her without any *pyālā* of initiation, is fully realized.⁴⁵³ The *bakhśiś* of mediumship in this context is such that ritual initiation is not necessary for the refinement of spiritual abilities; spiritual development, as the medium had been advised, entails ‘praying more often.’

Shroff highlights the initiation-like terms of devotional engagement at the Parsi shrine.⁴⁵⁴ She cites the dynamic that Basu outlines between the Sidi ritual specialist as teacher and parent of the spiritual seeker as initiate and child, comparing this to a devotee’s terms of engagement with the medium of Bava Gor at the Parsi shrine. Shroff describes her father’s regular attendance of weekly *baiṭhak* sessions at the shrine, even nightlong prayer vigils, after receiving a remedy for anxiety involving a healing prayer (*kalmā*) from Makbul Bava. She identifies this as an initiatory process by which the supplicant begins a lifelong journey of healing self and others:

“My mother ...told me that often people approach Bava Gor through the spirit medium with personal problems seeking quick solutions. But for the spirit medium, the seeker of solutions had to first become a participant within a community, like an initiate. ...the supplicant begins a lifelong process of healing himself or herself and continues the process of healing others. In this regard, [devotees] who attended

⁴⁵² From meetings with Beheroze Shroff and Parsi mediums of Mai Misra on August 11-16, 2017.

⁴⁵³ Personal communication with Parsi medium on December 14, 2020 and with Beheroze Shroff on December 29, 2020.

⁴⁵⁴ Shroff, “Sidis and Parsis,” 165.

nightly prayer sessions, were gifted kalmas that they could themselves use as healing prayers for their family or friends.”⁴⁵⁵

Shroff’s father approached the medium as a supplicant, seeking healing for anxiety; in return, the medium required devotional engagement, as a spiritual teacher or *murśid* would request of an initiate. This process was an initiation of sorts that begin with a healing prayer (*kalmā*) for the initiate and resulted in the medium gifting the initiate with healing prayers that could be used for others.

This dynamic parallels the maturation of the medium: the devotee of the saints receives the gift (*bakhśiś*) of mediumship, grapples with assimilating the new energy, experiences relief after acclimating to the energy, and shares this gift with other devotees to offer them the “miracle healing assistance” (*karāmat*) of the saints.⁴⁵⁶ Yasin Bava, who recalls experiencing physical pain in the beginning days of *hāl*, now only feels heaviness when in the presence of the saints: “That happens to us also when we go to Ratanpur,” he explains. “They [the saints] can do miracles; they can read you. They are searching for true disciples.”

Spiritual development at the Parsi shrine is an initiatory process involving devotional engagement with the medium of Bava Gor; it does not necessitate the *pyālā* of ritual initiation into the Sidi Rifai lineage. Nevertheless, as the lead ritual authority (*gādī vāras*) of the shrine, Yasin Bava took the *pyālā* of ritual initiation from his grandfather, Makbul Bava, in Ratanpur. Yasin Bava details the unique circumstances of his initiation. He was born with his leg wrapped around his shoulder and was in the hospital for seven days on a ventilator. At that time, Makbul

⁴⁵⁵ Shroff, “Spiritual Journeys,” 268-269.

⁴⁵⁶ This reflects the reciprocity of exchange in the Sidi devotional tradition, as explored in Chapter One. Shroff defines *karāmat* in “Goma is Going On,” 22.

Bava vowed, “If he survives, I will give him my throne.” “With his blessings and prayers,” Yasin Bava reflects, “I survived.” So Makbul Bava initiated Yasin Bava, with permission from the latter’s parents, when Yasin Bava was eighteen years old. Makbul Bava entered *hāl* and administered a *pyālā* of milk to Yasin Bava, who sat on his lap, thereby transferring the gift (*bakhsīs*) of mediumship and ritual leadership of the Parsi shrine.⁴⁵⁷ Like the trajectory of a supplicant’s spiritual journey under the tutelage of the medium, outlined above, Yasin Bava’s healing from his condition as a newborn required devotional commitment as heir to the “throne” (*gādī*) of leadership at the shrine.

The fact that the *pyālā* of ritual initiation was administered in Ratanpur suggests the gravity of the event. Makbul Bava transferred ritual authority to Yasin Bava in the spiritual presence of the saints while in *hāl*, and in the physical presence of the saints’ tombs in Ratanpur. The leader (*sardār*) of the Sidi community and lead ritual authority (*gādi vāras*) of the Ratanpur *dargāh* of Bava Gor administers Bava Gor’s *pyālā* to initiates in Ratanpur; likewise, the *gādi vāras* at the Parsi memorial shrine of Bava Gor in Mumbai administered the *pyālā* to his grandson in Ratanpur, transferring the gift of mediumship of Bava Gor. This performance of ritual initiation through administering the *pyālā* in Ratanpur mirrors the Sidi initiatory rite of ritual kinship between the teacher-parent and initiate-child and integrates the ritual lineage of the Parsi shrine within the Sidi Rifai lineage.

The teacher/parent-initiate/child dynamic of the Sidi ritual tradition becomes apparent between Makbul Bava and Yasin Bava in the symbolic gesture of Makbul Bava feeding milk to

⁴⁵⁷ The practice of transferring mediumship ability as a gift (*bakhsīs*) to someone while the teacher is actively in *hāl* is reported amongst Sidis. Communication in Rander, Surat on March 6, 2019.

his eighteen-year-old grandson seated on his lap. This reflects the symbiosis of ritual and natural kinship that characterizes Sidis' relationships with the ancestor-saints but suggests natural kinship in different terms; whereas shared African heritage connects a Sidi initiate or ritual specialist with their African ancestor-saints, genealogical descent connects the Sunni Muslim initiate Yasin Bava with his grandfather Makbul Bava, the medium of Bava Gor.

The interconnectedness of ritual and natural kinship in the Sidi context also applies to the terms of Yasin Bava's ritual kinship with Bava Gor as his medium. Yasin Bava describes a wakeful vision (*baśārat*) he and others witnessed simultaneously, in which a messenger approached the shrine on a Thursday night.⁴⁵⁸ The man wore a turban, a long robe and a face covering that only revealed his eyes. He proclaimed that he was to give Yasin Bava a rosary, a ring, and a deed of endowment (*waqf nāmā*) to confirm Yasin Bava's membership in the Sidi community (*jamāt*) after fifty years of devotional service (*khidmat*). The trajectory of Yasin Bava's life demonstrates the devotional commitment required by the medium in return for a blessing; having dutifully honored that commitment, Yasin Bava was being gifted with recognition by the saints' themselves. In his case, recognition involved acceptance into the Sidi community: the parent-child dynamic of ritual kinship between a teacher and initiate that ultimately positions both as children of Bava Gor had been rewarded with acceptance as a Sidi 'child' of the saint, melding the terms of ritual and natural kinship.

The dynamics of ritual kinship position Bava Gor as an elder brother rather than parent of his sibling-initiates, Bava Habash and Mai Misra.⁴⁵⁹ Interestingly, Yasin Bava's male and female

⁴⁵⁸ The eve of congregational (*jumma*) prayer, Thursday evening (*jumerāt*) is an auspicious time for ritual observance at the Sufi shrine.

⁴⁵⁹ Basu. "Theatre of Memory," 251.

children received the *bakhśís* of mediumship of Bava Habash and Mai Misra, respectively. As in Yasin Bava's case, ritual kinship blends with the terms of natural kinship ties with the Sidi saints in the case of one of his daughters.⁴⁶⁰ Born during the *urs* of the saints, she was the first girl born in her family after sixteen or seventeen years. Makbul Bava, her great-grandfather, was elated with her birth, but her health was suffering. Makbul Bava suggested that her parents change her given name from 'Rashika' to 'Mishra.' The morning after her name was changed, her hair became curly and her complexion became dark. "Mai appeared in her," the family explained. They believed that once "she took the name 'Mishra,' [she] entered into their *khāndān*" – that is, into the family of the Sidi saints.

The young Mishra was given clothing sewn from the embroidered satin cloths (*galef*) offered at the shrine. When she was around ten years old, she started to experience mediumship. She describes it as a force that pulls her and presses on her chest; like Heena ji, she describes losing awareness of what was going on around her, especially triggered by *dhammāl*. Like her father, she reports experiencing this heaviness while in Ratanpur. After some difficulty with marriage arrangements, the ritual authority figure (*gādī vāras*) of the Ratanpur shrines, Janu Miya, suggested that this was due to the name 'Mishra,' as the saint had been engaged, but had never married. Mishra eventually married; as if to confirm her alignment with Mai Misra after taking the saint's name, her conjugal last name became "Madre," rendering her name a mirror for the saint's.⁴⁶¹

⁴⁶⁰ From an interview with Mishra Madre on April 2, 2019. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Mishra are drawn from this interview.

⁴⁶¹ "Madre" means 'mother' in Spanish; "Mai" also means 'mother.'

The explanation given for the transformation of Mishra’s physical features suggests the ‘gifting’ of natural kinship with the saint; this intertwines with ritual kinship, indicated by devotional commitment and/or mediumship ability at the Parsi shrine, and articulated in terms of a parent-child dynamic. A young woman from Surat, living in Ratanpur, explains that children gifted by the saints to non-Sidi supplicants are born with curly hair, understood to be the defining phenotypical feature of the Sidi *jamāt*, and a celebrated physical attribute of the ancestor-saints Hazrat Bilal and Mai Misra.⁴⁶² This belief reinforces the way in which the lines of ritual and natural kinship blur to align devotees – and their children – as ‘children’ of the Sidi ancestor-saints along the [liens] of Sidis’ expression of shared heritage with the saints. This goes even further in the case of one Parsi devotee, who hoped for a child.⁴⁶³ Bava Gor [reassured-- Blessed Her?] her through his medium, “You will give birth to a child. *Terī god kā baccā hogā.*” She subsequently married a Nigerian man and had a daughter, whom she brought back to the shrine. Through his medium, Bava Gor exclaimed joyously, “This child is ours! *Ye baccā to hamārā hai.*” Within the saint’s expression of delight are the linked concepts of ritual kinship, as it involves the paternal dynamic between the medium and the devotee, and natural kinship accentuated by the child’s African ancestry.

Natural kinship at the Parsi shrine extends the parent-child dynamic of ritual kinship (as devotional commitment) between medium and devotee via the saints’ blessing devotees with children. The cases cited above of children born to devotees and marked phenotypically in ways that suggest the ‘imprint’ of the African saints accentuates these terms of natural kinship,

⁴⁶² Communication in Ratanpur on March 19, 2019.

⁴⁶³ Personal communication with Beheroze Shroff on December 29, 2020.

aligning them more closely with the African heritage-based dynamic of natural kinship with the saints amongst Sidis. The Parsi medium of Mai Misra, quoted above, describes the intimate connection that devotees' children share with the saints:

“We have been going [to the Parsi shrine] since our birth. So, it's like forever that we have this bond with them [the saints] and their forefathers. . . . We are blessed by them and we are their children. We have been gifted to our parents through them. So that is how far and how deep the connection goes with us.”

Similarly, the Parsi devotee whose grandfather played a large role in constructing the memorial shrine, has been coming to the shrine since childhood; quoted above in the study of Mai Misra's *Ghat*, this devotee identifies Mai Misra as a beloved mother figure for most women devotees.

Shroff observes the parent-child dynamic that her mother cultivated with Bava Gor through his medium Makbul Bava, noting that the identity of the saint appeared indistinguishable from that of the medium.⁴⁶⁴ Shroff emphasizes the way in which this dynamic unites devotees as a family: “Makbul Bava also created in the Bava Gor devotees a sense of an extended family. The devotee would develop an ongoing relationship with the spirit medium and eventually bring in members of their entire family into the circle of believers who would collectively honour the saints.”⁴⁶⁵ The medium of Bava Gor as leader of the devotional community facilitates ritual relationships between the saints, himself, and believers predicated upon a parent-child dynamic. This dynamic of ritual kinship then extends to natural kinship, as devotees invite their biological families into the fold. Devotees are gifted children by the saints, who form an additional ring in the circle of believers as they engage in devotional service to the saints from childhood.

⁴⁶⁴ Shroff, “Spiritual Journeys,” 273. Similarly, Rumanaben reports a dream (*baśārat*) in Bava Gor appeared to her in the likeness of Janu Miya, the *sardār* or spiritual leader of the Sidi community and of the Ratanpur shrine, and invited her to celebrate Bava Gor's *urs* in a remote, seaside location. (Communication in Ahmedabad on September 12, 2019.) Here, too, the identities of the saint and his representative are superimposed.

⁴⁶⁵ Shroff, “Spiritual Journeys,” 269.

As we have seen in the case of Mishra and the Parsi medium of Mai Misra, children ‘gifted’ to their parents by the saints may in turn be granted mediumship abilities. This spiritual gift (*bakhsís*) perpetuates the family of believers by ensuring that the saints’ contact with the devotional community will continue even after the current mediums pass on. In this way, natural and ritual lineages within the body of believers extend simultaneously. While the Sidi *pyālā* tradition is not necessary in this context to perpetuate ritual lineage, an aspect of this tradition appears in the context of spirit mediumship sessions (*baiṭhak*) at this shrine. After the mediums of Bava Gor and Mai Misra have finished channeling the presence of the saints for devotees to greet (*salāmī*) and question (*sawāl-jawāb*) them, they are given a cup of water to drink.⁴⁶⁶ This cup may be circled around the head of Bava Gor’s memorial tomb seven times before being offered to the mediums. After one medium drinks, the water is poured into a pitcher, then poured into a cup for the next medium to drink, then returned to the pitcher; [the process of pouring the water from cup to pitcher is repeated until every devotee present has had a chance to drink. ←not sure of this line?] This process reflects the centrality of spirit mediums in weaving a web of ritual kinship linking devotees to the saints.

This process recalls a scene from the *Śakkarwālī Khicṛī* ceremony analyzed in the first chapter of the dissertation. A Sidi woman embodying Mai Misra was given a *pyālā* (ceremonial drink) of black coffee to sip; after the woman’s *hāl* ended, the cup was passed between participants.⁴⁶⁷ The use of a ceremonial drink rather than plain water in this context suggests the *pyālā* of ritual initiation, as does the fact that the woman embodying Mai Misra drinks from the

⁴⁶⁶ Participant-observation in Mumbai on August 16, 2017.

⁴⁶⁷ During a *Khicṛī* ceremony, a cup of water may also be offered to an embodied Mai Misra. Drinking water that someone in *hāl* has already drunk is believed to have healing properties. Participant-observation in Ratanpur on January 26, 2019 and communication with Rumanaben in Ahmedabad on October 18, 2019.

pyālā while still in *hāl*, as Makbul Bava did while initiating the young Yasin Bava. The distribution of water drunk by the mediums of Bava Gor and Mai Misra to the *baiṭhak* ritual participants at the Parsi shrine parallels this process. It facilitates the transmission of charisma (*barkat*) from the embodied saints to the circle of believers, reinforcing the bonds of ritual kinship linking the saints, through their mediums, with the community of devotees.

The approximately 250 to 300 Parsi devotees of the Sidi ancestor-saints at the Mumbai memorial shrine reflect a small cross-section of the Parsi diasporan population of India.⁴⁶⁸ This community of diasporan devotees of the Sidi ancestor-saints organizes itself as a family of ‘children’ gifted and guided by the ‘mother’ and ‘father’ saints they venerate, a dynamic which corresponds to African diasporans’ formation of community based on ties of ritual and natural kinship with Bava Gor. This chapter’s case study of Parsi diasporan devotees’ veneration of the Sidi ancestor-saints underscores the previous chapter’s analysis of the process by which devotion to the Sidi ancestor-saints healed the pain of the kinless and the childless, as Afrodescendants found family and community under the auspices of the African Sufi saints they venerated.

The chapter’s exploration of the roles and experiences of spirit mediums at the Parsi shrine focuses on three women’s identities as mediums of Mai Misra to foreground the importance of Mai Misra to devotional life at this shrine. Unlike the steady presence of Bava Gor at the shrine, through his memorial tomb and the consistent activity of his medium, Mai Misra’s presence oscillates as her mediums handle the challenges of their ritual, familial, and professional responsibilities. Mai Misra’s *Ghaṭ* affords an annual opportunity for devotees, especially women, to interact with the presence of Mai Misra at the shrine as they symbolically

⁴⁶⁸ Shroff, “Spiritual Journeys,” 267-268.

embody her in a life-sized *kalas* and as her medium physically embodies her. The chapter analyzes the ways in which the *urs* festivities draw from the material culture and ritual aspects of Mai Misra's *kalas* traditions, and how the concluding portion of the monthly mediumship session (*cāndrāt baiṭhak*) mirrors the symbolism of ritual kinship observed in Mai Misra's *Śakkarwālī Khicrī*.

The chapter has guided its analysis with reference to Shroff's study of devotional commitment under the medium of Bava Gor at the Parsi memorial shrine. It is worthwhile to comment here on Shroff's perspectives regarding the integration of the Parsi shrine into the African *ngoma* systems of healing in which the Sidi *dhammāl/gomā* tradition is rooted. Shroff draws connections between Janzen's canonical 1992 study of eastern, central, and southern African *ngoma* traditions, Basu's analysis of Sidis' development of community and communal identity based on ritual kinship with Bava Gor, and devotional activity at the Parsi shrine.⁴⁶⁹ Shroff observes that Sidis self-representation as spiritual healers through the ritual of *dhammāl/gomā* is rooted in the practice of "personal transformation" and "self renewal, in the context of others" that African *ngoma* traditions provide their participants.⁴⁷⁰

Like Sidi *dhammāl/gomā*, many of these continental African *ngoma* traditions involve a ritual song-dance performance and spirit embodiment. Regarding the communal dynamic of ritual activity in *ngoma*, Janzen observes, "There is a strong insistence in *ngoma* theorizing that singing, sacrifice, and communing turn life around and literally bring life out of death."⁴⁷¹ In this

⁴⁶⁹ Shroff, "Spiritual Journeys," 259-264.

⁴⁷⁰ Shroff, "Spiritual Journeys," 260-261. The quoted phrases are drawn from Janzen, *Ngoma*, 109, which Shroff cites on page 261.

⁴⁷¹ Janzen, *Ngoma*, 105.

way, the community's assemblance to perform the devotional songs and ecstatic dance of *dhammāl* (*gomā*) together during the *urs* of the ancestor-saints engenders a sense of individual and communal 'rebirth.' This ceremonial rebirthing process reflects the ways in which dispersed Africans and their descendants reinscribed the contours of self, family, and community through collective veneration of Bava Gor, Mai Misra, and other Sidi ancestor-saints.

Parallels emerge between Bellamy's analysis of *hāzirī* and healing, and Janzen's explanation of healing in *ngoma*. In a section entitled "The Sufferer Becomes the Healer," Janzen explicates that, "The single most characteristic feature of *ngoma* is this transformation of the negative, disintegrative affliction into positive, integrative wholeness. ... Much of the empowerment of *ngoma* is, however, in the newly acquired ability of the afflicted to meet specific or general problems with resolve."⁴⁷² Bellamy likewise positions the *hāzirī* performance as part of a healing process that ultimately reintegrates the individual in family and community; in certain cases, the healed person emerges with a spiritual gift that engenders others' healing, and may take the form of embodiment of the presence of the Muslim saint whose "greeting" (*salāmī*) the healed person has received.⁴⁷³

In this way, spirit mediumship of the ancestor-saints, especially as facilitated by the *dhammāl* performance, is an additional site for the reconstitution of self in the context of community. The chapter's case study of the Parsi shrine reveals that saints deliver blessings to devotees in the form of a child, relieving suffering associated with childlessness or the child's illness. In many such cases, these children are ultimately gifted with mediumship by the saints,

⁴⁷² Janzen, *Ngoma*, 105-106.

⁴⁷³ See Bellamy, *The Powerful Ephemeral*, 51-56, 182.

which entails a commitment of service to the devotional community to assist others' healing, in return. Mediumship of Bava Gor is relatively rarely attested, both at the Parsi shrine where the caretaker is Bava Gor's medium, and within the Sidi community. By contrast, this chapter mentions four women mediums of Mai Misra at the Parsi shrine, with at least two more young women demonstrating budding mediumship ability at the shrine at the time of dissertation research; mediumship of Mai Misra and select companion saints is also widespread amongst Sidis. This suggests the active role that the saint Mai Misra plays in women's devotional lives throughout the Sidi saint-shrine network, affirming this dissertation's effort to foreground the role of Mai Misra's veneration in perpetuating ritual and natural kinship lineages historically and within the contemporary Sidi Sufi devotional tradition.

Voices of the Saints: African Diasporan Instruments of Sidi *Dhammāl/Gomā*⁴⁷⁴

While mediumship is a spiritual gift (*bakhśīs*) that may be bequeathed to devotees of the ancestor-saints, the devotional songs (*jikar*) and ecstatic dance of *dhammāl* are identified as a natural gift (*qudratī bakhśīs*) exclusive to Sidis.⁴⁷⁵ As the characteristic features of African *ngoma* traditions emerge in the context of Sidi *dhammāl/gomā*, this section takes a closer look at the African diasporan heritage of this Indian Sufi devotional music tradition.

Sidi *dhammāl* as a genre of devotional music and ecstatic dance participates in the tradition of Sufi ritual audition (*samā*) as it involves remembrance (*zīkr*) of God, the Prophet,

⁴⁷⁴ This title is inspired by Shroff's *Voices of the Sidis* documentaries.

⁴⁷⁵ Shroff interviews a Sidi caretaker of Mai Misra's shrine in Bhavnagar, who identifies *jikar* as a "natural gift (*qudratī bakhśīs*)" of Sidis (Shroff unpublished documentary, *Sidis of Gujarat: Maintaining Traditions and Building Community*). Makbul Bava would invite Sidis to perform *dhammāl* during the *urs* at the Parsi shrine for this reason. See Shroff, "Spiritual Journeys," 263-264.

and Sufi saints to generate ecstatic states. The eruption of the seated *dhammāl* performance into the rigorous movements and tempos of standing *dhammāl* mirrors the way in which *wajd*, a more personal, affective experience of religious transport, culminates in embodiment (*hāl*) and mediation of the saints' presence. This parallel suggests the mechanics of African *ngoma* traditions involving spirit possession. In such contexts, percussion instruments such as the footed *ngoma* drum and gourd shakers generate rhythms that rouse corresponding spirits and communicate those spirits' voices. This section examines the sacred instruments of Sidi *dhammāl/gomā*, including the *mugarmān* drum and the 'Mai Misra' coconut-shell rattles, which have no known indigenous counterparts in South Asia, as they carry on the instrument-rhythm-spirit correspondences of continental African *ngoma* traditions.

The importance of Mai Misra and her companion saints reemerges in this context, in the feminine-gendering of the 'Mai Misra' rattle and the symbolic associations between the *mugarmān* and the companion saint 'Mai Goma' remembered by the Shidis of Karachi. This section's study of the construction, ritual use, and ceremonial storage of the 'Mai Misra' rattle underscores the multivocality of the Sidi Sufi devotional tradition, with its multilayered incorporation of material media drawn from eastern African and Indian religious contexts.

Sacred instruments of African origin performed in veneration of African Sufi saints memorializes the African heritage of the Sidi devotional tradition and its custodians. Basu elaborates, "Seven rhythms, each of which is associated with one female saint, are played on different types of drums. Collectively, these rhythms - which establish a relationship with the female saint Mai Goma - are referred to as *goma*, i.e., by the word that also denotes the dances

and is suggestive of the Swahili meaning of *ngoma*, dance.”⁴⁷⁶ Mai Goma is one of the seven ‘sister’ saints, including Mai Misra, remembered by the Shidis of Karachi. As the names of the Sidi ancestor-saints serve as “tags for memorial clusters”, Mai Goma personifies the *ngoma* traditions of eastern, central and southern Africa which the Sidi *dhammāl/gomā* performance memorializes in South Asia.

The standing drum called the *mugarmān* epitomizes Mai Goma. The *mugarmān* “which is treated as one of the most sacred objects of the cult... orchestrates the interplay of rhythms created by other drums” during the *goma* performance.⁴⁷⁷ Directing the hepta-rhythmic drumming of the Shidi *gomā* performance, the *mugarmān* represents a distinct rhythmic voice among the seven rhythms, each associated with one female ancestor-saint, that collectively “establish a relationship” with Mai Goma.⁴⁷⁸ The caretaker of Mai Misra’s shrine in Karachi dresses the *mugarmān* with red cloths and rose garlands, the same items with which he decorates the women who represent sister saints during the *urs*.⁴⁷⁹ This feminine gendering of the *mugarmān* indicates its role in the Karachi *urs*, along with the women similarly dressed, as a symbolic embodiment of a female saint. The overlap between the centrality of the *mugarmān* to the Sidi *dhammāl/gomā* performance and the symbolic valence of the saint Mai Goma as a personification of African *ngoma* traditions highlights the basic definition of the Bantu term *ngoma*: drum.

⁴⁷⁶The information in this paragraph is drawn from Basu. “Theatre of Memory,” 259-260.

⁴⁷⁷ Basu, “Theatre of Memory,” 260.

⁴⁷⁸ This paragraph analyzes the feminine-gendering of the *mugarmān* in the Shidi saints’ *urs* in Karachi. However, the *mugarmān* is not associated with the female saint ‘Mai Goma’ in the Sidi tradition of India. Rather, it is associated with the male saint Bava Gor. See Jairazbhoy, “Sidi Music,” 130 and Basu, “A Gendered Indian Ocean Site,” 241, 243, 244.

⁴⁷⁹ Basu, “Theatre of Memory,” 262. The *mugarmān* and the ‘Mai Misra’ may be clothed in red or green cloth in India; the *mugarmān* is not exclusively clothed in red, as Basu observes in Karachi.

Janzen identifies the *ngoma* drum as the primary instrument of *ngoma* rituals:

“In the belt across the middle of the continent, from Kongo to Swahili... *ngoma* refers primarily to the elongated wooden drum with a single membrane attached at one end with pegs. ...In societies where trance-possession and therapeutic cults are present, *ngoma* more than any other drum is used in this therapeutic setting, to the accompaniment of shakers and singing.”⁴⁸⁰

Likewise, the Sidi *gomā* performance features the sacred *mugarmān* drum and the ‘Mai Misra’ rattle, which accompany the recitation of devotional songs (*jikar*). Amy Catlin-Jairazbhoy compares the *mugarmān* to a Zimbabwean *ngoma* drum, noting, “Similar types of pegged drumheads and footed drums are widespread on the east coast of Africa, while they are otherwise unknown in India.”⁴⁸¹ She cites Abdulaziz Lodhi’s etymology of the term *mugarmān* as an “abbreviation of the [Bantu/Swahili] phrase ‘*ngoma ya magulu mane*’ (four-legged drum). In several places, ‘*magulman*’ is not only the name of the drum but also the dances danced with it and the songs sung with it...” The term *mugarmān* therefore describes a four-legged *ngoma* (drum), and in some contexts amongst Sidis carries the same semantic range as *ngoma* (‘song’ and ‘dance’) in Africa, rendering *mugarmān* synonymous at these sites with the Bantu usage of the term *ngoma*. What the *ngoma* drum is to the *ngoma* ritual performance in eastern, central and southern Africa, the *mugarmān* is to the Sidi *goma* tradition of South Asia.

The Mai Goma sequence of the *urs* in Karachi symbolically links Mai Goma with the *mugarmān* and associates one of seven distinct rhythms with each of the seven ‘sister’ saints. A precedent for this direct linkage between rhythm and spirit also exists in Tanzanian *ngoma* traditions.

⁴⁸⁰ Janzen, *Ngoma*, 70.

⁴⁸¹ The information in this paragraph is drawn from Catlin-Jairazbhoy, “Sidi Music,” 129.

“In Tanzania, ...waganga [healers] and music experts also point to the association of spirits in ngoma and distinctive rhythms. ...For Botoli Laie, a mganga from Kilwa in Tanzania, specific instruments play distinctive rhythms appropriate to each spirit. This degree of specificity between spirit and rhythm, as well as the dance, is present as well in *loa* possession in Haiti (Courlander 1960:21), particularly in the Central and West African originating spirits.”⁴⁸²

Specifically, “The drumming is considered to be the voice or influence of the ancestral shades or other spirits...”⁴⁸³ Thus, a particular rhythm can be understood to be the cadence of the voice of the unique spirit with which it is associated. For example, the healer Botoli Laie works with Ngoma Mbungi, a type of *ngoma* therapeutic cult which features five ngoma drums. These drums “represent five up-country *masheitani* [spirits]... each of which is roused and manipulated by its own drum.”⁴⁸⁴ This suggests a bidirectionality of the drum’s voice in *ngoma*: it rouses and manipulates the spirit associated with it, while articulating that spirit’s voice or influence. Devotional song lyrics performed in Gujarati by Sidi women in Ratanpur gesture toward this dynamic of communication between saints and supplicants through Sidi *dhammāl/gomā* instruments: “*Damāmu vāge, musindo vāge, vāge Māi Misrā / Bolo Mārī bolo ramvām āvśo ke nahīm*. The *damāmā* beats, the *musindo* beats, the ‘Mai Misra’ beats. Tell us, Mother, tell us will you come playing or not?” The narrator of this verse asks whether Mai Misra will make her presence known in response to the rhythms of *dhammāl*, including the coconut-shell rattle that bears her name.

Other *ngoma* instruments among the Tanzanian healer’s paraphernalia also feature in Sidi *gomā*. These include “a small ngoma drum (*musondo*, also used in puberty rites)” and “gourd

⁴⁸² Janzen, *Ngoma*, 126-127.

⁴⁸³ Janzen, *Ngoma*, 1.

⁴⁸⁴ Janzen, *Ngoma*, 25.

shakers.”⁴⁸⁵ Catlin-Jairazbhoy identifies the Sidis’ “middle-sized horizontal *musindo*, with its name of Bantu origin [as] . . .virtually identical to the Indian *dholak*.”⁴⁸⁶ This drum features ubiquitously in Sidi *gomā*; Basu observes the *dholak* in use during the Karachi *urs*.⁴⁸⁷ Women generally play the *musindo* during Mai Misra’s *khicrī* or a bride’s *pīṭhī* ceremony, both of which are customarily performed prior to marriage. This is reminiscent of the *msondo* drum-dance traditions of coastal East Africa, which are part of girls’ initiation and marriage customs, including pre-marriage education.⁴⁸⁸ This resonance reflects the diffusion of East African musical heritage across the Indian Ocean, where the *msondo* drum features in the material culture not only of the African diaspora in India, but in locations such as Bahrain and Oman as well.⁴⁸⁹

The Tanzanian healer’s gourd shakers find a counterpart in another Sidi *gomā* instrument: the ‘Mai Misra’ rattle. The instrument’s form is evocative of Mai Misra’s *kalas*, with which it shares some constituent parts.⁴⁹⁰ A coconut and handle-stick are needed to create the rattle. Three holes should be pierced on each of three sides of the coconut, one hole on the top, and one hole on the bottom for a total of eleven holes. Then, the coconut should be left to dry. After the coconut is fully dried, it should be washed along with the handle-stick and the stones that will fill the rattle. The stones are called *khajānā* and are white agate stones sourced from the Ratankhari mine in Ratanpur. They should number one hundred twenty-five, a sacred number in the Sidi

⁴⁸⁵ Janzen, *Ngoma*, 24.

⁴⁸⁶ Catlin-Jairazbhoy, “Sidi Music,” 134.

⁴⁸⁷ Basu, “Theatre of Memory,” 259.

⁴⁸⁸ Frank Gunderson, *The Legacy of Tanzanian Musicians Muhidin Gurumo and Hassan Bitchuka: Rhumba Kiserebuka!* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2018), 75.

⁴⁸⁹ Gunderson, *The Legacy of Tanzanian Musicians*, 75-76.

⁴⁹⁰ From a meeting with Rumanaben in Ahmedabad on January 29, 2019 & October 18, 2019.

devotional tradition.⁴⁹¹ The coconut, handle-stick, and stones should be washed in a mixture of rosewater, milk and non-alcoholic fragrance (*attar*); this mixture is used especially on ritual occasions such as the *urs* and Mai Misra's *Khicrī*. The coconut should then be filled with the *khajānā* and sealed vertically with the stick through both holes on its latitudinal line. Mai Misra's *cundarī* is then draped over the structure and secured in place with a red thread, completing the preparation of the 'Mai Misra' rattle.

The name of this instrument clearly indicates its association with Mai Misra. The anthropomorphic appearance of the rattle, its component parts, and its assembly evoke Mai Misra's similarly gynomorphic *kalas*. Accordingly, the final steps for preparing the 'Mai Misra' recall that of the *kalas* installation: a coconut is enrobed in a *cundarī* which is then secured with a red thread. Instead of an empty clay or metal vessel to be filled with liquid, the dried coconut filled with one hundred twenty-five stones perpetuates the womb symbolism of the *kalas*. The stones inside of the coconut evoke ovoid imagery of fertility, such as the human female ovary.

The protocol for assembling the rattle suggests that its preparation, like that of the *kalas*, is a ritualized act of embodiment. Though not a *pardewālī* (closed-door) ritual activity like Mai Misra's *Khicrī*, privacy is required during the process of bathing the instrument's parts and dressing the assembled, naked rattle. This underscores the fact that it is a symbolic embodiment of Mai Misra. In a manner befitting the embodiment of a saint, the instrument is bathed in a liquid medium that is traditionally used to purify participants in a ritual assembly and even to ritually wash (*ghusl*) the shrine in Ahmedabad before the *urs* festivities. This suggests that the

⁴⁹¹ 125 is the canonical number of devotional songs (*jikars*). It is the number of ancestors who accompanied Mai Misra to her "first seat" in Ghogha (from research in Ghogha on March 16, 2019). It is also the number of days required to cure malevolent spirit possession at the Ratanpur shrines.

rattle is a sacred space for housing the ritual potency (*barkat*) of Mai Misra similar to a shrine or a devotional context where mediumship will occur. Just as Mai Misra's tomb may be draped with a satin embroidered cloth or her niche inside a memorial shrine adorned with a red *cundarī*, so too are her *kalas* and rattle dressed in the same material medium. These parallels indicate the sanctity of the rattle, a percussion instrument directly associated with Mai Misra that contributes its voice to the polyrhythms of Sidi *gomā*.

The storage and use of the 'Mai Misra' rattle emphasizes its role as a material medium imparting Mai Misra's voice and ritual potency (*barkat*). As a sacred instrument, the rattle must be placed inside of a shrine, including a household shrine, or hung above the ground in a *jholī*, a special red or green bag made specifically for holding *gomā* instruments.⁴⁹² The 'Mai Misra' or the *jholī* holding it must never be set on the floor: a fallen 'Mai Misra' augurs the death of one of her living *sahelis* - that is, a Sidi woman.⁴⁹³ This omen underscores the notion that *gomā* instruments communicate the voice of the ancestor-saints. The rattle's adornment with a *cundarī* (veil) signifies its function as a material medium not only of Mai Misra's voice, but of her *barkat*. Sidis playing the 'Mai Misra' rattle may pass its *cundarī*-skirt over the head of an infant, a gesture which denotes the transference of Mai Misra's blessings to the child through the instrument.⁴⁹⁴ The constituent parts, method of assembly, storage and uses of the 'Mai Misra'

⁴⁹² People no longer know how to make this kind of *jholī*, so a regular bag may suffice. (From a meeting with Rumanaben in Ahmedabad on October 18, 2019. Unless otherwise indicated, citations in this paragraph are drawn from this conversation.)

⁴⁹³ Similarly, a fallen *damāmā* drum or broken *malungā* string portends the death of a *dhammālī* (*dhammāl* player) - that is, a Sidi man.

⁴⁹⁴ Observation in Ahmedabad on October 13, 2019. See also Catlin-Jairazbhoy, "Sidi Music," 137-138.

collectively reveal the instrument as an embodiment of Mai Misra and her *barkat* in ways that mirror the *kalas*.

The method of assembling the ‘Mai Misra’ and its anthropomorphic appearance, resembling a woman veiled in Mai Misra’s *cundarī*, suggest that the rattle symbolically embodies the Sidi ancestor-saint after which it is named. This recalls the treatment of the *mugarmān* in Karachi, where its role in the Mai Goma segment of the *urs* and its adornment in red cloth suggest feminine gendering evocative of the female saint ‘Mai Goma’ in that specific context. The *mugarmān* is believed to have come “from Africa by supernatural means, over the waves of the Indian Ocean”, like the ancestor-saints themselves, and the recent ancestors of the contemporary Sidi community.⁴⁹⁵ Housed ceremonially inside of shrines, decorated with “ritually sanctioned cloth”, and even venerated with incense, the sacred instruments of Sidi *dhammāl/gomā* convey the charisma (*barkat*) of the ancestor-saints. This section’s brief analysis of the instruments of African *ngoma* traditions as communicators between the *ngoma* participants and the spirits or spirit classes associated with the instruments underscores the role of the instruments of Sidi *dhammāl/gomā* in, like spirit mediums, invoking the presence and conveying the voices of the Sidi ancestor-saints.

⁴⁹⁵ The information in this and the following sentence are drawn from Catlin-Jairazbhoy, “Sidi Music,” 129-30.

Conclusion

This dissertation analyzes the devotional songs, rituals, oral narratives, material culture, and textual records of the Sidi Sufi devotional tradition of Gujarat and Mumbai. The product of multidisciplinary methods and multi-sited field research in western India, the dissertation frames its study of this African-Indian Islamic devotional tradition with reference to an analytical category drawn from the study of premodern vernacular Hindi literature: multivocality. Multivocality refers to the multiple meanings a symbol accrues as it circulates among multireligious audiences. This term articulates an active process of reception and reconceptualization that locates the pulse of the interactive, performative, even competitive contexts in which symbols circulated; poetry and ritual practice as products of this dynamic environment were equally robust.

These cultural products defy the logic of bounded, monolithic identities, rendering descriptors like ‘syncretic’ or ‘liminal’ too static to convey their complexities. Multivocal literature such as the Hindavi Sufi romances and their associated ritual practices creatively interpose Persianate, Islamicate, Nath yogic, Tantric, and other Indic literary and devotional modes to produce transcendent poetry and transporting affective experiences. It is with this conceptual framework that the dissertation engages the oral literatures, material culture, and ritual practices of the Sidi Sufi devotional tradition as a multivocal product encoding a dynamic process of transmission, reception, and reconceptualization of symbols from diverse sites in eastern Africa and multireligious contexts in western India.

The dissertation finds the pulse of the Sidi Sufi devotional tradition in the veneration of the African Rifai Sufi saints Bava Gor, Mai Misra, and Bava Habash. These saints, entombed in

Gujarat where they lived in the fourteenth century, are venerated as the ancestor-saints or *kulpīr* (lineage saints) of the Sidi community. This observation positions the study of the Sidi Sufi devotional tradition as a window onto the history of the African diaspora in western India, traceable in textual sources to as early as the thirteenth century. The pioneering scholar of the Sidi devotional tradition, Helene Basu, maintains that eastern Africans of diverse ethnic origins who were dispersed in Gujarat in the nineteenth century established community around the veneration of fourteenth-century African Rifai Sufi saints as ‘ancestors.’ This dissertation culls the oral literature, veneratory rituals, and material culture of the Sidi Sufi devotional tradition for evidence of this process.

Given that investigation has already been conducted into the identity of Bava Gor, the dissertation seeks to shed light on the black African woman saint Mai Misra (“Mother [from] Egypt”) as a historical figure, whose “curly hair,” a recurring motif in Sidi devotional songs, is of immense significance to Sidi community identity and to tracing the process of the community’s formation. Each chapter of the dissertation engages with a different aspect of Mai Misra’s identity as preserved in textual sources, and as remembered and reconceptualized in oral narratives, devotional songs, and veneratory rituals.

Chapter One highlights Sidi women’s ritual re-presentation of Mai Misra as their *kulpīr* (lineage saint) during the *khicrī* ceremony as they reenact her historical role as a Sufi teacher and spiritual guide in fourteenth century Gujarat. The material medium of the *pyālā* (sacred drink) of Mai Misra and her companion saint, Itarewali Ma, involved in one iteration of the ceremony performed in Ahmedabad underscores these rituals as spaces for the affirmation of intertwined notions of natural and ritual kinship with Mai Misra construed as ‘Mother’ and *kulpīr* of the

community. These rituals likely played a formative role in the integration of Afrodescendant women into the Sidi community through the establishment of ritual relationships with Mai Misra.

Chapter Two pinpoints Mai Misra's characterization in terms of a Hindu goddess in her oral narrative and as a *kuldevī* (lineage goddess) in the context of a pre-wedding *khicrī* ceremony performed by Sidi brides in Ahmedabad. Chapter Three highlights Mai Misra's *kalas* (water-pot) as a multivocal symbol, itself evocative of the multivocality of the saint's representation in the Sidi Sufi devotional tradition. This symbolic embodiment of the saint mirrors the installation of a jar-form (*ghaṭasthāpanā*) of a Hindu goddess, underscoring the process by which the identity of 'Mai Misra' as a cultural symbol circulating among Afrodescendant women in multireligious contexts in Gujarat accrued multivalent layers as 'mother' saint and goddess.

Chapter Three reveals that the nuptial imagery and gynomorphic symbolism of Mai Misra's *kalas* rituals performed during the death-anniversary celebrations (*urs*) of the Sidi ancestor-saints position Mai Misra as a perpetual bride through whom bonds of natural kinship, interconnected with notions of ritual kinship, flow to unite the community of devotees. These rituals commemorate the women saints and unnamed women of the African diaspora in India responsible for the cohesion of a community formed from the dispersed, the destitute, and the kinless. Devotional song lyrics in Swahili preserve the lamentations of those separated from family and without children of their own. The Hindi lyrics of Sidi devotional songs invoke the saints Bava Gor and Mai Misra as sources of relief; the shrine of Mai Misra provides food for the hungry, water for the thirsty, healing for the disabled, and swinging cradles in the home of the childless. The use of the term *malungu* in one song suggests that Africans dispersed in Gujarat

may have conceptualized the African Sufis entombed there as ancestral spirits of the land (*malungu*) whose propitiation would heal their distress.

Chapter Four studies the organization of a Parsi Zoroastrian diasporan community of devotees around the veneration of Bava Gor and Mai Misra for insight into the process by which Africans did the same in nineteenth century Gujarat. Spirit mediumship plays a critical role in structuring devotional life at the Parsi memorial shrine of Bava Gor in Mumbai. A non-Sidi, Sunni Muslim medium of Bava Gor is the caretaker and ritual authority at the shrine; he along with Parsi and Sidi mediums of Mai Misra convey the “miracle healing assistance/presence” (*karāmat*) of the saints to the body of devotees. *Urs* rituals at this shrine creatively incorporate the medium of Mai Misra’s *kalas* to provide a focal point for devotion and an access point for her *barkat*, while the distribution of a material medium offered to the saints and imbued with their *barkat* transfers their blessings to devotees.

The medium of Bava Gor participates in the Sidi *pyālā* tradition of ritual initiation, establishing a bond of ritual kinship with the saint that culminates in ‘natural’ kinship with the saints and with the Sidi community. Devotional relationships with the saints at this shrine likewise produce gifts of children who perpetuate the community of believers as ‘children’ of the ‘Mother’ and ‘Father’ saints; the conceptualization of these ritual relationships in terms of ‘natural’ kinship with Sidi saints becomes pronounced in the case of two devotees. The organization of this diasporan devotional community in loosely conceived terms of natural and kinship with the saints mirrors the process by which African dispersed in nineteenth-century Gujarat established community based on notions of natural and ritual kinship with African Sufi saints entombed in Gujarat.

The dissertation's analysis of the veneration of Mai Misra in the Sidi Sufi devotional tradition contributes to South Asian Studies, Africana Studies, Islamic Studies, Indian Ocean Studies, Ethnomusicology, and Women's Studies. The study of the African diaspora in the Indian Ocean world is a steadily burgeoning field that requires language and area studies training, interdisciplinary methods, and multi-sited field research.⁴⁹⁶ Multiple avenues for future research can be drawn from the subject matter of this dissertation, such as the veneration of the Sidi ancestor-saints and the maintenance of their shrines by non-Sidi Muslims, Hindus, and Sidi communities beyond Gujarat and Mumbai. More investigation can be conducted into the veneration of Bava Gor's 'brother' saints, Mai Misra's 'sister' saints, and the Hindu goddesses 'Makhan Devi' (Shikotar Ma) and Khodiyar Ma in the Sidi tradition. Those interested in the Rifai Sufi lineage of Bava Gor might look deeper into the named representatives preceding and following him; others might study the role of the Rifai *pīr* as living spiritual guide of the Sidi community, or further investigate the Sidi *pyālā* initiation tradition. Song genres other than the *jīkar*, like *qawwālī*, *garbā*, and *pīṭhī* songs; oral histories of the saints and of more recent ancestors from Africa; and Swahili language attested in Hindi and Gujarati as spoken by Sidis today are all rich areas of inquiry.

It is important to parse the specificities of local histories and traditions within the Sidi community in India. The history of community formation among Sidis in Kacch may be quite different from that of Sidis in Surat; likewise, iterations of devotional rituals and cultural practices may vary. Additional research may be conducted into the internal diversity of the Sidi community in terms of its differentiation into twenty clans, and into the potential for historical

⁴⁹⁶ See the contribution of Ned Bertz in Basu's volume, *Journeys and Dwellings*.

continuity between the Habshi elites and contemporary communities, such as in Ahmedabad.

Branching out to the wider context of the African diaspora in South Asia, scholars might devote attention to the Shidis of Pakistan to generate a more expansive view of Sidi community formation, identity, and devotional practices.

Appendix



Figure 1. Sign at Memorial Shrine of Bava Gor in Dongri, Mumbai. Photographed by the author.



Figure 2. Sign at Original Shrine of Bava Gor in Ratanpur. Photographed by Sofia Péquignot.



Figure 3. Rifai Genealogy of Initiation Lineage of Bava Gor. Photographed by the author in Ratanpur.

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