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FORUM ARTICLE

Material modernities: Tracing Janbai's gendered mobilities across the Indian Ocean

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Abstract

This article uses techniques of microhistory to explore how Janbai, the third wife of Sir Tharia Topan, exerted economic, religious, and social influence in Indian Ocean networks. An Ismaili woman from a Gujarati trading family who lived in East Africa, Janbai lies outside of the social worlds that have dominated studies of Muslim modernity in South Asia, which centre on Sunni male professionals from North India. Janbai was illiterate and largely disconnected from textual debates about modernity. In fact, she was just the sort of woman that reformers castigated for their supposed attachment to religious superstitions and customary practices. In contrast, studying Janbai through an alternative frame of 'material modernity' reveals the complex biography of a women who neither conformed to the idealized 'new' woman, nor simply reproduced inherited practices. Instead, she navigated rapid social mobility, shifting geographies, and new technologies and institutions, particularly colonial law courts, in ways that echoed and departed from how women had long exercised agency. The article argues that scholars, by foregrounding textual archives and discursive analysis, have tended to reproduce the marginalization of women like Janbai. In contrast, looking to sources such as jewellery and photographs, and reading textual archives with greater attention to gendered patterns of consumption and investment, brings Janbai from the margins to the centre of our understanding of modernity. In addition to enriching our understanding of the lives of women, increased attention to materiality and visuality opens up critical new avenues for writing a more variegated history of Muslim modernity.

Keywords: Indian Ocean; gender; photography; Ismaili; colonial law

Introduction

In histories of Indian Ocean trade and politics, Tharia Topan (1823–1891) occupies a legendary status. Born in a small town in Kutch to a modest oil miller, he migrated to Zanzibar where he built a trading empire that spanned Africa, India, Europe, China, and the United States, eventually settling in Bombay. Tharia amassed a fortune valued

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at 40 lakh rupees and was knighted by Queen Victoria.[1] He was also a leading member of the Ismaili Khoja community and received the title of *varas* (*vazir*, or minister) from Imam Hasan Ali Shah, the first Aga Khan.[2] Speaking of Tharia's influence, American merchant and consul Edward D. Ropes, Jr. wrote that even the most 'insolent big headed' merchants 'tremble in T.Ts presence simply because they know that he could reduce them to paupers in a few months'.[3] In contrast, Tharia's third wife, Janbai, has been accorded a mere footnote in histories of her husband. Yet in contemporary sources Janbai occupied a much larger role. While Janbai and Tharia's son remembered his mother as a 'fanatic Ismaili', he also noted that she did not hesitate to chide the young Aga Khan for meddling in her family's affairs.[4] Ropes, who described Janbai as a strikingly beautiful woman, noted that Tharia relied heavily on her advice.[5] Tharia's attorney Rahimtulla Sayani described Janbai as her husband's business confidante and noted that she had significant independent trading interests.[6] Less generously, Tharia's *munim* (business manager) described his boss as 'much afraid' of Janbai.[7] Apparently, while others cowered before him, Tharia trembled before Janbai.

How and why has Janbai, clearly a formidable presence during her lifetime, received so little scholarly attention in histories of colonial South Asia, the Indian Ocean, or the Muslim world?[8] This article suggests that scholars in these fields have overlooked

[1]*Sala Mohommed Jafferbhoy and another* v. *Dame Janbai* (Bombay) [1897] United Kingdom Privy Council 17, p. 5, available at http://www.bailii.org/uk/cases/UKPC/1897/1897_17.html, [accessed 28 March 2024]. Hereafter cited as Judgment.

[2]Mumtaz Ali Sadik Ali, *101 Ismaili heroes*, Vol. 1 (Karachi: Islamic Book Publisher, 2003), p. 416, available online at http://www.ismaili.net/Source/mumtaz/Heroes1/hero099.html, [accessed 28 March 2024].

[3]Norman Robert Bennett (ed.), *The Zanzibar letters of Edward D. Ropes, Jr*., 1882–1892 (Boston: African Studies Center, Boston University, 1973), p. 27.

[4]Mohamed Hussein Tharia Topan, 'Biography of Sir Tharia Topan, Knight', manuscript, 1960–1963, in the possession of Farouk Topan, Book XI, p. 9; Book XIV, p. 14. Hereafter cited as Biography.

[5]*The Zanzibar letters of Edward D. Ropes, Jr*., pp. 13, 48.

[6]*Sala Mahomed Jafferbhoy and Alli Mahomed Jafferbhoy* v. *Dame Janbai*, Privy Council Cases with the Judgements, Record of Proceedings, p. 93. Hereafter cited as Record of Proceedings. Note: these are the printed records from the Privy Council, which include the evidence and testimony collected by the lower courts, along with their judgments. The copy that I consulted is held by the British Library, shelf mark PP.1316* (1897), Box 349G.

[7]Record of Proceedings, p. 97.

[8]A few scholars have recently mentioned Janbai in relationship to the dispute over Tharia Topan's estate. See Johan Mathew, who uses correspondence between Tharia and his sons, which is preserved in the legal records from the case, and that I shared with him while we were both conducting research on Indian-Zanzibari trade. Johan Mathew, *Margins of the market: Trafficking and capitalism across the Arabian Sea* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016). Janbai's legal battles are also discussed in Hollian Wint, 'Credible relations: Indian finance and East African society in the Indian Ocean, c. 1860–1940', PhD thesis, New York University, 2016. More broadly, there has been limited research on Muslim women who were part of South Asian trading diasporas. For East Africa, see Dana April Seidenberg, 'The forgotten pioneers; Asian women, 1895–1985', in *Mercantile adventurers: The world of East African Asians, 1750–1985* (New Delhi: New Age International (P) Limited, 1996), pp. 93–117. Seidenberg mostly emphasizes the domestic roles that Indian women played in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In her three-volume oral history collection, Cynthia Salvadori provides glimmers of a more diverse past, including women who drove tractors, shot lions, opened bus companies, ran shops, and worked as midwives and doctors. Overall, however, her interviewees narrated the Indian past in East Africa through an emphasis on male pioneers, suggesting how scholars and community members have both contributed to a male gendering of the history of diasporic trading communities. Cynthia Salvadori (comp.), *We came on dhows*

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Janbai, and other women like her, due to broader conceptual limits. Her biography contributes to a small but growing body of work that is exploring the crucial role that women played as agents of mobility in the Indian Ocean—unsettling a historiography that has foregrounded mobile men as powering transregional economies.[9] While adding to this literature, the article is even more concerned with how studying women like Janbai might reorient scholarship on Muslim modernities in South Asia, the theme of this Forum. Janbai's biography might at first seem ill-suited to this historiography, although she was by all accounts devout and did many modern things—getting her photograph taken, riding on steamships, and using colonial law courts. Her very marginality to the ways in which Muslim modernity is often conceptualized therefore reflects critical limitations in how the field limits its own vision, excluding many ways of being Muslim and modern in the process. While vast in scope, scholarship on Muslim South Asia during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is dominated by research on a core set of debates, often referred to as 'reform and revival', through which Muslims advanced competing conceptions of modernity and tradition.[10] This work has relied heavily on textual archives, particularly the voluminous body of Urdu printed works published from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards.[11] These archives have yielded rich insight into crucial trends, including the formation of new educational institutions, the rising emphasis on 'original' religious texts, the increasing importance of sectarian divides, and the influence of colonial secularism.[12] These issues were

(Nairobi: Paperchase Kenya, 1996), esp. vol 2, p. 134 and vol. 3, p. 113. I am grateful to Gaurav Desai for referring me to these two works.

[9]Women are largely side characters in many of the classical works on Indian Ocean economy. A new wave of scholarship, however, is profoundly shifting our understandings of gender, mobility, and economy in the region. My work has been particularly enriched by conversations with Nurfadzilah Yahaya and Hollian Wint, whose books and articles are cited below. For another recent critical intervention questioning the emphasis on men as agents of mobility, see Scott Reese, 'The myth of immobility: Women and travel in the British imperial Indian Ocean', *Journal of World History*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2022, pp. 301–320.

[10]While work on Islam in South Asia has focused on 'revival and reform', the wider field of Muslim South Asia has also produced a vast body of work on political movements, from Muslim peasant uprisings to the creation of Pakistan. For a wide-ranging survey of these movements, see Ayesha Jalal, *Self and sovereignty: Individual and community in South Asian Islam since 1850* (London: Routledge, 2002).

[11]For a seminal intervention on the centrality of print to Islamic reform and revival movements, see Francis Robinson, 'Technology and religious change: Islam and the impact of print', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 27, no. 1, 1993, pp. 229–251. Interest in print has also focused attention on the crucial role of written language in shaping sectarian identities during the colonial period. See Christopher Rolland King, *One language, two scripts: The Hindi movement in nineteenth century North India* (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1994). Additional research on print culture has explored the influential role of publishers and newspapers: Ulrike Stark, *An empire of books: The Naval Kishore Press and the diffusion of the printed word in colonial India* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2007); and Megan Eaton Robb, *Print and the Urdu public: Muslims, newspapers, and urban life in colonial India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

[12]Several landmark studies tracked shifting structures of scholarly and textual authority, establishing in particular the centrality of new educational institutions to these processes: David Lelyveld, *Aligarh's first generation: Muslim solidarity in British India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978); Barbara Daly Metcalf, *Islamic revival in British India: Deoband, 1860–1900* (1982; Reprint, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002); Francis Robinson, *The 'ulama of Farangi Mahall and Islamic culture in South Asia* (London: C. Hurst, 2001); and Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The ulama in contemporary Islam: Custodians of change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002). An extensive body of literature has built on these earlier studies. See, for example, Brannon D. Ingram, *Revival from below: The Deoband movement and global Islam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018). A large body of scholarship has subsequently traced how these trends contributed

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clearly of enormous importance to a subset of Muslims in South Asia, particularly a literate professional class of men, including religious scholars, teachers, and government bureaucrats. Yet as a number of scholars have begun to suggest, they were less important to many other Muslims, about whose lives and concerns the field has produced far more limited research.[13] Janbai was one such individual: an Ismaili woman from a trading family who moved between western India and eastern Africa, who spoke Kutchi, and did not read or write.

In the existing literature on Muslim modernity in South Asia, women like Janbai are either absent or appear as the objects of male reformers' projects. Some might even ask: was Janbai modern? And by some measures, the answer would be no, or only superficially so, if we associate being modern with embracing a self-conscious ideological project or discursive vocabulary, as studies of reform and Muslim political life often do. These ways of defining modernity have also shaped scholarship on Muslim women, which have largely mirrored the wider field in its focus on education and vernacular printed texts, including seminal studies such as Gail Minault's *Secluded Scholars* as well as more recent work.[14] This scholarship has significantly enriched our understanding of the critical role of gender as a nexus of reformist debate, echoing Lata Mani's formulation that women served as the key 'site' for debating competing understandings of tradition and modernity in colonial South Asia.[15] While women were often deliberately excluded from these exchanges, historians have noted that some women articulated contesting visions of Muslim modernity through their own writings.[16] Yet if we limit studies of Muslim modernity to these discursive expressions, most women (as well as the vast majority of men) drop out of our field of vision. At the turn of the century only

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to often highly contentious debates over interpretation and authority that pitted various Muslim sects against one another. See, for example, Usha Sanyal, *Devotional Islam and politics in British India: Ahmad Riza Khan Barelwi and his movement, 1870–1920* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Justin Jones, *Shi'a Islam in colonial India: Religion, community and sectarianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); and SherAli Tareen, *Defending Muhammad in modernity* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020). Recent scholarship has also focused on the impacts of secularism in spheres from language to law. See Kavita Datla, *The language of secular Islam: Urdu nationalism and colonial India* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013); and Julia Stephens, *Governing Islam: Law, empire, and secularism in modern South Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). The citations above represent only a fraction of the rich body of work on Islam in colonial South Asia, including some highly creative research that does not easily fit into these broader trends.

[13]Research on alternative geographies has been particularly crucial in broadening the range of themes within the scholarship on Islam in colonial South Asia. See, for example, Farina Mir, *The social space of language: Vernacular culture in British colonial Punjab* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010); and Nile Green, *Bombay Islam: The religious economy of the West Indian Ocean, 1840–1915* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[14]Gail Minault, *Secluded scholars: Women's education and Muslim social reform in colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999); Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, *Elusive lives: Gender, autobiography, and the self in Muslim South Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018); Shenila Khoja-Moolji, *Forging the ideal educated girl: The production of desirable subjects in Muslim South Asia* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018); Asiya Alam, *Women, Islam and familial intimacy in colonial South Asia* (Leiden: Brill, 2021); Megan Eaton Robb, 'Gendered nationalism and material texts: An Urdu women's periodical in 1960s Pakistan', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, vol. 45, no. 2, 2022, pp. 1–18.

[15]Lata Mani, *Contentious traditions: The debate on Sati in colonial India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

[16]See, in particular Siobhan Lambert-Hurley's and Asiya Alam's works cited above.

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about 1 per cent of Indian women were literate—approximately one-tenth of the number of men who could read and/or write, itself a small population.[17] Many women were thus unable (or uninterested) in accessing print forums, even when we account for 'literacy awareness', in which a broader group of people engaged with written material through practices such as reading texts aloud.[18] By all accounts Janbai was one such woman. It seems very unlikely that she would have described herself as modern, a vocabulary which her contemporaries were most likely to encounter in texts that she could not read. There is also little evidence that Janbai engaged even indirectly with texts on reform, politics, or education, although her male relations did, adopting the language of fanaticism to deride their mother's devotion, and Janbai did use legal documents, albeit mediated by lawyers and translators. Wary of the pen, she chose different weapons to fight her battles.

Yet treating Janbai as not modern because she demonstrates the persistence of 'traditional' religiosity, for example in her belief in intercession, or exercised age-old forms of women's agency, such as strategic gift giving, is problematic. It is the very idea that women like Janbai were stuck in the past that male reformers used to exert authority over them. When we focus our own studies of modernity on reformist, educational, and political projects alone, we can end up hamstrung by these reformist logics, even when trying to argue against them. Thus for subjects like Janbai there can be added pressure to show how their lives were fundamentally different from earlier generations—a break that shows that they *were not stuck in the past*. But by this measure Janbai might also fall short. While there were many aspects of her life that were new, there are also critical ways in which she extended long-standing patterns of women's agency in Indian Ocean societies. Women within Gujarati merchant families in particular had for centuries participated in family businesses and built spiritual and social capital through public giving, from endowing mosques to building standing wells.[19] Even well-established spheres of Muslim modernity in South Asia, for example the explosion of Urdu printing presses and publishers, built on centuries of intellectual activity, with fourteenth-century texts circulating in new printed forms. We thus also need scholarly frameworks for studying figures like Janbai that allow Muslim women to emerge in roles other than those of the new woman or traditional matriarch.

To open up such possibilities, the article focuses on how Janbai engaged in what I call material modernities, navigating between new and old forms of consumption, embodiment, and investment to exert authority, build social networks, and navigate space. The article also examines how she engaged with colonial law, both because of the extensive trails she left in legal archives and because, for Janbai, law was in many ways a material and spatial rather than discursive field. While others prepared a litany of

[17]E. A. Gait, *Census of India, 1911*, Vol. 1, Part I. Report (Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing, India, 1913), p. 292. The report did, however, note that the measure of literacy used was the ability to read and write, and that there were many Indians who were able to read a limited canon of religious texts, who would not be deemed literate by this measure.

[18]On India as 'literacy aware', see C.A. Bayly, *Empire and information: Intelligence gathering and social communication in India, 1780–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 39. On the limits of literacy and the significance of orality, see Green, *Bombay Islam*, p. 191.

[19]Samira Sheikh, *Forging a region: Sultans, traders, and pilgrims in Gujarat, 1200–1500* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 81.

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texts on her behalf, Janbai by her own account knew little of what was written in them. Even if these statements of ignorance were strategic, her interest in law was driven by the possibilities it offered for controlling financial assets. She was also keenly aware of the power of her embodied presence in, or absence from, the public space of the courtroom. Her engagements with law thus echo how she used new technologies, such as gifting a portrait photograph to the wife of an American sea captain, to exert influence and forge social relations across global geographies and variegated social spheres. Through these practices Janbai also engaged with key questions related to gendered Muslim modernity, from ritual celebration to veiling, through her actions rather than words. In fact, revisiting these core debates through the lens of material modernity allows a critical re-reading of discourses of reform, for example pointing to how male reformers' obsession with women's expenditure on customs was entangled with consumer capitalism. A focus on material modernities, and the archives in which they are foregrounded, thus offers exciting new possibilities for studying not just Muslim women.[20] By decentring Sunni-male-literary modernity, it shows how deeply variegated experiences of Muslim modernity were in South Asia and the Indian Ocean—for women, non-literate subjects, and other sects of Muslims, particularly those with ties to religious communities centred on the charismatic leadership of figures such as the Aga Khans.[21]

This article explores such alternative histories of Muslim modernity through techniques of biography and microhistory that use Janbai's life as a window into larger themes. In deploying this approach, I acknowledge the many ways in which Janbai was exceptional. Janbai was a remarkably forceful woman who rose from humble origins as a young girl peddling fruit to become the matriarch of a wealthy household. By all accounts, she was bold enough to make demands on even the most high-ranking men, hot tempered in the face of obstacles to her desires, but shrewd enough to pursue other avenues of influence. All these qualities contributed to the rich archives that exist to trace her life story—including a manuscript family biography, legal records, and objects now housed in a museum collection in Salem, Massachusetts. Janbai is admittedly somewhat unusual in the variety and depth of these archival legacies, but the fact that she has nonetheless received limited scholarly attention shows how many stories of Muslim women's lives remain to be told.[22]

[20]Histories of the built environment and spatial approaches also offer rich new possibilities for thinking about a more variegated approach to studying Muslim modernity. With respect to the Khoja diaspora, Taushif Kara's recent and forthcoming works are particularly creative in deploying this approach. Taushif Kara, 'Modernism and "the minority" in decolonising East Africa', in *Architectures of empire: Buildings, governance, and power in the age of globalisation, 1800–2000*, (eds) Edward Gillin and Harry J. Mance (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, forthcoming 2024). I am grateful to the author for sharing the manuscript chapter with me in advance of its publication, as well as his dissertation, which will be the basis of a forthcoming book.

[21]Green, *Bombay Islam*, pp. 155–178.

[22]I join a number of scholars who are exploring such alternative archives, including Megan Eaton Robb's recent article on Elizabeth Sharaf un-Nisa, which is especially rich in its use of a collection of family jewellery. Megan Eaton Robb, 'Becoming Elizabeth: The transformation of a Bihari Mughal into an English lady, 1758–1822', *The American Historical Review*, vol. 128, no. 1, 2023, pp. 144–176.

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Between three coasts

Janbai and Tharia moved along circuits of economic, political, and cultural connection that knitted together the coastal societies of western India, the Gulf, and eastern Africa (Figure 1). Both were from families that traced their origins to Kutch in Gujarat. Located on the northwestern coast of India, Gujarat has been closely connected to Indian Ocean circuits of people, goods, and ideas for millennia. Kutch was one of Gujarat's regional hubs, with the port of Mandvi serving as a trading centre and departure point for pilgrims travelling on hajj from as early as the sixteenth century. Starting in the eighteenth century, and accelerating in the nineteenth, the region and its merchants played a particularly crucial role in transregional networks. During this period Kutch was ruled by an Indian princely dynasty, the Raos of Kutch, who maintained a semi-autonomous government under the umbrella of British suzerainty.[23] This liminal position within British imperial geographies allowed merchants from Kutch to benefit from new imperial infrastructure, including using British courts, and to remain connected to older oceanic networks. They continued to transport their wares through the circuits of dhows (a sailing vessel common in the Indian Ocean) that plied the three coasts, and which offered cheaper and less closely regulated transport even after the advent of faster steam-based shipping.

This geography was held together not just by economic ties, but also spiritual circuits. Janbai and Tharia belonged to a caste of Khoja traders from Sindh and Gujarat, many of whom during the nineteenth century consolidated into a Muslim Ismaili sect under the leadership of the Aga Khans. According to some histories of the community, the Khojas converted to Islam in the fourteenth century under the influence of the charismatic Persian teacher Pir Sadardin and his grandson Pir Imam Shah. Scholarly work on the community, however, has emphasized Khojas' ties to wider syncretic regional traditions, sometimes known according to the Sanskrit term Satpanth, which defy modern religious epistemologies dividing Hindu and Islamic practices. While some Khojas may have cultivated loose ties to Persian-Ismaili circuits, they were thus also deeply rooted in more local religious networks. This spiritual geography shifted considerably in the nineteenth century with the arrival in India of Hasan Ali Shah. Shah was believed by his followers to be the forty-seventh imam, or rightful leader of the Muslim community, having inherited the position through a chain of descent linking him to Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad. While serving as governor of various provinces under authority delegated from the Qajar shahs, who also originally gave him the title of Aga Khan, Hasan Ali Shah would fall out with his patrons, organizing a local rebellion in western Iran. By the early 1840s Hasan Ali Shah was on the run, fleeing with a band of his followers to Afghanistan, where he provided military support and intelligence for the British Army during the first Anglo-Afghan War.

While this alliance would prove short lived, the Aga Khan would find other ways to use colonial circuits to his advantage. After a brief stay in Calcutta, he shifted to Bombay in 1848, where he used the colonial press and courts to consolidate his control

[23] Edward Simpson, *Muslim society and the western Indian Ocean: The seafarers of Kachchh* (Milton Park: Routledge, 2006); Chhaya Goswami, *Globalization before its time: The Gujarati merchants from Kachchh* (Gurgaon: Portfolio, Penguin, 2016).

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Figure 1. Map of key locations in Janbai's and Tharia's biographies. *Source:* The author.

over a community of Indian followers. He quickly identified the Khojas as a core constituency, given their historic ties to Persian *pirs* (spiritual guides) and their growing power in Bombay, where many had relocated to benefit from the city's rising importance as an industrial centre and pre-eminent Indian Ocean entrepôt. At the same time, however, from at least the 1830s some members of the Khoja community had been advocating for religious reforms that pushed more orthodox Sunni practices, and were therefore resistant to the leadership of the Aga Khan. The stakes in these fights were not just spiritual, but also economic, as the Aga Khan sought to claim the right to collect tithes from all of the Khoja *jamats* or local assemblies. The colonial courts began to intervene from the late 1840s, when the Bombay High Court heard two cases involving disputes over Khoja women's inheritance rights, which overlapped with the question of whether the community followed Quranic or customary practices. In 1866 the Bombay High Court issued a decision in what would become popularly known as the 'Aga Khan Case', declaring Hasan Ali Shah the official head of the Khoja community. The case, however, did little to resolve disputes within the community, with some

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Khojas breaking away and identifying as Sunni or Twelver Shias, and questions about how Khoja estates should be divided still unresolved.[24]

Tharia's and Janbai's lives closely tracked these intersecting economic, religious, and legal circuits. Tharia was born in 1823. According to family lore, as a teenager he first left Kutch after mistakenly being accused of theft and fleeing on a dhow bound for Muscat, where he established an export market for his father's oil-mill business. Tharia soon returned to Kutch, where he married his first wife and began a family, but this first sojourn whetted his appetite for further travel. Around the age of 20 he joined a group of merchants who were recruited by the Sultan of Zanzibar, via the Rao of Kutch, to expand trade links between western India and eastern Africa.[25] In the nineteenth century Zanzibar was governed by the Busaidi sultans, an Omani dynasty which split into two branches in 1856. The Zanzibari Busaidis were the heirs of Oman's sprawling east African empire, which at its height in the early nineteenth century stretched from Oman in the north down the coast to Madagascar. By the latter decades of the nineteenth century, these territories had shrunk to the islands of Zanzibar, over which the Busaidis retained control through strategic political alliances with the British empire, becoming a formal British protectorate in 1890.[26]

Having already worked with Omanis during his time in Muscat, Tharia's migration to Zanzibar represented a logical next step in an interregional network of political and trade connections. Tharia's father also had long-standing business connections to other Gujarati families trading in Zanzibar. These multigenerational ties are likely to have helped propel Tharia's rapid ascent into the island's economic elite.[27] After working as an apprentice to another Indian firm, he struck out on his own, trading in cotton cloth, spices, ivory, and slaves. Tharia also purchased the contract to 'farm' the customs revenue for Zanzibar in 1879, a position that put him at the epicentre of commercial and political power in the island.[28] While building his business in Zanzibar, Tharia also established a commercial office in Bombay, from which he expanded his trade links with China.[29] In addition to acting as the economic hub for the western Indian Ocean, Bombay was the centre of Britain's sprawling legal influence in the region, under which British subjects were exempt from the jurisdiction of 'native' courts and instead subject to consular jurisdiction. Starting in the 1860s the British consular court in Zanzibar acted as the primary legal venue for civil disputes between the island's mixed population of Swahili, Arab, and Indian merchants, and appeals from its decisions were

[24]Teena Purohit, *The Aga Khan case: Religion and identity in colonial India* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012); Green, *Bombay Islam*, pp. 155–178.

[25]Biography, Books I and II.

[26]Abdul Sheriff, *Slaves, spices and ivory in Zanzibar: Integration of an East African commercial empire into the world economy, 1770–1873* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1987); Seema Alavi, *Sovereigns of the sea: Omani ambition in the age of empire* (Gurugram: Penguin Random House India, 2023).

[27]Hollian Wint, '"From *desh* to *desh*": The family firm as trans-local household in the nineteenth-century western Indian Ocean', *Journal of World History*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2023, p. 198.

[28]Gijsbert Oonk, 'South Asians in East Africa (1880–1920) with a particular focus on Zanzibar: Toward a historical explanation of economic success of a middlemen minority', *African and Asian Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2006, p. 12; Fahad Ahmad Bishara, *A sea of debt: Law and economic life in the western Indian Ocean, 1780–1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 55.

[29]Sheriff, *Slaves, Spices and ivory*, p. 107.

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heard by the Bombay High Court.[30] Reflecting Bombay's centrality to the geographies in which they travelled, Tharia and Janbai relocated there in the 1880s, becoming neighbours of the Aga Khan, who also resided in the city.

Tracing Janbai through family, legal, and material archives

In comparison to Tharia, little information is available about Janbai's life before her marriage. Three collections of sources, however, provide surprisingly rich details about Janbai after she entered the Topan household: an unpublished biography of Tharia written by Janbai and Tharia's youngest son, Mohamed Hussein; material objects held in the collections of the Peabody Essex Museum (PEM) in Salem, Massachusetts; and the legal records of the inheritance dispute over Tharia's estate. The biography is in the private collection of Mohamed Hussein's son, Farouk Topan, a professor and writer of Swahili literature, who now resides in London. Farouk has periodically shared the memoir with scholars, who have used it to write about Tharia's life and the role of Indian (male) merchants in the economic, political, and social landscapes of the Indian Ocean during the heyday of British imperialism.[31] When Farouk shared the memoir with me, I was steeped in reading the records of Janbai's legal disputes with her stepsons, and after meeting to discuss the memoir, we both became convinced that it provided as much insight into Janbai as Tharia.[32] Mohamed Hussein was outwardly more interested in the 'wonderful and colourful' stories that he had heard about his father's life from family and friends, but he had limited personal memories of Tharia, who passed away when he was five.[33] In contrast, he had an intimate, if often tense, relationship with his mother, and provided many personal details about how she exercised power within her family and in wider circles. While rich in details, the typescript biography is written in somewhat clunky English, reflecting Mohamed Hussein's limited formal education. Its organization is also at times idiosyncratic, with multiple seemingly disjointed historical and ethnographic asides, features I found often invited creative readings of its contents. Alongside the biography, the legal records from the inheritance dispute also provide a treasure trove of information about the family's affairs, including personal correspondence and testimony from employees, business associates, medical practitioners, and relatives. Despite the richness of these two sources, however, they focus on Janbai's interactions with men—from male relations to legal professionals—but provide limited insight into Janbai's relations with other women. Fortunately, a couple of years after working with the biography and legal records, I stumbled across a reference to a bracelet and photograph which Janbai

[30]Shizuo Katakura, 'Introduction of British consular jurisdiction to Zanzibar: Indian merchants in a judicial transition', in *Re-searching transitions in Indian history*, (eds) Radhika Seshan and Shraddha Kumbhojkar (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 134–143; Bishara, *Sea of debt*, p. 154.

[31]For works citing the manuscript, see Frederick Cooper, *Plantation slavery on the East coast of Africa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977); M. Reda Bhacker, *Trade and empire in Muscat and Zanzibar: The roots of British domination* (London: Routledge, 1994); Margaret Frenz, 'Doing well but also doing good? East African Indian merchants and their charitable work, c. 1850–1920', in *Knowledge and the Indian Ocean: Intangible networks of western India and beyond*, (ed.) Sara Keller (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 173–188.

[32]Farouk Topan, conversation with author, 23 June 2015.

[33]Biography, 'First attempt to write biography'.

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gifted to the wife of an American sea captain, now part of the PEM's collections. Read in tandem, these three archives provide a multifaceted, if still fragmentary, view of Janbai's life.

Janbai first appears in these archives as a young woman peddling her wares on a street outside the Topan family home. According to family lore, as recorded in Mohamed Hussein's biography, soon after the death of Tharia's second wife in 1863, Tharia's elder sons from his first marriage, who were approximately 20 and 12 at the time, initiated the search for a new bride for their father.[34] Although Tharia initially suggested the possibility of marrying a childless widow, his sons Musa and Jaffer convinced him to marry Janbai, then 12, after Musa observed her selling fruit for her father's business. While also a Khoja, as the youngest daughter of a small business owner, Janbai was a surprising choice given the families' disparate economic circumstances. Musa and Jaffer, however, believed that her family's relative poverty was an advantage. They assumed that after marrying into a wealthy family, Janbai would feel 'entire satisfaction' and 'not bring quarrel, trouble and unhappiness…as many step mother brings'. Later the brothers would lament that 'this illiterate girl began to rise to her changed status' and began to interfere 'in each and every work and act of her husband'.[35]

A little over a decade into their marriage, Janbai had given birth to three healthy daughters, Jainab, Fatmabai, and Khadija, but had lost four infant sons.[36] Desperate for male progeny and, in the words of her son, 'a fanatic Ismaili', Janbai convinced Tharia to make a pilgrimage to visit the Aga Khan in India in 1875. During their visit, the Aga Khan 'closed his eyes and waited in that condition for [a] couple of minutes', after which he reassured the couple that Janbai would give birth to three healthy sons. In exchange, the Aga Khan instructed Janbai and Tharia to take the boys on a pilgrimage to Karbala and to shave their heads as an act of thanksgiving. Soon after returning to Zanzibar, Janbai gave birth to her first son, Mohamed Medi, followed by another son, Mohamed Ali, four years later. After the birth of their second son in 1881, Tharia and Janbai, along with their young sons, travelled to Mecca and Karbala to fulfil their vow. (Mohamed Hussein, who was the couple's third and youngest son, was born in 1886.) Echoing wider schisms within the Khoja community, Mohamed Hussein, in recounting these events in the biography, cast them as the product of his mother's 'fanatic' religious devotion, which he associated with her lack of education. In contrast, Mohamed Hussein held up Tharia as a rational and doctrinally correct Muslim, who believed that the Aga Khan was the 'rightful owner of the throne of Imamat (spiritual leadership) and not beyond that'. He also noted that, as the father of two adult sons, Tharia was less concerned than his third wife about producing additional male progeny.[37]

In this anecdote Janbai navigated two intersecting spheres of male authority—the religious hierarchies of the Ismaili community and the patriarchal structures of her

[34]Tharia had a daughter and two sons from his first marriage, but no children from his second wife.

[35]Biography, Book VI, pp. 13–14.

[36]The biography does not provide dates for these births, but in Tharia's will, which was dated January 1886, he listed the ages of his living children as follows: Musa (43); Nanbai (37); Jafar (35); Fatma (19); Khadija (16); Mohamed Medi (10); Mohamed Ali (6); and Beuba (1). Mohamed Hussein was born in February 1886. Janbai and Tharia's eldest daughter, Jainab, passed away in 1885.

[37]Biography, Book X, pp. 10–12; Book XI, p. 9.

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family—to assert her own ambitions. Janbai's ability to play different patriarchies against one another to advance her own ends increased as she aged and gave birth to additional children. According to Mohamed Hussein, by the time Janbai was in her thirties, she had assumed the rank of the 'highest commanding officer or her super ladyship' within the Topan household, dominating her increasingly elderly husband. While Mohamed Hussein may have somewhat overstated Janbai's relative power in the family, she does seem to have won crucial victories as the couple negotiated different ideas about how to best build their household's power. In addition to their different religious practices, Janbai and Tharia also diverged in their approaches to managing their increasing wealth, with Janbai pushing the family towards more conspicuous consumption, including household adornments and gifts, while Tharia preferred business investments and colonially sanctioned forms of philanthropy, including donating funds for the construction of a hospital in Zanzibar to celebrate Queen Victoria's Jubilee.[38]

Janbai's ability to assert her approach was particularly apparent in the arrangements that the couple made for the marriage of two of their daughters, Fatma and Khadija, in 1882. While their eldest daughter Jainab had been married in a simple ceremony several years earlier, the family's circumstances, and Janbai's growing influence, led to far more elaborate preparations for the marriages of their younger daughters. This time around it was Janbai, rather than Tharia, who selected the grooms, despite objections from some members of the community to one of the matches. Janbai also gained the upper hand in managing the expenses for the wedding; the family ordered elaborate jewellery and embroidered clothing from Bombay and arranged for a famous dancer to travel from Egypt to entertain the guests. With plans for festivities lasting nearly three weeks, Janbai was determined that the Sultan of Zanzibar should attend the wedding. When Tharia visited the sultan to invite him, however, the sultan explained that he did not attend any marriages, even of his own relations, to spare his subjects the extra expense of his attendance. Tharia accepted the sultan's explanation. Janbai did not. She promptly visited the palace herself and leveraged the ruler's paternal instincts to get her way. She asked the sultan whose daughters Fatma and Khadija were, to which he replied 'my daughters'. She then asked how the marriage could take place without the presence of their 'father'. According to Mohamed Hussein's biography, 'Sayyid Bargash knew very well Janbai was not a[n] easy nut to crack like Tharia' and promptly agreed to attend.[39]

To underline the spectacle of the sultan's attendance, on the night of the wedding the royal guests were led along carpets laid from the palace to the family's residence. After welcoming the sultan and his family into their home, Tharia and Janbai presented him with a specially carved wooden chair covered with a thin layer of silver. The Topans commissioned the chair from a workshop of Ceylonese craftsmen who had recently set up shop in Zanzibar to meet the island's growing demand for luxury furnishings. Two large trays of silver *riyal* coins were also presented to the sultan on the brides' behalf. In return the sultan and his wife gave the brides-to-be double-stranded pearl necklaces and diamond rings set with ruby and emerald accents. While in the biography

[38]Ibid., Book XII, p. 4.

[39]Ibid., Book XII, pp. 4–9.

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Mohamed Hussein described the details of the wedding as one more example of his mother's domineering personality and her profligate tastes, Janbai most likely saw the lavish celebrations as an investment. The wedding took place approximately three years after Tharia secured the contract to farm the customs revenue from the sultan; his attendance therefore broadcast the family's growing political and economic influence—encouraging new alliances and warning those who might consider getting in Tharia's, or Janbai's, way. At a minimum, the celebrations left a lasting impression. As Mohamed Hussein himself acknowledged, locals who observed the wedding continued to tell stories about the celebrations even decades later.[40]

Despite the rich details about Janbai that emerge from the biography and legal records, the view they provide is of Janbai moving through worlds dominated by men—from patriarchal familial structures to religious patronage to courtly politics. Yet Janbai also built influence through her relations with women. The biography mentions her visits to the homes of elite Indian and Arab women in Zanzibar, and her management of a large household of female slaves, but lacks the vivid anecdotes that it provides in relation to Janbai's interactions with men. The objects in the PEM collection, however, provide an alternate glimpse into how Janbai cultivated networks of women associates. The objects—a gold bracelet and photograph of Janbai—were gifted to the museum by Minnie Batchelder, the daughter of Captain Nathan A. Batchelder and his wife Caroline (née Parbuck). Caroline visited Zanzibar in the early 1880s, travelling on board the *Taria Topan*, which the American merchant Captain John Bertram named in honour of Tharia.[41] The family lore that must have accompanied these objects seems to have been lost when they were gifted to the museum, which only possesses a note that they were given to Caroline by Janbai. While Nathan and Caroline had six children, only one of their sons had children, who were born in New Zealand, far away from their aunt Minnie, who lived with her other spinster sisters in Salem and taught music until her death in 1936.[42] One can imagine though that Minnie treasured the bracelet, perhaps reminding her of her own adventurous origins—born at sea in 1860 during another of her parents' oceanic voyages. Perhaps Janbai and Caroline bonded over their mutual experience caring for young infants while on extended sea journeys? We will probably never know, but the fact that Minnie gifted Janbai's photograph to the museum when the museum purchased the bracelet from her in 1932 suggests that the Batchelder women strongly associated it with Janbai's memory. The bracelet itself also conveys its own story—its diminutive size, measuring just two-and-half inches across, creates a striking juxtaposition against the visual weight of its Gujarati-style metal work (Figure 2).

Its presence in the collection of the PEM, as well in a catalogue of noteworthy jewellery in American museum collections, testified to the enduring legacies of Janbai's

[40]Ibid.

[41]George Granville Putnam, *Salem vessels and their voyages* (Salem, MA: The Essex Institute, 1924), pp. 111–112. On Tharia's relationships with Salem merchants, see Joshua Sidney Chamberlin Morrison, 'Cut from the same cloth: Salem, Zanzibar, and the consolidation of the Indo-Atlantic world, 1790–1875', PhD thesis, University of Virginia, 2021, pp. 205–207.

[42]Frederick Clifton Pierce, *Batchelder, Batcheller genealogy* (Chicago: W. B. Conkey Company, 1898), p. 304; US Census of 1920 and 1930.

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Figure 2. Gold bracelet, *circa* nineteenth century, artist in Zanzibar, 2 1/2 x 2 3/4 in. (6.35 x 6.99 cm), museum purchase, 1932. *Source:* Courtesy of the Peabody Essex Museum, Object E22365.A.

good taste.[43] As discussed later in the article, the photograph of Janbai (Figure 3), when viewed in tandem with other contemporary photographs of women from Zanzibar, proves even more suggestive of Janbai's modes of exerting her presence.

A few years after Janbai and Caroline most likely met in Zanzibar, Tharia and Janbai decided to shift their household to Bombay, travelling with their four daughters and two sons. Their youngest daughter Beuba was a mere infant at the time—the second time that Janbai undertook an oceanic journey soon after giving birth.[44] The move

[43]I am indebted to Susan Bean, the retired curator of South Asian art at the PEM, for sharing some of her impressions of the bracelet with me. Email correspondence with the author, 22 January 2020. I first encountered the bracelet in Martha Gandy Fales, *Jewelry in America, 1600–1900* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Antique Collectors' Club, 1995), p. 351.

[44]The biography does not mention Beuba's birth, but Tharia listed her age as one and a quarter in his will (dated January 1886), suggesting she was born before the family travelled to Bombay in 1885.

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Figure 3. Photograph of Janbai, gift of Minnie Batchelder to PEM, 1932. *Source:* Courtesy of the Peabody Essex Museum, Image TR2016.13.

seems to initially have been intended as a temporary one, at least for Janbai; she left stores of jewellery locked in the family home in Zanzibar, and the couple also transferred the deed for their home in Zanzibar into her name. Tragically, the couple's eldest

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daughter Jainab died en route, and the family were forced to bury her in Aden. Tharia's eldest son Musa was already in Bombay, although he would later return to Africa to join his brother Jaffer in tending to the family's business interests in their father's absence. In Bombay the Topans purchased a large home a few houses away from the residence of the Aga Khan.[45] Tharia also engaged the services of Rahimtulla Mahomed Sayani, one of the top lawyers in Bombay and later president of the Indian National Congress, to draft his will, which Tharia signed in January of 1886.

Over the next several years, Janbai, dissatisfied with the provisions that Tharia had made for her and her children in his original will, waged a persistent campaign to increase their share. She was perhaps fearful that Tharia's elder sons from his first marriage, who clearly did not approve of the influence that she exercised in the household, would sideline her after Tharia's death. Their absence from the family household in Bombay allowed her to exert additional influence. In discussions over the division of his assets, Tharia seems to have been torn between what he understood to be his obligations to Janbai under religious law versus family custom. In his original will he noted that, 'According to the Mahomedan law my wife Bai Janbai should have an eighth share…But I have not done so. The reason thereof is that there is no such custom prevailing in my house (family).' While denying Janbai a specific fraction of the estate, he bequeathed her possession of the family's home in Zanzibar and the income from a group of rented properties. The original will specified that Janbai could not sell or mortgage either.[46] Between 1886 and 1891, however, Tharia added five additional codicils to his will increasing the bequests to Janbai and her children and removing the limits on Janbai's control over the property that she would inherit as his widow.

After Tharia's death in 1891, his elder sons challenged the validity of these codicils, claiming that Janbai had forced Tharia to consent to them. This battle quickly moved into the colonial courts, where Musa and Jaffer submitted personal correspondence in which Tharia purportedly complained of Janbai's oppressive behaviour. As a matter of law, the case revolved around the question of whether Tharia acted as a 'free agent' when making various provisions for Janbai and her children or whether she had extracted these concessions through 'undue influence'. At a larger level, the case staged a public debate about the appropriate balance of power within the Topans' marriage as the judges who heard the case pondered whether a man of Tharia's standing was at the mercy of his wife. In 1893 the lower court rejected the validity of the codicils. The judge was clearly troubled by what he viewed as an inversion of gender roles within the Topan household, describing Tharia's bequests to Janbai as 'unbusinesslike' and 'alarming'.[47] In contrast the judges who heard the case on appeal, first in the Bombay High Court and subsequently in the Privy Council, found the logic of the lower-court decision uncompelling. For them, Tharia's status as 'a good man of business' created a strong presumption that he acted as a free agent.[48] As one of the judges explained: 'the tester when importuned by his wife was capable of reasoning calmly with her and explaining his intentions to her and had no idea of being led

[45]Biography, Book XIII, pp. 5–7.
[46]Record of Proceedings, pp. 24–25.
[47]Ibid., p. 88.
[48]Ibid., p. 236.

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by her wishes on the matter of the disposition of his property'.[49] In contrast, with respect to his intimate dealings with Janbai, the judges emphasized that his religion and race made him susceptible to bursts of passion. They could thus dismiss complaints that Tharia wrote to his elder sons about Janbai's oppressions, 'as momentary expression, in Mahomedan fashion of his annoyance…'.[50] This split reading of Tharia—as a rational (racially unmarked) businessman and as an overreactive (Muslim) husband—allowed the judges to uphold the will while censuring Tharia for 'exaggerated and unjust complaints against his wife'.[51]

For Janbai, this outcome was a substantial victory, with the courts upholding many, although not all, of the additional bequests Tharia made on her behalf. It certainly seems to have encouraged her to pursue other fights via the colonial courts, including suing Tharia's *munim* (business manager or accountant) and the firm's cashier for criminal breach of trust the following year. Janbai, however, lost this case, and the costs of her ongoing litigation, including additional cases she brought against her own sons, were a mounting strain on the family's finances.[52] These battles also took an emotional toll on the family, as Mohamed Hussein's complex relationship to his mother makes clear. Yet while her youngest son clearly felt that Janbai's litigation hurt her family, Janbai may have held a different view; at a minimum throughout these extended legal battles she was able to retain control over key assets even as the family's overall financial position suffered. In fact, at the time of Janbai's death in 1934, Mohamed Hussein was largely living off his mother's property, including the Topan home in Zanzibar and rents from a large plot of land in Zanzibar, housing over a thousand tenants.[53] Mohamed Hussein also engaged in a bevy of his own lawsuits, leading his son Farouk to remember his father as frequenting the courts on an almost daily basis—suggesting that while colonial courts may have consumed much of the family's financial assets they did not exhaust their appetite for further litigation.[54]

Material modernities: Janbai through objects and assets

Having pieced together the arc of Janbai's life from three key archives, the following three sections explore in more depth particular themes that emerge, tracing their relevance from Janbai's life into larger historiographies. This first section connects struggles within the Topan household to larger questions about the role of material practices and financial flows in contemporary religious movements. Tharia, in letters to his elder sons, later submitted as evidence in the inheritance case, claimed that he

[49]Ibid., p. 241.

[50]Ibid., p. 228.

[51]Judgment, p. 7. For a similar pattern of splitting legal subjects into different frames for judging 'economic' and 'domestic' relations, see Julia Stephens, *Governing Islam: Law, empire, and secularism in South Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), esp. pp. 57–69. The judgment also fits a pattern of 'chivalric imperialism', which Mitra Sharafi has shown was common in colonial judgments: Mitra Sharafi, 'The semi-autonomous judge in colonial India: Chivalric imperialism meets Anglo-Islamic dower and divorce law', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 46, no. 1, 2009, pp. 57–81.

[52]'Lady Janbai and her mehtas', *The Times of India*, 17 February 1898, p. 3; 'Lady Janbai's case', *The Times of India*, 16 June 1898, p. 3; Biography, Book XIV, p. 10.

[53]Biography, Book XVII, pp. 6–8.

[54]Farouk Topan, conversation with author, 23 June 2015.

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was so frugal that he only changed his clothing every two or three days, while his wife spent lavishly. Tharia himself understood these differences through a gendered frame, complaining: 'Women do not at all know how to preserve wealth.'[55] In the biography Mohamed Hussein repeatedly associated Janbai's profligate tastes with her ignorance and illiteracy, which he also blamed for her 'fanatic' devotion to the Aga Khan. The men in the Topan household thus cast Janbai's spending as evidence of her lack of modern habits, both economic and religious. In fact, their critique of Janbai feels distinctly Weberian in its association of frugality and capital accumulation with rational religious belief. Yet Janbai's spending habits were far from indiscriminate; a critical reading of the biography suggests that she spent money to bolster the family's social, political, and spiritual position through gifts, clothing, and jewellery for her household, ceremonial occasions, and pilgrimages. Many of these expenditures were rooted in longer traditions of women's roles in organizing religious and family celebrations and gift giving, but they were simultaneously shaped by the explosion of consumer goods circulating through coastal societies in western India and the Swahili coast. Seeing Janbai's consumption as marshalling both new and old practices to navigate rapidly shifting social worlds situates them solidly within larger patterns of continuity and change in Muslim modernity. It also suggests that questions of 'frugality', a prevalent but little-studied theme in Islamic reformist discourse, deserve greater attention, particularly as a gendered discourse that was often associated with reformist critiques of women's supposed irrational attachment to custom.[56] Looking to the broader Khoja community suggests that male attacks on women's superstition were often linked to efforts to curtail their control over material assets, from charitable gifts to inherited wealth. Studying Janbai through a focus on objects and assets therefore suggests that greater attention to the material aspects of religious reform opens up new avenues to understanding women's relationship to these movements.

While Mohamed Hussein, like his father and elder brothers, was often critical of his mother's expenditures, the biography nonetheless provides evidence of the crucial role that Janbai played in securing the family's place in elite Zanzibari society. In a seeming aside from his recounting of his father's life, Mohamed Hussein included a lengthy description, based on information from Janbai, about the customs that elite Arab and Indian women observed when visiting each other's homes. He described in precise detail the material arrangements required for such visits, from the types of lanterns that should be carried by the procession of visiting women to the numbers of salty and sweet dishes that should be served by the hosts. Mohamed Hussein also noted that the family's female slaves were expected to participate in these visits, and often socialized on the roof terrace, where they could be viewed by others, while the other women from the two households gathered inside.[57] The description in the biography is

[55]Letters from Sir Tharia Topan to Moosabhai and Jafferbhai, Translations from Cutchi Gujerati, Record of Proceedings, pp. 186–190.

[56]Barbara D. Metcalf, 'Weber and Islamic reform', in *Max Weber and Islam*, (eds) Toby E. Huff and Wolfgang Schluchter (New York: Routledge, 2019), pp. 219–220. Calls for frugality remain a common feature of Islamic reform movements today, both in South Asia and other regions. See, for example, Pnina Werbner, 'Reform Sufism in South Asia', *Islamic Reform in South Asia*, (eds) Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 54; Adeline Masquelier, *Women and Islamic revival in a West African town* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

[57]Biography, Book VIII, pp. 12–15.

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evocative of scholarly accounts of the role that household slaves played in Swahili society as public signifiers of the status of their owners. When entering a new household, slaves were expected to adopt new garments and jewellery chosen by their owners. As Jeremy Prestholdt has argued, the act of dressing slaves was a 'graphic scene of domination', through which masters and mistresses exerted their control over the bodies and selves of the enslaved.[58] Janbai actively participated in these processes, purchasing elaborate jewellery for the family's female slaves.[59] Contemporary sources support Janbai's investment in such visible signs of wealth. In her famous memoir of court life, the Zanzibari princess Sayyida Salme, later Emily Ruete, emphasized the particular importance of wearing and exchanging jewellery as a marker of status in Zanzibar. According to her, the sultan kept stores of jewellery for this express purpose, and even beggar women in Zanzibar would not appear in public unadorned.[60] Herself of humble origins, Janbai seems to have studied with particular care how others marked their elite status and stubbornly insisted that her family also conduct themselves accordingly. Janbai also clearly understood jewellery as a gendered store of wealth; one of the first concessions that she extracted from Tharia concerning the division of assets after his death was written clarification that the jewellery that the family had left behind in Zanzibar belonged to her.[61]

In the biography Mohamed Hussein's criticism of his mother's profligate tastes dovetailed with his condemnation of her 'fanatic' devotion—overlapping qualities of excess that he blamed on her lack of education. Yet, as Janbai's wedding preparations for her daughters suggest, ceremonial occasions were one of the most critical moments in which families engaged in conspicuous consumption, often in ways that were entangled with struggles over the proper mode of performing religious obligations. In addition to the wedding, Janbai also clashed with her stepsons over the money she spent on Tharia's funeral, including customary gifts to female members of the Khoja community—obligations which Tharia had specifically mentioned in his will, but on which his sons felt that Janbai had overspent.[62] While Janbai certainly had less formal education than her male relations (or her daughters), such differences of opinion were also rooted in gendered struggles for control over material assets.

Like his condemnation of her spending habits, Mohamed Hussein was also troubled by the way in which Janbai used her relationship to the Aga Khan and Ismaili community to bypass the authority of her male relations. For example, he described how, at the height of her efforts to convince Tharia to amend his will, she threatened to move into the Ismaili-Khoja *jamat khana* (meeting house) and beg for a living, leveraging her ability to bring shame on the family and to call on the support of her religious networks.[63]

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[58]Jeremy Prestholdt, *Domesticating the world: African consumerism and the genealogies of globalization* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2008), p. 123.

[59]Biography, Part II, Chapter 1, p. 11.

[60]Emily Ruete, *Memoirs of an Arabian Princess: An Autobiography* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1888), p. 11.

[61]Record of Proceedings, pp. 39–40.

[62]Translation of a Gujarati will of Sir Tharia Topan, Record of Proceedings, p. 20; Civil Side Case No. 275 of 1893: Salehmahomed Jafferbhoy Tharia v. Lady Janbai, National Archives of Zanzibar (hereafter ZNA), File HC7/432.

[63]Biography, Book XIII, p. 9.

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Debates within the Topan family over how to spend their growing wealth, and their entanglement with questions of ethics and religion, were far from unique to their household. For example, the esteemed Deobandi scholar Ashraf Ali Thanawi in his early-twentieth century women's moral guide, *Bihishti Zewar*, warned women against squandering their family's wealth in performing customs that violated the sharia. While Thanawi associated these practices with a range of different life-cycle events, he directed his greatest indignation against weddings—sarcastically declaring that they 'should not be called "bliss" (*shadi*) but "ravage" (*barbadi*)!' Thanawi blamed this waste on women's desire to show 'off her paraphernalia of pride', and seemed particularly concerned that women often spent money on such occasions without their husbands' permission. He remarked with horror that a woman 'just summons a cloth merchant on her own and shops on credit or takes a loan with interest'.[64] Scholars have noted that many of the customs that Thanawi condemned had deep roots in local Indian traditions, which had traditionally been managed by women.[65] Yet reformist campaigns against such expenses, which were also common among contemporary Hindu reform movements, should also be read in the context of shifting global cultures of domesticity and consumption. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries many regions of the Indian Ocean saw a massive influx of consumer goods, including foreign textiles, umbrellas, mirrors, pocket watches, sewing machines, china teacups, and kerosene lamps. This expansion of consumer markets was particularly pronounced in the Swahili coast and western India—the regions through which the Topans circulated.[66] As David Arnold has argued, weddings—the targets of Thanawi's particular ire—were deeply imbricated with the 'increasing acquisitiveness of the rising middle class', with bicycles and sewing machines becoming popular dowry gifts.[67] Meanwhile, the global spread of 'separate-sphere' ideology in the nineteenth century created new associations between domestic and ceremonial spending and women's roles as household managers and spiritual beings. Yet, as Abigail McGowan has shown in her work on consumption in western India, while such ideas were increasingly influential in shaping gender roles in middle-class households, men often retained considerable control over family expenditures.[68] Consumption thus emerged as a site of contest over men's and women's respective duties and powers. Reformist calls for 'frugality', while outwardly directed against 'customs', should therefore also be read as a reaction

[64]Barbara Daly Metcalf, *Perfecting women: Maulana Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi's Bihishti Zewar. A partial translation with commentary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 108, 111, 115.

[65]Ibid., p. 85.

[66]Abigail McGowan, 'An all-consuming subject? Women and consumption in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century western India', *Journal of Women's History*, vol. 18, no. 4, 2006, pp. 31–54; Abigail McGowan, 'The materials of home: Studying domesticity in late colonial India', *The American Historical Review*, vol. 124, no. 4, 2019, pp. 1302–1315; Prestholdt, *Domesticating the world*; Prita Meier, 'Unmoored: On oceanic objects in coastal eastern Africa, 1700–1900', Special issue: 'The Indian Ocean as aesthetic space', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, vol. 36, no. 3, 2017, pp. 355–367; Douglas Haynes, Abigail McGowan, Tirthankar Roy and Haruka Yanagisawa (eds), *Towards a history of consumption in South Asia* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[67]David Arnold, *Everyday technology: Machines and the making of India's modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), p. 81.

[68]McGowan, 'An all-consuming subject?', p. 39.

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to shifting patterns of consumption, and women's contested role in navigating these changes.

Turning back to Janbai, this frame helps us recast her choices about how to dress her family, adorn her home, and entertain her guests as expressions of material modernity, rather than as vestiges of ignorance or timeless tradition, as her male relations asserted to bolster their own competing notions of piety and economy. In these realms Janbai navigated experiences we associate with modernity—from new technologies to globalizing markets—differently, but just as intensely, as her husband and sons did in their trade and political activities. In fact, her pursuit of different avenues of influence, including gift giving to business and political associates, suggests that the family may have benefitted from the couple's different modes of engagement. The gifts that Janbai gave to Caroline and to the sultan were both essential to forging connections, and increasingly vulnerable to being labelled by Western businesses and colonial governments as bribes.[69] The Topans may therefore have benefitted from Tharia engaging in colonially sanctioned philanthropy while Janbai managed more suspect, but equally critical, gift exchanges.

The gendered struggles over material assets that played out in the Topan household also mirrored wider gender dynamics within the Khoja community, which have received surprisingly little scholarly attention despite significant research on the religious schisms that divided the community in the nineteenth century. A number of important studies have examined how debates about Khoja religious identity were deeply shaped by their encounters with the colonial courts, most notably during a landmark case in 1866 in which the Bombay High Court declared that the Aga Khan was the spiritual head of the Khoja community, effectively excluding non-Ismaili Khojas from communal resources and religious spaces.[70] Scholars have generally framed these conflicts as disputes between the Aga Khan and elite Khoja men, despite the centrality of women's inheritance rights to many of the legal cases.

Reading Janbai's story in tandem with other contemporary sources, however, suggests that Khoja women were not merely 'sites' on which male reformers contested different meanings of tradition and modernity. While men were more likely to author pamphlets and testify in court, Khoja women found other ways to participate in these struggles. Starting in the 1840s Khojas advanced competing claims about how their family estates should be divided. Colonial judges and Khoja litigants disputed whether their estates should be divided according to Quranic principles, by which daughters and widows received fixed shares; according to Hindu practices in which widows received only a lifetime interest; or according to customs unique to the Khoja community, or even particular families within the community.[71] Efforts to settle these

[69]Nancy Um, *Shipped but not sold: Material culture and the social protocols of trade during Yemen's age of coffee* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017), especially Chapters 2 and 3.

[70]Purohit, *Aga Khan case*; Michel Boivin, 'The Isma 'ili–Isna 'Ashari divide among the Khojas: Exploring forgotten judicial data from Karachi', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. 24, no. 3, 2014, pp. 381–396; Soumen Mukherjee, *Ismailism and Islam in modern South Asia: Community and identity in the age of religious internationals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), see esp. Chapter 1, 'Khoja Ismailis and legal polemics', pp. 30–52.

[71]Rachel Sturman, *The government of social life in colonial India; Liberalism, religious law, and women's rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 199–208.

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questions in court remained elusive, and the government convened a commission in 1878 to codify the community's personal laws. The commission culminated in the circulation of a draft Khoja Succession Bill to local officials and (male) members of the Khoja community in different parts of India, Zanzibar, and the Arabian Peninsula. These surveys generated conflicting responses, and ultimately the government abandoned the bill. One of the key areas of dispute was whether women should enjoy 'absolute' or 'limited' control over inherited assets, with the Aga Khan favouring the former while influential Khoja men in Bombay advocated for the latter. For example, Ahmedbhoy Habibbhoy, who owned several textile mills and later served as the president of the Bank of Bombay, joined other prominent Khoja merchants in warning that Khoja women were 'illiterate, prone to superstition and liable to be very easily imposed upon'. He therefore cautioned that if given control over property, women 'would waste it away', a phrasing which was evocative of Tharia's complaints about Janbai.[72] Colonial officials were sympathetic to the concerns of men like Habibbhoy. Reinforcing the position of the Bombay Khoja merchants, a judge from the small causes court recommended to the government that, 'having regard to the superstitious character of females generally and the great influence which the Agha exercised over the females of his sect…it would lead to gifts being made to him by devout females to the detriment of the members of the family'.[73] Faced with seemingly irresolvable differences of opinion within the community, colonial officials retreated, leaving questions of Khoja inheritance to be further litigated in courts, communal forums, and households.

While few Khoja women appear to have been directly consulted concerning the Khoja Succession Bill, their involvement in these struggles can be traced more indirectly. For example, in response to the draft bill, the British consul in Muscat reported back that the local Khoja community had been split for decades along gender lines. According to the consul, Khoja women met in their own houses of worship and sent regular donations to the Aga Khan. Meanwhile, the men distanced themselves from the Aga Khan and described themselves as 'Orthodox Shias'.[74] The consul's report may not accurately reflect the complex dynamics within the community of merchants based in Muttrah, a commercial port to the west of Muscat, where they dominated the date trade. Alternatively known as Hyderabadis (after the city in Sindh), Khojas, and Al Lawatis, the community in Muttrah at times claimed British colonial protection based on historical ties to India, links that the British also encouraged as the presence of Indian merchants helped expand networks of informal colonialism in the region. The Muttrah Khojas, however, also rooted themselves within alternative geographies by cultivating religious and political ties to Shia Ithna Ashari ulama from Najaf and the Omani sultans.[75] Additional colonial reports from Muscat suggest that gender played a

[72]On Habibbhoy, see Arnold Wright, (ed.), *Twentieth century impressions of Ceylon: Its history, people, commerce, industries, and resources* (London: Lloyd's Greater Britain Publishing Co., 1907), p. 489; *The Bankers', Insurance Managers', and Agents' Magazine*, vol. 78, 1904, p. 461.

[73]'From Second Judge, Bombay Court of Small Causes, to Secretary to Government, Bombay', 28 August, 1885, British Library, India Office Record (hereafter IOR), L/PJ/6/142, File 1987, pp. 6–7.

[74]'From Her Britannic Majesty's Political Agent and Consul, Muscat, to Political Resident, Persian Gulf, and Her Britannic Majesty's Consul General for Fars', 26 August 1884, IOR, L/PJ/6/137, File 2152.

[75]Amal Sachedina, *Cultivating the past, living the modern: The politics of time in the sultanate of Oman* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021), pp. 198–221. Today some of the al-Lawati community claim Arab descent.

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complex role in these shifting allegiances and identities; a few years after the consul's report, the Government of Bombay initiated an investigation in 1886 into reports that Khoja husbands, with the encouragement of the Sultan of Oman, were forcing their wives to give up allegiance to the Aga Khan. The investigation, however, concluded that the reports were exaggerated as only one case of abuse could be verified.[76] Today members of the community vividly recall the mid-nineteenth century as a period of great internal dispute, but do not emphasize a dramatic gender divide between Khoja followers of the Aga Khan and Ithna Asharis. Some recall that it was a woman who gathered the material vestiges of the community's association with the Aga Khan and threw them into the sea to mark the transformation of their central meeting place from an Ismaili *jamat khana* into a mosque.[77] Nonetheless both colonial records and oral histories suggest that women played an active role in these struggles, and that financial resources and material objects were central to how they expressed their positions.

Turning to legal records from Zanzibar also suggests that Khoja women used control over assets to exercise power within patriarchal family structures and to express alternative claims to religious authority. Tharia was intimately entangled with these struggles through his role as an informal adviser to the British consular court in Zanzibar. In one such case, he was asked about community customs in relationship to the estate of a Khoja trader from Kutch, who left behind a widow, two brothers, and a nephew. The widow, who locals noted was a 'clever woman and knows the business', sought control over the estate, including by hiding her husband's accounts from his male relations and instructing her husband's business associates that outstanding payments should be made to her. When the case came before the courts, Tharia and several other leading members of the Khoja community advised that customs among their community dictated that the widow should receive a lifetime interest in the estate but was not permitted to 'alienate or waste' the funds, which would pass to her husband's heirs after her death. They specified, however, an exception which allowed the widow to make a deathbed bequest for 'religious purposes' without the consent of her husband's kin.[78]

Together these sources demonstrate that women were active participants in religious struggles that scholars have previously studied primarily through textual parlays exchanged between elite men. While in the latter sources women often appeared as mere sites of contestation, turning to material histories—from consumer goods to ceremonial objects to financial assets—casts them as more central players. While scholars should be wary of uncritically accepting colonial accounts that drew simplistic binaries between Khoja men and women, various sources do suggest that some Khoja women, including Janbai, were particularly committed followers of the Aga Khan and resisted efforts by their male relatives to curtail their expressions of devotion. Recent ethnographies of Ismaili women reinforce this analysis, documenting women's often

[76] J. G. Lorimer, *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf: 'Oman, and Central Arabia*, Vol. 1, Part 2 (Calcutta: Superintendent Government Press, 1915), pp. 2379–2380.

[77] Sachedina, *Cultivating the past*, p. 207.

[78] In the estate of Mohamed Dosa (1878), ZNA, File HC1/3.

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highly visible participation in public celebrations of the Aga Khan's spiritual leadership.[79] Such gendered devotion should not be misread as a mere defence of tradition. The Aga Khan had limited contact with the Khoja community before his migration to India in the 1840s, and the practices of fealty he cultivated among his followers in the second half of the nineteenth century drew on new modes of transportation, structures of colonial law, and styles of charismatic global leadership.[80] As part of this distinctly modern movement, the Aga Khans also emerged as prominent proponents of women's uplift, advocating for reduced pardah restrictions and promoting women's education.[81] Scholars often portray these reforms as top-down, male-initiated efforts, but a deeper understanding of gender dynamics within Ismaili communities suggests that women were not passive recipients of the Aga Khans' patriarchal benevolence. Instead a focus on the material dimensions of religious struggle suggests that Ismaili women backed the Aga Khans during a period of vulnerability, and the Aga Khans' subsequent dedication to women's causes was an implicit acknowledgement of their central role in building a distinctly modern, global Ismaili community.

Some of these dynamics were certainly particular to Ismailis and linked to their expanding wealth as key interlocuters between colonial and regional capital flows. Greater attention to the material dimensions of religious struggles, however, has the potential to reorient our understanding of other religious reform and revival movements. Research on the interplay between shifting economic contexts and religious life has enriched recent scholarship on Islam in South Asia and the Indian Ocean. Nile Green has shown how Bombay dockyard and mill workers, many of whom migrated from rural areas, were drawn to the sense of order offered by hierarchical Sufi brotherhoods.[82] Turning to the fields of Bengal, Andrew Sartori and Tariq Omar Ali have shown how shifting property laws, market-oriented farming, and an influx of consumer goods contributed to new understandings of what it meant to be a good Muslim.[83] These accounts, however, have overwhelmingly centred male subjects—shaped by colonial and reformist frames that mutually conspired to obscure women's roles as economic actors. In contrast, greater attention to consumption, familial wealth, and charitable giving offer glimpses of women's central role in struggles over material and religious practices, not just as sites of reform or bastions of tradition, but as active participants in shaping new modernities.

Veiled sightings: Janbai's silent presences and agentive absences

As the above section suggests, greater emphasis on material history involves exploring new archives, such as museum collections, and alternative readings of texts that

[79] Marsden Magnus, *Living Islam: Muslim religious experience in Pakistan's North-West Frontier* (Cambridge: Cambridge, University Press, 2005), pp. 225–226.

[80] Green, *Bombay Islam*, pp. 155–178.

[81] Zayn R. Kassam, 'The gender policies of Aga Khan III and Aga Khan IV', in *A modern history of the Ismailis*, (ed.) Farhad Daftary (London: I. B. Tauris Publishers, 2011), pp. 247–264.

[82] Green, *Bombay Islam*, pp. 179–208.

[83] Andrew Sartori, *Liberalism in empire: An alternative history* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014); Andrew Sartori, 'Property and political norms: Hanafi juristic discourse in Agrarian Bengal', *Modern Intellectual History*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2020, pp. 471–485; and Tariq Omar Ali, *A local history of global capital: Jute and peasant life in the Bengal Delta* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

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use them to reconstruct histories of objects, physical spaces, and flows of capital. This approach contrasts with that deployed in many histories of gender and Islam in South Asia. While acknowledging the importance of orality and performance, the field has dominantly explored the new religious publics that emerged through the circulation of printed materials.[84] Scholars in the field have thus extensively mined vernacular printed materials to catalogue how male reformers used debates over women's behaviour, particularly the observance of pardah, as central sites for articulating competing understandings of modernity and tradition.[85] As a result, in seeking to recover the presence of women, feminist scholars have also emphasized Muslim women's writings, framing the act of writing, particularly when autobiographical, as the 'ultimate unveiling'.[86] Despite the clear importance of visibility/invisibility to the observance of pardah, questions of voice have therefore dominated discussions of gender, power, and agency in the field.[87] While this approach has yielded many rich insights, its limits are apparent when we turn to a figure such as Janbai. Janbai was as adept at using silence as speaking to get her way. For example, when called to testify in court during the dispute over Tharia's estate, she offered curt replies that emphasized her lack of voice: 'I have never said a word to him [Tharia] about it…I cannot read anything.'[88] We should of course not uncritically accept Janbai's statements as evidence of her actual silence, and the biography documents other moments in which she asserted herself verbally. Her statements in court, however, flag the problem with equating agency with voice. The following section therefore suggests an expanded emphasis on 'visibility', both via under-utilized visual archives and analysis of visual presence (and absence) as a means through which women navigated shifting publics.

When I first discovered the photograph of Janbai in the PEM's collection (Figure 3), I was simultaneously overjoyed and frustrated. Staring at Janbai's face created an emotive sense of connection to the woman that I had already been tracing through archives for multiple years. I nonetheless found myself struggling to articulate what new evidence the image provided. The photograph seemed frustratingly opaque—I did not initially see anything in Janbai's expression or the staging of the photograph that

[84] J. Barton Scott and Brannon D. Ingram, 'What is a public? Notes from South Asia', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, vol. 38, no. 3, 2015, p. 359. Urban space and law have also been important subjects of analysis.

[85] On the centrality of critiques of pardah to the articulation of a new, Muslim, urban modernity, see Asiya Alam, 'Interrupted stories: The self-narratives of Nazr Sajjad Hyder', in *Speaking of the self: Gender, performance, and autobiography in South Asia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), p. 80.

[86] Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, *Elusive lives: Gender, autobiography, and the self in Muslim South Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), pp. 1–27, 192.

[87] While acknowledging the theoretical insights of Spivak's seminal intervention, the desire to find women's agency by recovering their 'voices' remains strong in the field. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the subaltern speak?', in *Colonial discourse and postcolonial theory: A reader*, (eds) Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), pp. 66–111.

[88] Whether out of choice or necessity, Janbai also addressed the court in Cutchi, a difference in language that was noted in the court transcripts and that created a certain linguistic veil between her and the rest of the court proceedings, which were linguistically unmarked. Interestingly, Janbai's daughters Fatma and Khadija also testified in court, but no indication is given of the language in which they spoke. Khadija told the court that she could read Urdu and Hindustani and write some Gujarati. Record of Proceedings, pp. 109–112.

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pointed to new insights into her biography or personality.[89] In fact, the book lying on a table beside her seemed distinctly at odds with Janbai's inability to read. Yet as I began exploring the rich body of scholarship on photographs as 'social' objects in India and Africa, I found that the image began to yield greater insights once I began viewing it alongside other contemporary images.[90] In its style and staging, the photograph resembles a *carte de visite*, a popular genre of commercial portrait photography, that were commonly traded among acquaintances in the late nineteenth century. The photograph was most likely taken in Zanzibar, although it is possible that Janbai commissioned it during a visit to Bombay, where the family stopped while en route to perform hajj in 1881. By the late 1870s and early 1880s numerous commercial studios were operating in both locales. Photographers in both places were also quick to develop modes of accommodating gendered sensibilities, using veils to block the photographer's view and hiring female assistants, which allowed women to commission portraits while exposing themselves only to select viewership.[91] As early as 1847, only a few years after the invention of the daguerreotype, the governor of Zanzibar and members of his family, including his seven-year-old niece and two Abyssinian concubines, were photographed by the French explorer Captain Charles Guillain. Guillain also conducted photography sessions at the homes of prominent Zanzibari traders.[92] In 1875 the Sultan of Zanzibar posed for a *carte de visite* while visiting London, which he circulated upon his return to Zanzibar, whetting local appetite for similar portraits. A number of photography studios, primarily operated by Goan families, opened to meet the surging demand.[93]

Janbai's photograph, and its migration into the PEM collections, should be read in this wider context. Her portrait resembles at least two other contemporary photographs of Zanzibari women, suggesting that it was produced in conversation with evolving aesthetic fashions, both local and global in their reach. Janbai's pose in the photograph, with her head resting on one arm, resembles a well-known photograph

[89]Historians of the genre have argued that the very flatness and uniformity of the photographs were essential to their ability to assimilate their subjects into global cultures of consumption. Prita Meier, 'The surface of things: A history of photography from the Swahili coast', *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 101, no. 1, 2019, pp. 48–69; Christopher Pinney, 'Notes from the surface of the image: Photography, postcolonialism, and vernacular modernism', in *Photography's other histories*, (eds) Christopher Pinney and Nicholas Peterson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 202–220.

[90]Christopher Pinney, *Camera Indica: The social life of Indian photographs* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997).

[91]Siddhartha Ghosh, 'Zenana studio: Early women photographers of Bengal', in *Taking pictures: The practice of photography by Bengalis*, (trans.) Debjani Sengupta, *Trans Asia Photography*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2014. While Ghosh's account is based on practices in Bengal, techniques of photography circulated widely. Raja Deen Dayal, one of the most prominent Indian photographers in the nineteenth century, opened a '*zenana* studio' in Hyderabad in 1892, which was surrounded by a high wall and where he employed a British female photographer, Mrs Kenny Levick, to manage the studio. Malavika Karlekar, *Visual histories: Photography in the popular imagination* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 15; Gayatri Sinha, 'Women artists in India: Practice and patronage', in *Local/global: Women artists in the nineteenth century*, (eds) Deborah Cherry and Janice Helland (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 69–70.

[92]Xavier Courouble, 'Swahili coast: Exploration by French Captain Charles Guillain, 1846–1848. Part 3, Encounters and Partnerships', Blog post, 13 May 2015, https://blog.library.si.edu/blog/2015/05/13/guillain3/#.Yl2lI5PMLrD, [accessed 28 March 2024].

[93]Meier, 'The surface of things'.

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Figure 4. Portrait of Emily Ruete (née Sayyida Salme) in Omani dress, photographer H. F. Plate, Hamburg, *circa* 1868. *Source:* Leiden University Libraries, Shelfmark Or. 27.135 D 1, http://hdl.handle.net/1887.1/item:2365279, [accessed 29 March 2024].

of Sayyida Salme, which was taken at a Hamburg studio in 1868 after she eloped with a German merchant (Figure 4).

The photograph became famous as an accompanying illustration to Sayyida's memoir, published first in German in 1886, but the photograph most likely circulated earlier in Zanzibar, where copies can be found in private collections.[94] Given Janbai's close

[94]Kate Roy, 'Only the "outward appearance" of a harem? Reading the memoirs of an Arabian princess as material text', *Belphégor: Littérature Populaire et Culture Médiatique*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2015, p. 12. The photograph

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relationship to the sultan's family, she may have seen a copy of the photograph and assumed a similar pose in her own portrait. Alternatively, the photographer who took her photograph may have known of Sayyida's portrait. In fact, at least one other early photograph exists of another Indian-Zanzibari woman assuming a strikingly similar position, also photographed with books on a small table, suggesting a common visual vocabulary (Figure 5).

Viewing the three photographs in tandem (Figure 6) suggests the importance of visuality and embodiment to how women like Janbai engaged with contemporary debates surrounding shifting public norms and modes of power.

Janbai's photograph suggests that she positioned herself within circuits of mobile and influential women not via words, but through poses and images. Janbai is not likely to have shared a common language with Caroline, but she forged a lasting connection with her through the gift of the bracelet and photograph—leaving an impression that persisted in the memory of Caroline's daughter, and later in museum records. Her act of gifting an image of herself that would travel across continents and centuries thus echoes Stephen Sheehi's emphasis in *The Arab Imago* on the role of the *carte de visite* in enabling a 'new form of friendship', an idea he borrows from the American jurist Oliver Wendell Holmes, and which foregrounds the deep entanglement of new forms of visuality, sociality, and spatiality.[95] While women like Janbai were often relegated to passive or subordinate roles in the print modernities that have dominated much of the historical scholarship, the gendered and cultural dynamics at work in material and visual exchanges were different, as suggested by the existence of thousands of colonial-era photographs of Muslim women in various collections. Through these images, women like Janbai engaged with topics, such as Muslim women's place in domestic and public spaces, that overlapped with questions that were hotly debated in textual spheres. By choosing to sit with her face uncovered for a photograph, either in her home or in the semi-private space of a portrait studio, Janbai presented herself for view, but in a controlled context that emphasized her wealth and social influence.

Janbai's engagement with photography and visual culture marks an interesting contrast with how she approached visibility and invisibility in another sphere in which she navigated new publics—colonial law. British colonial law was simultaneously obsessed with and confounded by the figure of the *pardah nashin*, or veiled woman, spawning distinct bodies of case law which allowed them to avoid appearing in court and which treated them as only semi-competent contracting agents.[96] While Janbai used photography to present herself for view, seemingly keenly aware of the power that images of Muslim women possessed in global circuits, in her engagements with the courts she became adept at using legal veils to screen her actions from view. After Tharia's death, the family's finances became strained by lavish spending and legal expenses, and were increasingly tied up in complex mortgages and pawns of jewellery. As creditors pressed the family, Janbai's degree of financial involvement with

was omitted from the earliest English translation of the memoir, which was published in 1888, but later appeared in a 1907 version. Notes on the verso of the framed photograph (cited above) indicate that copies were also held privately in Zanzibar.

[95] Stephen Sheehi, *The Arab imago: A social history of portrait photography, 1860–1910* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), p. 55.

[96] Stephens, *Governing Islam*, pp. 65–67.

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Figure 5. Portrait of a Zanzibari woman, *circa* 1893. *Source:* The Humphrey Winterton Collection of East African Photographs: 1860–1960, Herskovits Library of African Studies, Northwestern University Libraries, https://dc.library.northwestern.edu/items/e418bb4f-123d-4e90-9d6d-8ee38306c5b8, [accessed 29 March 2024].

her sons was often difficult to discern as she alternatively signed documents linking their finances and later selectively claimed ignorance of these arrangements. During these struggles, Janbai used the colonial courts' hesitance to 'unveil' elite women and their understanding of them as susceptible to male manipulation to her advantage. For example, in 1895 her eldest son Mohamed Medi sued his former tutor and his brother-in-law for criminal breach of trust and misappropriation, involving the purchase and

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Figure 6. Comparison of three portrait photographs.

pawn of expensive jewellery.[97] Mohamed Medi's lawyer wished Janbai to testify, and asked that she be examined in the judge's chambers. This was a privilege that colonial courts often accorded to elite Indian women on the grounds that they observed pardah and could not appear in public. The lawyer for the defence, however, objected on the grounds that Janbai did not observe pardah and had previously appeared in open court. But in this case, Janbai refused to answer the court's summons, shielding her from involvement with her son's legal troubles.[98]

Just as Janbai selectively invoked gendered seclusion when it served her purposes, she also at times used her lack of literacy to renounce legal obligations. In 1913 Janbai sued Mohamed Hussein for recovery of money that she had paid on his behalf in a divorce settlement. When presented with a power of attorney that made Janbai a party to the settlement, Janbai informed the court that, 'She never understood the true purport of the writing and the same was never read over and explained to her. She does not know how to read and write except write her own name, and under the circumstance the writing is void and not binding on her.' According to court reports, mother and son reached an undisclosed settlement outside of court. [99] Even for the historian, it is difficult to 'see' to what degree Janbai's claims of ignorance were strategic, and perhaps made in consultation with her sons, or whether she was indeed financially manipulated, or some convoluted mixture of these factors. What is clear, however, is that Janbai was adept at deploying gendered assumptions to cloak the family's finances in ambiguity, forcing their creditors to pursue them through long legal battles.

Read together, Janbai's engagement with photography and law suggest how looking for women's visibility and invisibility (both literal and metaphorical) can enrich scholarship on gender that has been dominated by questions of voice and silence. In comparison to textual sources, the numerous collections of women's photographs in public and private collections remain relatively under-used by scholars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[100] In texts, women's status as either in or out of pardah

[97]'Serious charges against a tutor', *Times of India*, 16 February 1895, p. 3.

[98]'Lady witness refuses to appear in court', *Times of India*, 12 August 1895, p. 3.

[99]'Mother and son: Suit No. 27 of 1913', *The Times of India*, 28 July 1913, p. 10.

[100]The use of photographic sources to study colonial South Asian remains to some extent a distinct subfield that is dominated by art historians. Existing studies of women's portrait photographs have also

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often served as a symbolic site for men to articulate different positions concerning modernity and tradition. A small number of women eventually entered these debates, but they were circumscribed by textual fields that were defined by, and remained dominated by, men. While much more research is needed, photographs, which captured myriad different styles of covering and uncovering different parts of the body, and which were procured and circulated in different manners, seem to have offered women more varied, if by no means unconstrained, modes of exerting their presence in public, semi-public, and private spaces and networks.[101] Working with images also draws our attention to the visual and embodied dimensions of struggles over pardah, which have sometimes been overshadowed by a focus on what women and men said on the topic. As Janbai's example suggests, women who were seemingly marginal to textual exchanges emerge as more active participants in these struggles when we track visual and material presences and absences in contexts in which their bodies were turbocharged with meaning. While by no means overturning gendered hierarchies, women like Janbai used their visibility and invisibility to create alternative circuits through which to navigate emerging publics.

Gendered mobilities: Janbai's alternative circuits

In this final section, I suggest that focusing on the alternative circuits through which Janbai navigated her varied social worlds enriches recent scholarship on transregional connections and mobility. Traditionally studies of Islam in South Asia have worked within the physical/political borders of the Indian subcontinent. The last two decades, however, have ushered in an explosion of interest in connections between South Asia and other regions.[102] Opening the borders of the field has directed new attention to circuits of connection that traversed colonial, national, and area-studies borders. Yet the mobile worlds uncovered by this new research often seem to be inhabited

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focused on a relatively narrow range of archives, particularly photographs from the *zenanas* of princely states. For discussions of photographs of women from the Rajput and Hyderabadi princely families, see Laura Weinstein, 'Exposing the zenana: Maharaja Sawai Ram Singh II's photographs of women in purdah', *History of Photography*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2010, pp. 2–16; Gianna Michele Carotenuto, 'Domesticating the harem: Reconsidering the zenana and representations of elite Indian women in colonial painting and photography of India, 1830–1920', PhD thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 2009. An important exception is Rochona Majumdar's fascinating discussion of wedding photographs in Rochona Majumdar, *Marriage and modernity: Family values in colonial Bengal* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

[101] My interest in photographs and gender was sparked in part by a brief discussion in *Bombay Islam* of a woman requesting photographs of potential suitors as an example of how photography empowered a broader range of groups. Green, *Bombay Islam*, p. 200.

[102] The shifting geographies of studies of Islam in South Asia mirror larger dynamics in South Asian Studies which supported greater attention to interregional connections. For the colonial period, Thomas Metcalf's and Sugata Bose's works were particularly influential in arguing for the ongoing importance of the Indian Ocean as a site of interregional connection even as the rise of European imperialism remapped its political and economic geographies in the nineteenth century. Thomas R. Metcalf, *Imperial connections: India in the Indian Ocean arena, 1860–1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Sugata Bose, *A hundred horizons: The Indian Ocean in the age of empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009). For the study of Islam in South Asia, some particularly important contributions include Seema Alavi, *Muslim cosmopolitanism in the age of empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); Green, *Bombay Islam*; and Ingram, *Revival from below*.

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overwhelmingly by men.[103] Some scholars have worked to rectify this imbalance by uncovering new archives, including women's travel writings, that point to important circuits of women's mobility such as religious pilgrimage.[104] Janbai echoes these findings, travelling on religious pilgrimages to India and the Hejaz. Yet merely focusing on women's physical, long-distance travels often leaves scholars chasing after a relatively small number of exceptions since these forms of mobility remain dominated by men. Asian migration during the long nineteenth century skewed distinctly male, with men often travelling while leaving women relations at home to care for family and property.[105] While Janbai was in some ways an exception to this pattern in that she migrated with Tharia from Zanzibar to Bombay, for much of her life she remained at home while her sons and husband travelled to tend to the family's business interests. Yet during these periods Janbai was far from immobile. She built her own transregional economic, political, and cultural ties by putting other people and objects in motion, delegating male relations to conduct business on her behalf, and gifting objects, which linked her to a sprawling network of associates.

One manifestation of these gendered forms of mobility was Janbai's frequent use of 'power of attorney' to temporarily delegate financial tasks to male relatives situated in different locales. The legal instrument known in British-Indian courts as a 'power of attorney' operated at the intersection of English legal forms and long-standing practices in the Indian Ocean of delegating authority to an 'agent' (often referred to in India as a *mukhtar*) to conduct business on a relative's or client's behalf.[106] From at least the seventeenth century, merchants operating out of western India

[103]The relative absence of women from the new wave of 'InterAsian' scholarship was noted in the proceedings of the InterAsia Academy held in February 2021; see https://www.ssrc.org/programs/interasia-program/interasia-academy-integration-and-disintegration-in-interasian-perspective/, [accessed 28 March 2024]. The rich body of work on indentured women is an important exception. For early contributions, see Brij V. Lal, 'Kunti's cry: Indentured women on Fiji plantations', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 22, no. 1, 1985, pp. 55–71; Marina Carter, *Lakshmi's legacy: The testimonies of Indian women in 19th century Mauritius* (Stanley, Rose Hill, Mauritius: Editions de l'Océan Indien; distributed by African Books Collective, Oxford, 1994); and Gaiutra Bahadur, *Coolie woman: The odyssey of indenture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[104]Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, Daniel Majchrowicz and Sunil Sharma (eds), *Three centuries of travel writing by Muslim women* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022).

[105]The large-scale wave of Asian migration, which lasted from around the middle of the nineteenth to the middle of the twentieth century, skewed more heavily male in comparison with European migration during the same period, for which women made up 35–40 per cent of emigrants. Sunil A. Amrith, *Migration and diaspora in modern Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 47; Adam McKeown, 'Chinese emigration in global context, 1850–1940', *Journal of Global History*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2010, p. 112. It is worth noting, however, that many women migrated locally in the context of marriage, a point that gender historians have emphasized is often overlooked in studies of migration and mobility. Sucheta Mazumdar, 'What happened to the women: Chinese and Indian male migration to the United States in global perspective', *Asian/Pacific Islander American women: A historical anthology*, (eds) Shirley Hune and Gail M. Nomura (New York: NYU Press, 2003), pp. 58–76.

[106]W. H. Macnaghten, *Principles and Precedents of Moohummudan Law Being a Compilation of Primary Rules Relative to the Doctrine of Inheritance (including the Tenets of the Schia Sectaries), Contracts and Miscellaneous Subjects*… [originally published 1825], 2nd edn (Madras: Athenaeum Press, 1860), p. 550. In Anglo-Indian legal manuals, power of attorney was often translated as *mukhtar nama* or *vakalat nama*. Elizabeth Lhost, 'Writing law at the edge of empire: Evidence from the Qazis of Bharuch (1799–1864)', *Itinerario*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2018, pp. 256–278.

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deployed documents resembling modern powers of attorney to conduct long-distance transactions.[107] Women across multiple Indian Ocean locales found such instruments particularly useful, as they allowed them to tend to their business interests while observing various degrees of seclusion.[108] While recognizing power of attorney as an instrument that traversed English and Indo-Islamic legal norms, British-Indian officials also viewed their use with suspicion, particularly in transactions involving women, whom they considered vulnerable to exploitation by their agents.[109] Power of attorney was thus both a ubiquitous legal instrument, and one which spawned vast quantities of litigation in colonial courts.[110] While in signing these agreements women might at first appear to be relinquishing power to men, for Janbai this does not appear to be true. For example, while Janbai was in Bombay, she entrusted her brother with the management of her rental properties in Zanzibar. He would later complain that the work was onerous and unprofitable to him. Frustrated with her brother's lagging effort, Janbai terminated their arrangement and sued him in court.[111] As noted above, in addition to allowing her to deploy (and recall) male delegates, Janbai used power of attorney, coupled with colonial legal norms that cast doubt on women's legal competence, to strategically assume and renounce financial obligations. Power of attorney thus contributed to her ability to manage complex real-estate and credit interests across distant locales, which traversed multiple legal and political jurisdictions, in ways that were dependent on, rather than hindered by, her gender.

This distinctly gendered form of mobility sheds light on how women like Janbai were able to move through worlds dominated by men. Rather than directly challenging male structures of authority, Janbai played them off against each other in service of her own objectives. For example, she appealed to the Aga Khan for sons when her own husband seemed indifferent to producing additional male progeny. When Tharia could not secure the sultan's attendance at their daughters' wedding, Janbai demanded his presence by casting him in the role of their father. Anticipating that her husband's elder sons would attempt to sideline her after his death, she pressured Tharia to bequeath her property that would give her financial independence. When her stepsons

[107]For references to the use of powers of attorney, and their circulation between commercial and legal forms spanning India, Persia, and Europe, see Sebouh David Aslanian, *From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean: The global trade networks of Armenian merchants from New Julfa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), pp. 190, 193. Nandini Chatterjee has also found evidence of the use of letters of attorney (*khutut-i vukalat*) within *qazi* records from the late seventeenth century in Pattan, Gujarat. Nandini Chatterjee, *Negotiating Mughal law: A family of landlords across three Indian empires* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 176.

[108]Nurfadzilah Yahaya, *Fluid jurisdictions: Colonial law and Arabs in Southeast Asia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020), pp. 75–80.

[109]See, for example, the appendix heading 'Agent and Principal' in the Macnaghten text, which discusses a case from the Sudder Diwani Adawlat in Bengal from 1805 that involved the invalidation of an engagement made on a women's behalf by her agent. Macnaghten, *Principles and Precedents*, p. 387.

[110]For a further discussion of litigation involving power of attorney and agents, see Johan Mathew, 'On principals and agency: Reassembling trust in Indian Ocean commerce', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 61, no. 2, 2019, pp. 242–268.

[111]*Lady Janbai, widow of Sir Tharia Topan* v. *Allarakhia Madhani*, Civil case no. 260 of 1899, ZNA, File HC7/649; *Lady Janbai, widow of Sir Tharia Topan* v. *Vikansi Sakarchand*, Civil case no. 112 of 1899, ZNA, File HC7/631.

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challenged her inheritance, she looked to the colonial courts to protect her interests, attempting to benefit from yet another centre of patriarchal authority.

When I say therefore that Janbai 'moved' through worlds dominated by men, I refer not only to her physical movement, but to more complex forms of mobility that also involved pursuing her interests across boundaries of class, race, and gender. Born into a humble household, Janbai achieved exceptional economic mobility through marriage and through the deft pursuit of her financial interests, at times via her family's business, at other times in tension with the interests of her male relations. Her success was dependent on her ability to forge social relations across cultural and racial boundaries—from her ties to the Sultan of Zanzibar to her relationship with Caroline Batchelder. Yet when we reduce the study of mobility to long-distance, physical travel, much of the richness of Janbai's mobility is lost. Following Janbai's circuits therefore pushes us to broaden our conception of mobility to operate across multiple spatial and social geographies.[112]

Conclusion: A view from the margins

My work on Janbai has stretched across many more years than I initially anticipated because she has both fascinated and frustrated me—much as she seems to have drawn the attention and ire of many of her contemporaries. Her exceptionally forceful personality has haunted me across the decades and differences of life circumstances that divide us. But my desire to know more about her has often made me painfully aware of the limits of my training and analytical frameworks, from my reliance on Urdu texts and colonial government archives, to my tendency to equate Muslim modernity with Sunni reform and revival. In fact, when I was first invited to contribute to this Forum on Muslim modernity in South Asia, I wondered if a piece on Janbai was even relevant. Ultimately, however, I have come to see Janbai as both highly exceptional and deeply instructive for how research more broadly on Muslim South Asia could embrace new sources and analytics. The field remains to a large extent focused on *ashraf* Sunni men who were members of 'professional' classes and who wrote in Urdu for an audience that centred on North India. Often studies of these groups are cast as indicative of histories of 'Islam in South Asia' more broadly, while research on other Muslims is relegated to more narrow 'Muslim minority' subfields. Yet work on individuals such as Janbai does not just offer (doubly) 'minority' perspectives—and not just because the majority of Muslims in South Asia were not male members of a Sunni elite. Instead, by pushing us to mine new archives and to shift our conceptual frameworks, it offers the possibility of reshaping the field more broadly. Janbai's near invisibility in published, printed sources forces us to grapple with the limits of textual approaches in contexts in which literacy remained very low and highly correlated with gender and class. It also pushes us to look beyond scriptural and textual assertions of religious authority, which dominated contemporary Sunni reform movements, to recognize the many other ways in which Muslims embraced new religious forms. For example, Janbai's religious pilgrimages and gift giving draw attention to how new modes of transport and

[112]For an effort to conceptualize alternative gendered mobilities, see Samia Khatun, 'The book of marriage: Histories of Muslim women in twentieth-century Australia', *Gender and History*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2017, pp. 8–30.

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centres of wealth contributed to shifting cultures of spiritual charisma and community, which were vital to the emergence of the Aga Khans as leaders of a 'neo-Ismailism', but which were far from unique to the sect.[113] Following Janbai's paths through alternative archives also reveals the ways in which scholarly approaches to concepts are entangled with our limits of study. As suggested above, the recent expansion of transregional work and interest in mobility remains male-centric not because men were mobile and women immobile, but because scholars have centred forms of movement which were more accessible to men. Similarly the field's overwhelming emphasis on textual archives means that scholars often approach Muslim modernity as a discursive and ideological project, while marginalizing other modes through which Muslims participated in modernity, including through shifting practices of consumption, investment, and embodied experience.[114] In concluding this piece, I therefore readily admit the many things that I continue to not know about Janbai, but I am deeply grateful to her for drawing my view towards new vistas of inquiry.

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[113]Green, *Bombay Islam*, p. 156.

[114]For alternative approaches that centre objects, images, and bodily practices, see the recent contributions to Anna Bigelow (ed.), *Islam through objects* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021).

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