

Voices from an Archived Silence – Transoceanic Exchanges

**Studio Kayamai
27 February –
5 March**

Voices from an Archived Silence – Transoceanic Exchanges (2023–2025) is a collaborative project by Studio for Memory Politics that aims to explore and address silences in cultural memory in the postcolonial geographies of Colombo and Karachi. The project brings together four artists – Hema Shironi Joseph and Firi Rahman from Colombo and Sophia Balagamwala and Veera Rustomji from Karachi – in a transoceanic dialogue to confront silences, erasures, and gaps in cultural memory within their distinct contexts.

Sophia Balagamwala (b.1987) is an artist and curator who explores the interplay between historical events, memories, and fiction. Drawing inspiration from archives, histories, and children's books, she constructs narratives that blur the boundaries between reality and imagination. Balagamwala has previously worked as the curator of the National History Museum in Lahore, and currently runs the Kurachee Reading Room, a collection of local artist publications formerly housed at the COMO Museum, Lahore (2021–2022), now at the AAN Ideas LAB (ArtSpace and Museum), Karachi. She teaches at the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture. Notable recent projects include participation in the Abu Dhabi Public Art Biennale (2024), Three Tired Tigers at the Jameel Arts Centre (2024), the Art South Asia Project (ASAP) Research Grant (2022), and Artist Commission Award at the London, Asia, Art Worlds Conference, Paul Mellon Centre (2021).

Hema Shironi Joseph (b. 1991) is an artist who lives in Colombo. Her artistic practice combines embroidery, mythological imagery, bricolage, and installation to inquire into concepts of cultural identity. Her work is deeply rooted in the histories of colonization, civil war, displacement and migration, as they intersect with her personal life. Driven by nostalgia for the numerous places she has called home, her work explores how communities belonging to these places grapple with concerns of language, culture, memory, myth, gender, and equality. She completed her BFA (2014) from the Ramanathan Fine Arts Academy, University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka and an MFA (2019) at Beaconhouse National University, Lahore. Her work has been featured at the Critical Zones conceived by ZKM, Centre for Art and Media Karlsruhe (2022), Colomboscope (2019 and 2022), Matara Art Festival (2023) and the 13th Taipei Biennial. Hema has also completed an Artist Residency at the House of Kal, Sri Lanka (2021).

Firi Rahman (b. 1990) is a multidisciplinary artist, observer, archivist, and activist who critically engages with the rapid urban redevelopment of Sri Lanka. His work addresses the Anthropocene, temporalities of identity and the impact of gentrification on communities and heritage sites. Rahman often adopts an autobiographical approach, drawing from his experiences in Slave Island, his neighbourhood. He mobilizes community narratives, conserving and archiving stories of inheritance and identity. Animism is a recurring theme, with animals serving as symbolic representations of relationships and emotions. Balancing deeply personal expression with community-driven projects, Rahman co-founded "We Are From Here," a collective that documents the ethnographic histories of urban Colombo. He received his art foundation training at Manchester College, UK.

Veera Rustomji (b.1992) is an artist from Karachi. Her practice deals with historiographical power structures and religious iconography portrayed through film, costume, and paintings. She holds a BFA from the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture (IVS) and an MA in Fine Art from Chelsea College of Arts at the University of the Arts London (UAL), where she was awarded the UAL Postgraduate International Scholarship. Veera is the recipient of the 2021–2022 Mead Fellowship, for which she produced a body of documentation capturing the erasure of island life and coastal heritage within the Indus Delta. Her site-specific investigations coexist alongside literary and community-based archives from public and private collections in Karachi. Veera is currently a faculty member and co-director of the Urban Repository Archive (URA) at the Department of Fine Art, IVS, supported by the Art South Asia Project (ASAP).

The project examines how archives-in-the-making – often oral, fragmented, or disappearing – can enable new ways of understanding histories of displacement, migration, and resilience. Over a year-long research phase, the participating artists engaged with local archives – ranging from family photographs, recipes, institutional collections, and community-driven archives – to explore how memory is preserved and transformed across geographies.

Over the past year, the artists have been engaged in a transoceanic discussion with each other. These dialogues were facilitated by the Studio over the course of 2024 through regular meetings, fostering an exchange of ideas that bridge personal and collective narratives.

The outputs include presentations in 2025 in Karachi at the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture Gallery and in Colombo at artist-run Studio Kayamai, where artists present their research as artworks and programming that interrogate historical narratives and propose alternative ways of remembering. The multi-city presentations of this project speak to one another, reflecting both the connections between our histories and the gulf and ruptures in North-South exchanges.

This project builds on *Voices from an Archived Silence* (2018–2020) which actively confronted the silences and implicit power structures of Swiss colonial archives and was aiming to explore a polycentric exhibition-making practice with artistic voices from Switzerland as well as from source communities.

01

In Search of Kambali 01

2024

Hand embroidery, Machine Stitching,
appliqué and paper collage on textile

02

In Search of Kambali 02

2025

Hand embroidery, Machine Stitching,
appliqué, digital print and paper collage on
textile

03

In Search of Kambali 03

2025

Hand embroidery, Machine Stitching,
appliqué and paper collage on textile

Hema Shironi Joseph reimagines the *kambali*, a woollen blanket whose exact history and communal significance remain hazy. Often called *karuppu kambali* ("black blanket"), it is widely believed to have been given to indentured workers brought by the British to labour on coffee and tea plantations. Typically made from coarse goat hair, the *kambali* provided warmth against the cold and rain. It was also said to have been used to wrap the bodies of labourers who did not survive the long walk from coastal Mannar to the Central Highlands. Others recall it as an heirloom, brought from South India and passed down through generations. Through *In Search of Kambali*, Shironi embraces this blurring of histories as a form of living archive. Her mixed-media works layer embroidery, imagery, and intricate details onto fabric, offering an amalgamated history of the *kambali* and exploring how plantation histories are visualised and remembered.

"My research explores the Tea Plantation Workers' Museum and Archive in Gampola housed in a century-old line room made up of rows of 12×12 ft smaller rooms. Among the objects in the museum archive, I was particularly drawn to a display of a single piece of *kambali*. Likely brought by or given to an indentured labourer from Tamil Nadu, the *kambali* was both a practical item, providing warmth and protection against the cold and rain, and a symbol of continuity often passed down across generations. The *kambali*'s presence in the archive reflected the transnational lineages and collective histories of the Malayiyaha Tamil community, to which I belong. However, the blanket's solitary presentation and the sparse information that is available about it, served as a stark reminder of the broader silences that surround this community's stories. My project goes in search of the histories tied to the *kambali* and reimagines it as a living object, exploring what it might carry today if the *kambali* itself or its story had continued to be passed down through generations."

01
Old Girls Association—Sanjan Stambh
(black)
Etching and Aquatint on Zinc Plate
Old Girls Association—Sanjan Stambh
(navy)
Etching and Aquatint on Zinc Plate with
Watercolor

02
The Cherag! Ajmalgadh Monument
(navy, purple and pink)
Etching, Aquatint on Zinc Plate with
Watercolor
The Cherag! Ajmalgadh Monument (black)
Etching and Aquatint on Zinc Plate

03
Navigating—Hormuz to Nargol (blue)
Navigating—Hormuz to Nargol (black)
Etching and Aquatint on Zinc Plates

04
Rivayat's Description of the dakhma
in Old Gujarati 01
Etching on Zinc Plate with Watercolor,
Tea and Saffron
Rivayat's Description of the dakhma
in Old Gujarati 02
Etching on Zinc Plate with Toproll

05
View of Arkayim, Ural Region,
Hamazor 01 (green)
Etching and Aquatint on Zinc Plate with
Watercolor
View of Arkayim, Ural Region,
Hamazor 02
Etching on Zinc Plate with Toproll

06
Discourses by Godrej Sidhwa (black)
Discourses by Godrej Sidhwa (green)
Etching, Aquatint on Zinc Plate with
Watercolor and Saffron

All works: 2025

Veera Rustomji examines the paradoxes of a Zoroastrian library in Karachi, situated between life and death yet shielded in isolation. Working with its multilingual collection, she creates prints that trace the archive's materiality, questioning the implications of moving such private objects into public spaces.

"Eagles, termites, stray dogs and fat lizards—these are some of my companions leading up to, and within the library itself. A year-long interaction with a mass of printed materials at the Dastur Dr Dhalla x Young Mazdayasnian Zoroastrian Association Library, has made me realise how archives can live at the edges of non-human existence in stillness and isolation. With literature in languages ranging from old and new Gujarati, Farsi and even Pahlavi, the scripts and images among the library's collection tell a story of community hierarchies, economical patronage and contention points of religious discourse. Since the library relocated to its current home in the early 2000s, its close proximity to centres of life and death has underscored a paradox: while it yearns to be heard and read, it also seeks to exist behind a protective shield. I have been documenting not only the content of specific publications, but moments, cracks and deteriorations within the space. This one-way relationship that I have had with the library is captured with prints, bringing copies or suggested insights of the library into a gallery space. Within this display and research in process, I consider the formalities and structure of the library and what it may mean for future custodians of this space to live without the resources that they have today."

01
Abujee and the Queen
2025
Animation, color, sound
2:50

02
Time in the Kitchen
2025
Monoprinted and Mixed Media Zine

Sophia Balagamwala delves into her family's migration as Memons from Kathiawar region of Gujarat to Karachi in 1947, exploring personal archives of photographs, recipes, and anecdotes. Through two bodies of work, she reflects on kitchens as spaces of creativity, conflict, and care, and interrogates the intersections of migration, memory, and identity.

"For this project, I think through the archive of my family, who identify as Memons, a mercantile community, many of whom migrated from Kathiawar region of Gujarat to Karachi in 1947. The research has included looking through family photographs, letters, and diaries – often a multi-purpose archive or recipes, receipts, lists and other memorabilia. From this research, two specific strands emerge. One project looks at family recipes which were passed on in the kitchen from mothers teaching their daughters how to cook, many of which have not been written down, given that the language spoken by the community, Memoni, exists only in oral form. Many of these recipes include specific dishes like Khaosuey, originally from Myanmar, and now re-adapted to local tastes and popularised in Pakistan. These recipes act as archives of migration of this community and its movement under the British Empire. As I began to collect and transcribe recipes from family members and friends from the community, they were accompanied by stories which apart from food, were about relationships, rituals, traumas, joys and more. This resulted in *Time in the Kitchen*, a series of drawings and recipes that look at the kitchen as an extension of other spaces and spheres of life – home making, archiving, nourishing, parenting, creativity, expression, pride, conflict, expectation and exhaustion. A second project is an animation *Abujee and the Queen* that merges truths and fictions from multiple oral histories and family archives to tell the story of a Memon migrant, who has a fascination for photography and history and reveres the Queen, speaking to relationships between Empire and postcolony and the way it still impacts communities today."

- 01
Papan pemotong (cutting board) 01–08
2025
Knife marks and engraving on wood
- 02
Meja kayang
2024
Mixed media
- 03
Ashray Map series 01–05
2022
Typewriter text and Digital Print on Paper
- 04
Nene's Recipe for Melayu Accharu (Malay pickle) recipe in Kadugu (mustard seed) bottle
2025
Faded ink on bank receipt and glass bottle
- 05
Rimza's Recipe for Melayu Accharu (Malay pickle) recipe in goola botol (sugar bottle)
2025
Ink on receipts and bank slip and glass bottle
- 06
Datha's Recipe for Melayu Accharu (Malay pickle) recipe in Chabey (chilli) and Bissar Chabey (capsicum) bottle
2025
Ink on electricity bills and glass bottle
- 07
Nona BB's Recipe for Melayu Accharu (Malay pickle) recipe in storage bottle
2025
Ink on shop invoice and glass bottle
- 08
Maami's Recipe for Melayu Accharu (Malay pickle) recipe in cuka (vinegar) bottle
2025
Ink on receipt and glass bottle

Firi Rahman collaborates with the last Malay food vendor family in Slave Island, Colombo, using food as a way to document and share stories. His project records recipes and conversations in Malay, preserving a cultural heritage shaped by movement and change. It focuses on a single recipe for Malay pickle, tracing how it has been passed from one family to another, continuously repeated and adapted. Firi Rahman considers the ways these recipes are recorded, whether scribbled onto scraps of paper tucked into jars, or absorbed into household objects, leaving their marks on cutting boards, tablecloths, and in kitchen conversations. Through this, he explores how food traditions evolve, shaped by those who make and share them.

"Despite my family's mixed ethnicity, Malay has remained the dominant language in our household, supported by strong first-language speakers. In multilingual Slave Island, Malay speakers often become trilingual through daily interactions with Tamil and Sinhalese communities. However, as development projects reshape the area, communities have been displaced, and aspects of Malay culture, including its well-known street food traditions, are disappearing. While Malay food in Sri Lanka reflects local influences – much like the language itself – its continuity is increasingly at risk as fewer families pass down traditional recipes. My research involves cooking and speaking with the last remaining Malay food vendor family in Slave Island. Through these conversations, recorded in Malay, I aim to document their recipes and, in doing so, reconnect with my own heritage."

Collectively
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projects that foster a shared language
to address and complicate global power
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Studio for Memory Politics consists of
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www.memorypolitics.studio

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