This paper is a work in progress; it sets up an exploration of certain speculative linkages between India and Africa that have surfaced in the course of my research on the tradition of Bhutaradhane (spirit worship) that intrigued me enough to attempt a further investigation. Within the paper, I attempt to flesh out some tentative formulations about Bobbare, a spirit venerated over five centuries by a wide spectrum of communities, along the west coast of India, in the present-day Indian states of Karnataka and Kerala. Bhutaradhane is an umbrella term which includes a variety of worship practices but popularly indicates the possession ceremonies performed for spirit propitiation in the coastal belt of South Karnataka, also known as Tulunadu. Bhuta in Tulu, the language used widely across the area, refers to spirits and the bhuta pantheon includes categories such as totemic animals, ancestral spirits as well as the spirits of heroic figures from history. A performative living tradition enacted primarily through complex rituals encompassing epic ballads, musical accompaniments and oracular spirit impersonation, the narrative of each spirit presents itself through its own specific story called paaddana. This is a richly descriptive oral text, which relates the individual history of a bhuta, its origin, its powers and the manner of its transformation into a spirit deserving to be worshipped. The paaddana is sung by the family members of the spirit impersonator and can differ widely in its details depending on the patron, the impersonator and the space of performance even when the spirit remains the same.

A particularly remarkable myth that circulated in the early part of the twentieth century created a vivid visual picture in its portrayal of the Bobbare Bhuta as a spirit who straddled ‘the Arabian Sea with one foot on the Western Ghats and the other across the ocean on the Barbary Coast’ (Prabhu 1996: 237). The references to this particular myth were heard in the fishing villages around the city of Mangalore, an important port city for the present-day district of South Karnataka and the larger surrounding area known as South Canara. The casual throwaway reference to an association between Africa and the coast of Canara seems at first a romantic allusion, a fleeting oral remnant drawn from its trading histories going back centuries. While maritime trade has been the notable context which recorded the links between the continents of Africa and Asia, a spirit worshipped as the deity of seafaring groups in small seaside shrines since the fifteenth century seems, at first, an unlikely figure to have tied together these continents in the pre-colonial period.

However an intriguing linguistic element within the name of this maritime spirit reiterates a possible connection articulated within the myth. The name, Bobbare, was speculated to have been drawing upon the spirit’s association with the Berbers (ibid.), a community whose members were known to have travelled to this coast as part of diverse groups of traders from North Africa who have been documented as visitors to the ports of Canara since the turn of the twelfth century (as described by Ghosh (2008), citing Goiten (1973:202); see below).
In the fourteenth century Ibn Battuta described Mangalore as a bustling trade hub frequented by Persians and Yemens. Mangalore has in fact been on trade routes since the mediaeval period, possibly famous since the Roman period going back in history as far as Ptolemy’s chronicles. One of the earliest textual accounts, dated to the twelfth century, vividly describes the town of Mangalore. This particular record was meticulously uncovered by the author Amitav Ghosh, within the scattered papers of the historic Cairo Geniza, and described in his book In An Antique Land (Ghosh 1992). According to Ghosh, the lives of an Indian slave in the mediaeval period, Bomma, and his master/owner Abraham Ben Yiju, a Tunisian Jewish trader, emerged within the written record of a letter sent to him in 1148 CE by his friend Khalaf Ibn Ishaq, a merchant in Aden. Ben Yiju’s decade-long stay in Mangalore and his letters, which mentioned the slave Bomma by name (ibid. 168–90), established not only the fascinating networks of Afro-Asian trade in this period; they also aided in a reconstruction of the region of South Canara and fuelled conjecture about the influences of such alliances, which found their way into the beliefs and traditions of the area that perhaps endure in the oral myths to this day.

Bomma, the slave of the merchant Ben Yiju, is initially only a number, MS.H.6, a fragmentary residue of an anonymous non-person present only within the libraries of the University of Cambridge. Ghosh brings him alive as a Mangalorean slave acquired by Ben Yiju. An apprentice to a trader in Aden, Yiju himself had migrated to the Malabar Coast in 1132 CE and Ghosh first speculates that as a possible trader of slaves, Yiju might have bought Bomma elsewhere. The Mangalorean antecedents of the slave become clearly apparent, however, in the linguistic roots of the name. Bomma was an extremely popular name amongst the older, matrilineal communities of Canara. It originated in Bemmeru/Bermeru or Berme, the spirit at the head of the pantheon revered by the Tulu-speaking indigenous communities who continue to follow older forms of worship such as the practice of spirit propitiation. According to local lore, the imaginary of the land, known as Tulunadu, is believed to have been inhabited by populations bound together by their language, Tulu, their adherence to matrilineal customs and the reverence accorded to Bhutas, the spirits which still reign over the land in their hundreds. The name of the tradition, Bhutaradhane, literally suggests the invocation of an older past, of the people and the elements, real and imagined, revered by the numerous communities of the region.

Bomma, then, must have been named after the principal spirit deity. Dr B.A. Viveka Rai at the University of Mangalore has elucidated the importance bestowed on the spirits within the region by the locals:

To them Bhutas and Sanskritic deities represented aspects of divine and supernatural power that shaded gently and imperceptibly into each other ... The name Bomma had once had wide currency within Tulu culture ... and even until a generation or so ago it was commonly encountered in and around Mangalore. Over the last few decades it had passed out of general use as a personal name, but it was still preserved in the titles of various groups and clans in Tulunad. (Ghosh 1992: 205–206)

It is possible that the name Bomma was revealed to be more than a number in a forgotten archive and was in fact evidence of the importance of spirits and their worship as early as the twelfth century. Bobbare similarly might have contained within its linguistic usage a kernel of an

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1 This work was subsequently condensed into an essay, The Imam and the Indian (Ghosh 2008), which will be referred to in this paper on account of its more convenient format.
2 The letter, bearing the catalogue number MS.H.6 of the National and University Library in Jerusalem, was published in the Hebrew journal Zion in 1942 (cited in Ghosh 2008: 223).
earlier history; it might be an aural record of forgotten visitors to these shores. Ghosh’s recuperation of the name Bomma from records which are nearly nine centuries old, when combined with the acceptance of the Bhutas in the common imagination of the region, would suggest both that the Bhuta cult was an established religious practice by the twelfth century and that it continued to exert an influence over the succeeding periods. The mediaeval inscriptions relating to the bhuta cult testify to the prominent status and the longevity of spirits in the popular realm, even though the inscriptions relating to the spirits seem to emerge only as late as the fourteenth century. An inscription in 1546 CE in Basrur, a famous port in that period, is one of the most relevant as it lists a land grant with the bhuta Bobbare as a witness. The 1564 CE inscription of Barkur, another town on the coast, also refers to Bobbare. The multiple inscriptions, with their implicit claims of importance for a tradition with comparatively sparse documentation, suggest that Bobbare must have been an important enough figure in the tradition to have an established cult by the sixteenth century.

Another intriguing aspect is the fact that these epigraphs exclusively referred to Bobbare, the spirit of a Muslim trader, who remains famous till today and continues to be offered worship in elaborate ceremonies across a large span of coastline. Deified as a maritime god, after his violent death at sea, this patron deity of the Mogaveeras, traditionally a fishing community, has his spirit abodes dotting numerous beaches. The inscription of 1564 clearly refers to a Bobbare shrine, a construction described by Prabhu as having ‘three walls, open front and no roof seen in many places across the coast’. However the clinching evidence of the importance of this spirit, according to Prabhu, is the 1546 inscription that mentions Bobbare as a witness to the grant of a parcel of land. Such an honour was usually granted only to the ‘Gods, or Sun and Moon’ (Prabhu 1996: 238) and hence could have been a mediaeval period indicator of the prominence of both the cult and the spirit Bobbare. Bobbare’s mythic martyrdom at sea and his consequent elevation as a protective deity of maritime enterprise might have led to his importance amongst the multiple coastal populations (Rao 2015: 50). But this facile assumption is refuted by the fact that Bobbare is venerated in various forms and is especially prevalent as a dvarapala (guardian deity) at prominent Hindu shrines throughout the region.

A comparison of the lists of noteworthy bhutas recorded in the colonial period by Rev. A. Manner ([1886] 2008: 9) and Edgar Thurston (Thurston & Rangachari 1909: 148) over a period of 25 years between the years 1886 and 1909 reveals an interesting detail. There were just a dozen bhutas who were mentioned in both the lists; they had also been significant enough to have their paaddana or ballad recorded within the documented accounts of the tradition (Nāvada & Fernandes 2008: xxv). The bhuta Bobbare was one such spirit who had his life and times first recorded for posterity in 1886: ‘The most dreaded names of the bhutas in Tuluva are

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1The first was an inscription dated to 1379 CE which referred to unnamed ‘Daivakkalu’, a term used for the lesser and the inferior powers known as the Bhutas (Prabhu 1996: 237).


6Seen at the prominent Devi shrine of Mandarthi in Udupi district during my site visit in July 2014.

7The paaddanas collected by both Manner and Arthur Burnell, a judge in Mangalore who studied the Bhuta worship of the Tuluva, were compiled into a collection of papers, The Devil Worship of the Tuluvas, authored by Burnell and published posthumously as a series by the editor of the Indian Antiquary, R.C. Temple, between the years 1894 and 1897. Rev. A. Manner’s long note on Bhutas was commissioned and incorporated into The Devil Worship of the Tuluvas by Temple. A reprint of the original edition, edited by A.V. Nāvada and D. Fernandes, was published in 2008.
Bobbriye and Kodadabatu ... Bobbriye is essentially a maritime bhuta’ (Saletore 1936: 371).

*Bobbare*, as a Muslim *bhuta*, assumes significance as it exemplifies the deification of a member of a historically marginalised community. The word itself, according to M.M. Prabhu (1996: 237), was not only a derivative of the word Berber, but had probably arisen due to the association between the west coast of India and Somalia. While the original references might have blurred in the intervening period, the influences and memories of it in the region must have been so significant that they surfaced within its longest-surviving tradition. The Muslims in this region were called *Mapillas*, ‘Tuluva Mapillas’ i.e. descendants of Arab fathers and *Tuluva mothers* (Saletore 1936: 487). The emergence of this *Mapilla Bhuta* could have been the consequence of the conversion of large chunks of the local population to Islam. Such a *bhuta* might have catered to the resultant mixed-race populations, as a way to assimilate the newer faiths of that time into *Bhutaradhane*, which was possibly a hegemonic practice of the mediaeval period. *Bobbare’s* *paaddana* calls him the product of a marital alliance between the *Mapilla*, *Murave Byari*10 and *Patuma* (Nävada & Fernandes 2008: 240), who is conjectured to have been a local woman of Jaina faith who had converted to Islam.11 This *bhuta* consequently seems to have enjoyed worship and patronage over many different historical periods, across regions and in different guises. *Bobbare bhuta* is the only one recorded consistently in the known histories of the tradition. He is also mentioned as a guardian deity, *Malayali* or *Baagilu Bobbare*, outside spirit shrines and Hindu temples. According to Professor Amruth Someshwara (2011), ‘[w]orship of this deity is practiced in Kerala, where the deity is called *Bappurian*:

Bobbriya is the son of a Muslim woman, who was born into a Jain family. According to one story, on the night of her wedding, a snake came out of her nose and bit her husband. The same thing happened to her second husband. A Muslim magician, asked for her hand in marriage if he was able to resolve the problem. When the snake came out of her nose, he killed it. This man’s name is said to be Murave Beary. Bobbriya is said to be Murave Beary and the Jain woman’s son. The son had learned sea trade from his father and died when his boat was wrecked in a storm. This is why he has been elevated to a deity.

*Mogaveeras* as a community were first recorded in 1807 as the lowest caste of ‘Tulava origin, a very indolent drunken race, of boatmen, fishermen’ (Buchanan [1807] 1999: 22). They were employed in the ‘fish curing yard’ (Thurston & Rangachari 1909: 66) of the British Government. In fact the two communities monopolising maritime trade are described as the *Mapillas* and *Mogers* (*ibid.*: 65–66). Their traditional settlements along the coastline were known as *pattanas* or maritime villages (*ibid.*: 67–68).12 *Bobbare* is clearly referred to in this text as the most important *bhuta* for the Mogers who was propitiated with periodic rituals, with every *pattana* having a ‘*Bobbriya Bhutasthana* (devil shrine)’ (*ibid.*).

This inexplicable persistence of a Muslim spirit and the length of his worship did however result in a multiplicity of visual forms ranging from a simple or pyramidal stone structure to a stone or wooden pillar, a metal mask, as well as life-size icons in varied materials. When seen as a mask, *Bobbare* is usually represented in brass or occasionally in silver and the portable icon is

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10 Byari is the name coined by Tulvas for Mapillas in South Kanara area.

11 Historical records indicate that a large number of Bunts converted to Jainism when Jaina chieftains ruled South Canara.

12 These self-governed fishery townships may be a feature common to the southern peninsula of India since the coasts of Tamilnadu have similar historically old habitations called Pattanas (see http://tulu-research.blogspot.in, accessed 6 January 2016).
similarly represented in brass or silver. As a life-size figure Bobbare has been documented in stone, wood and brass. He is usually visualised as a fierce moustached figure with a mace in one hand and a sword, shield or bell in another, sometimes bare-chested, wearing a red pyjama-like garment with bells and the ceremonial anklets associated with spirit worship called gaggare. He is also possibly one of the few bhutas conceptualised in stone, as a life-size granite image, holding a mace in one hand and a bell in another.\(^\text{13}\) The wooden mace, known as daanya, was believed to be a weapon, which symbolised his fierce character and as such is often kept in older shrines as a solitary symbol without any other representation (Upadhyaya & Upadhyaya 2002: 39, 115). According to U.P. Upadhyaya, dry fish and palm liquor or toddy were often offered to this spirit possibly in keeping with the customs of the seafaring devotees (ibid).

Newspaper reports of a procession organised by a Mogaveera association at the beginning of the fishing season, starting from the Bobbare shrine in a fishing village and moving towards the seashore for a homage to the sea god, and reportedly involving the fishermen’s association, the fish marketing federation, political and religious leaders, indicates the importance of the bhuta and the embedded nature of its presence in multiple spheres of the local landscape.\(^\text{14}\)

The position of Bobbare in the spirit pantheon is unique as it mobilises multiple elements; it is not just one of the few spirits to have been mentioned in epigraphic inscriptions in the sixteenth century, and memorialised in stone, wood, brass and silver in shore-based shrines and Hindu temples as a guardian spirit from the seventeenth century onwards. It also had its narrative ballads recorded in colonial records in the nineteenth century and it continues to resonate in the region in the twenty-first century. The performative rituals and songs of Bobbare circulate through newer media platforms such as YouTube clips and audio tracks on internet blogs. But by far the most fascinating facet of this spirit of the sea emerged in Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya and Jean-Pierre Angenot’s *Uncovering the History of Africans in Asia*, wherein a closer investigation into the term Baburu as used in Maldives reveals that it refers to a Negro of Berber origin. According to Jayasuriya and Angenot,

> [t]he term used for Africans in Maldives today refers to a geographic area. Africans are identifiable by their Negroid physiognomy. Most African slaves are reported to have come directly from Eastern Africa via Zanzibar and the Omani port of Muscat. The word Baburu means ‘negro’ as in Baburu Nisun (‘negro dance’), and Baburu Lava (‘negro song’). The word Baburu could be from ‘berber’ which has its etymon in the Roman word, ‘barbara’ which was used to denote Barbarians. The Berbers were descendants of the pre-Arab North Africans. The Arabs would refer to a non-Arab Muslim as a Barbari. (Jayasuriya & Angenot 2008: 12–13)

The possible associations between Bobbare and Baburu/Barbari present a new area hitherto unexplored that might yield further historic links between Africa and Asia in the pre-colonial period. They also open up a new set of research questions such as the following:

- What was the climate, social and political in South Canara that allowed for the spirit of a Muslim trader possibly North African in origin to emerge and acquire such a stature?
- Was the fluidity of the spirit worship tradition and the pervasive nature of its practices a

\(^{13}\) A life-size granite figure of unverified antiquity, documented at the outer periphery of Mekekattu shrine during my site visit in July 2014.

factor that enabled and furthered the deification of a rank outsider?

- What were the iconic aspects memorialised in the numerous visual depictions of the spirit that led to its widely diverse materiality and equally disparate documentation and duplication?

- What attributes have been associated with the spirit in the performative aspects such as ballads, hymns and spirit propitiation ceremonies recorded across the last hundred odd years?

These and other questions on the nature of its worship and the affiliations of its votaries in its numerous incarnations might aid in a deeper excavation of this intriguing spirit of the sea, principally the features that aid its appropriations in disparate sites spanning a wide arc.

As the verse used in ritual practices of Bobbare such as the one recorded below reveals, there exists some intriguing element in the nature of this cosmopolitan spirit, which leads improbably enough to the composition of a Sanskrit prayer in honour of the Muslim barbari in Konkana desam (country):

Kankana manigana hastam kinkinimaala virajita haaram
Konkanadeesa nivaasam pankaja barbaritam vande (Varadpande 1992: 47)

References


