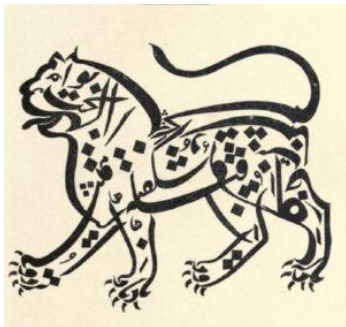


May 27, 2024, 5-7pm in EDT (Eastern Daylight Time)

Pigeons, Tigers, and Vampire Bats: On Ethnonationalism, Hospitality, and Kinship in South Asia (online workshop)

Chair: Radhika Govindrajan



This panel explores South Asian fables about human relationships with more-than-human entities. Drawing on songs, films, and stories about bats, pigeons, tigers, and elephants, the panel explores how “folktales”, old and new, animate questions of ethnonationalism, militarization, hospitality, and kinship.

The workshop is part of the AHRC-funded project 'Rethinking Fables in the Age of Global Environmental Crisis' (June 2023-May 2025) <https://research.kent.ac.uk/rethinking-fables/>

Speakers & abstracts

Muhammad Kavesh, Ethics of Welcoming Pigeons in Pakistan

In this talk, I explore multiple meanings associated with *opening*—the house, the door, the self—for unfamiliar pigeons and making them familiar Others through hospitality. Through the narration of stories within stories—stories of pigeons and about pigeons, stories that people tell about the stories that people make with pigeons—I explore the profound potential of welcome, the initial gesture of acceptance that lifts the curtain to reveal hidden realities. These stories are intricately tied to the broader story of hospitality to humans and buffaloes, epitomized in the timeless tale of Heer-Ranjha that Waris Shah elegantly elucidated in 1767 through his profound understanding, experiences, and keen observations of Punjabi culture. By building on Waris Shah’s *Heer* (1767), I offer an understanding of hospitality that remains distinct from Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida’s understanding of the concept and ask what the ethics of welcome and refusal mean in South Asia when the one who arrives is not human.

Dolly Kikon, Tiger, Spirit, Man: Creation Journey and Relationship in the Naga World

Nagas believe the first woman on Earth came from Makhel. She gave birth to three sons: the tiger, the spirit, and the man. The tiger fled to the forest, the spirit took off to an uninhabited land, and the man occupied the best fertile lands. One day, the brothers decided to part ways. To mark their departure, they held a feast and erected three monoliths, each stone representing the tiger, spirit, and man. Today, many visitors arrive in Makhel to see the monoliths. The smooth grey rocks covered with lichens and inscriptions mark the Naga people’s journey of origin, belonging, and shared history. In this presentation, I will share how Indigenous fables and ancestral connections to land might help us reflect on situated care practices for community, history, and land.

Mythri Jegathesan, Vampire bats, white blood, and thirsty elephants: fabulating ethnonationalism on Sri Lanka’s plantations

This talk thinks about the more than human elements that emerge in filmic representations of Sri Lanka’s plantations. Thinking with Paul Kockelman’s modes of “enclosure and disclosure” (2007) and Saidiya Hartman’s methodology of *critical fabulation* and to “jeopardize the status of the event” (2008), I listen and watch the migration of lesser vampire bats, latex tapped from rubber trees, and elephants searching for water across feature films that were shot on or near Sri Lanka’s rubber and tea plantations between 1934 and 1983. In doing so, I speculate how these life forms—surveilled, hunted, and extracted—test the plantation’s edges and do the labor of holding Sri Lanka’s politics of ethnonationalism and militarized violence.

Speakers/ Chair Bio

[Muhammad Kavesh](#) is the Director of the South Asia Research Institute (SARI) and an ARC DECRA fellow in anthropology at the Australian National University. His research interests include ethics, multispecies anthropology, decolonization, anthropology of Islam, multisensory analysis, and the geopolitics of present-day South Asia. Kavesh is the author of *Animal Enthusiasms: Life Beyond Cage and Leash in Rural Pakistan* (2021) and the lead editor of *Nurturing Alternative Futures: Living with Diversity in a More-than-Human World* (2024). He has also co-edited two special journal issues: *Anthropology of Mutualism* (2023, *Anthropology Today*) and *Sense Making in a More-than-Human World* (2021, *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*). His research has been featured in *American Anthropologist*, *American Ethnologist*, *Journal of Asian Studies*, and *South Asia*, among others. Currently, he is finalizing a manuscript on the ethics of hospitality to pigeons in South Asia.

[Dolly Kikon](#) is a Professor in the Department of Anthropology University of California, Santa Cruz. Her publications include *Life and Dignity: Women's Testimonies of Sexual Violence in Dimapur (Nagaland)* (2015), *Living with Oil and Coal: Resource Politics and Militarization in Northeast India* (2019), *Leaving the Land: Indigenous Migration and Affective Labour in India* (2019, with Bengt. G. Karlsson), *Ceasefire City: Militarism, Capitalism, Urbanism in Dimapur* (2021, with Duncan McDuie-Ra), *Seeds and Sovereignty: Eastern Himalayan Experiences* (2023, with D. Deka, J. Rodrigues, B.G. Karlsson, S. Barbora and M. Tula), and most recently *Food Journeys: Stories from the Heart* (2023, with Joel Rodrigues). She is a member of Recover, Restore and Decolonise (RRaD), a community research initiative founded by the Forum for Naga Reconciliation (FNR). <https://rradnagaland.org/> She is a senior researcher with the North Eastern Institute of Language and Culture, (NEILAC) in Guwahati, and serves as a member of the Council of Advisors for The India Forum (TIF).

[Mythri Jegathesan](#) is associate professor in the Department of Anthropology at Santa Clara University. She earned her PhD from Columbia University in 2013 and uses ethnographic, feminist, and humanistic methods to examine plantation life and the politics of labor, capital and development in Sri Lanka. Her book *Tea and Solidarity: Tamil Women and Work in Postwar Sri Lanka* (2019) is an ethnography of plantation life and work in the context of ethnonationalist violence and civil war in Sri Lanka. She is currently researching land resettlement, labor and livelihood in Sri Lanka's Northern Province and is President of the American Institute for Sri Lankan Studies (AISLS) and co-editor of *Anthropology of Work Review*.

[Radhika Govindrajan](#) is an Associate Professor of Anthropology and International Studies at the University of Washington, Seattle. She is the Director of the South Asia Center. Her book, *Animal Intimacies: Interspecies Relatedness in India's Central Himalayas*, was published by the University of Chicago Press in 2018 and Penguin India in 2019. She has published in *American Ethnologist*, *Cultural Anthropology*, *American Anthropologist*, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East*, and *HAU: The Journal of Ethnographic Theory*. She is currently working on a book that explores how debates about what makes a village a village take shape in relation to the political economic of sex.