



UNIVERSITÀ DI NAPOLI
L'ORIENTALE

DAAM
DIPARTIMENTO ASIA,
AFRICA E MEDITERRANEO



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Oceano Indiano

Progetto di Ricerca di Ateneo
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*New Research on
South Asia*
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NOVEMBRE 2026

CICLO ANNUALE DI CONFERENZE A CURA DEL CENTRO DI STUDI SULL'ASIA MERIDIONALE E IL
SUD-EST ASIATICO DELL'UNIVERSITÀ DI NAPOLI L'ORIENTALE.

LA PARTECIPAZIONE AD ALMENO CINQUE INCONTRI NEL CORSO DELL'ANNO DARÀ DIRITTO
ALL'ACQUISIZIONE DI 2 CFU, PREVIO SUPERAMENTO DI UNA PROVA ORALE



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5 novembre

ore 14:30, Palazzo del Mediterraneo, Aula 2.5

“Embodying Dāna: portraiture and patronage in Gandhāra”

speaker: Moizza Elahi, Cornell University

18 Novembre

ore 15:00, Antisala Degli Specchi, Palazzo Corigliano

“Shallow Blue Empire: A History of Pearl Diving in the Indian Ocean,

1850–1930”

speaker: Tamara Surani Fernando, STONY Brook University

discussant: Francisco Apellaniz (Università L'Orientale, Napoli)

30 novembre

ore 14:30, Antisala Degli Specchi, Palazzo Corigliano

“Framing the Divine: the many arts of Sucindram’s gopuram”

speaker: Anna Lise Seastrand, University of Minnesota

Abstracts

Shallow Blue Empire: The History of Pearl Diving in the Indian Ocean, 1850–1930

Tamara Surani Fernando, Stony Brooks University

Shallow Blue Empire: A History of Pearl Diving in the Indian Ocean, 1850–1930 is a book by Tamara Surani Fernando published in 2026 by Harvard University Press. The author will discuss it in conversation with Prof. Francisco Apellaniz (Università L'Orientale, Napoli).

The monograph offers a nuanced history of seafaring communities in the Indian Ocean, where the force of British imperial power depended on the expertise of local divers and sailors to feed a global demand for pearls. In the late nineteenth century, thousands of men and boys across the northern rim of the Indian Ocean dove daily to the ocean floor in search of pearl-bearing oysters. It was the height of the so-called global pearl boom, driven by enormous demand for pearls in Europe and North America. Far removed from the showrooms of New York, London, and Paris, these divers drew on skills and expertise handed down across generations to conduct the dangerous work of hauling oysters up from the warm shallows. But they also faced a new challenge: the rise of British power in the Indian Ocean, where colonial officials relied heavily on local knowledge and labor to feed the lucrative pearling industry. Tamara Fernando examines the transformations wrought by colonial extraction across the three primary sites that fed the pearl boom between 1850 and 1930: the Persian Gulf, the Gulf of Mannar near Sri Lanka, and the Mergui Archipelago in Myanmar. British oversight transformed migration patterns and the dynamics of race and caste among divers, while imperial scientists regularly tested new technologies and techniques intended to improve oyster hauls. Yet even as the positions of local divers and sailors changed dramatically, their expertise remained paramount to the industry—until, in the 1930s, the

depletion of oyster beds and the rise of lab-grown alternatives shuttered the market for natural pearls altogether. A vivid account of how seafaring communities navigated these shifting tides, *Shallow Blue Empire* fundamentally recenters the human labor, animal lives, and environmental conditions that sustained a global obsession with pearls.

Framing the Divine: the many arts of Sucindram's gopuram

Anna Lise Seastrand, University of Minnesota

In the late 19th century, the soaring entrance tower (*gopuram*) of the Sucindram temple (Kanyakumari District, Tamil Nadu) became a site of intriguing artistic experimentation. While South Indian murals traditionally served as a kind of *mise-en-scène*, providing both visual and intellectual background for the rituals and events that occurred before them, the murals of Sucindram represent a striking departure. Executed to resemble framed European oil paintings, complete with *trompe-l'oeil* nails and golden picture frames, these works innovate murals by responding to the many new forms of art and styles that emerged in the late colonial period. This talk explores how these fascinating paintings drew inspiration from the burgeoning world of studio photography and the spectacle of Parsi theater, as well as incorporated royal visual culture and the dance-dramas of *kathakali* and *kutiyattam*. Located in the historic princely state of Travancore, these murals are more than mere decoration; they are a visual record of a culture in transition. By examining the way divine subjects are "staged," we uncover how 19th-century artists used the temple walls to reflect, and reflect upon, the sweeping social and political changes of the late colonial period.

