Sex, Death and the Gods is a seventy-five minutes documentary, directed by Beeban Kidron, on the devadasi tradition, the dedication of pre-pubertal girls to deities. Considered female servants of god, they were temple attendants in the roles of arts performers and sacred prostitutes in pre-colonial times.

In contemporary India their functions have completely changed, as the camera of Beeban Kidron shows us. In her portraits of devadasis, and while describing the history of the tradition, she especially underlines the linkages between the current system, poverty and discriminatory gender ideologies.

‘Devadasi: slaves of god, pre-pubescent girls married off with a god’. A woman reads the meaning of the word devadasi, and Beeban Kidron asks if there are still girls dedicated to god. ‘No, it stopped, the practice is illegal today.’ However, the reality is dramatically different, as the data confirm: in Karnataka there are almost 30,000 girls still dedicated to Yellama, a goddess of the Dalit (untouchable) community, as nowadays the practice is maintained only among Dalit girls. Indeed, through the narration of some devadasis’ life stories, the documentary explains how poverty is at the root of contemporary dedications, together with a discriminatory gender ideology that devalues women as objects in the hands of their family.

The first portrait is taken in a brothel of Belgaum District: Roopa was dedicated by her mother, who sold her virginity for 5,000 rupees (around 80 dollars). Since that time, Roopa has been sustaining the whole household, her mother and even her married brother and his family. Her life story is representative of those many girls who are dedicated during Saundatti Festival, a celebration of Yellama: a necklace made of red and white beans signifies their new status, but they will understand the meaning of that ‘jewel’ only after their first menstruation, when they will begin to receive men and work as prostitutes.

Anjina has not been dedicated yet. She does not want to be, to her grandmother’s despair: Anjina should take care of the whole family, her dedication could be a ‘great benefit’, more remunerative than her education. But Anjina does not want to be like her mom, a devadasi victim of HIV. Anjina and her brother are HIV positive as well, but medicines are only for her brother.

Is the life of a woman easier to be sacrificed? This is the basic question the director addresses to the audience, developing two topics: the community (Dalit) exploitation of female sexuality and gender discrimination, both caused by the absence of opportunities for girls: they can only be wives or prostitutes, their education is temporary, and it ends as soon as a faster way to earn money arrives.

Poverty is, therefore, the main reason for dedication, which brings remunerative work. Meena, a social worker, says ‘choice is a very cruel mirage for all the women of the Third World’. Indeed, although in the Devadasi Red Light District some devadasis (Anita, Kamala Bai) are proud of their condition, as they feel free and in control of
their own lives and choices, as a matter of fact, the problem is the lack of opportunity and choice for women coming from these communities.

In the past things were different. The director reconstructs the history of the tradition through recent videos of temples devadasis, as well as through the explanations of Davesh Soneji (Associate Professor of South Asian Religions, McGill University). He explains that until the nineteenth century both Dalits girls and girls from high castes were gathered under the umbrella the term of devadasis. They formed a peculiar group of women out of the domestic world, and were considered auspicious because of their marriage with a god. Their activities in temples were not only to satisfy the sexual desire of priests and rulers, but included entertaining pilgrims with dances and performances, as well as performing propitiatory ceremonies, attracting resources to the temple.

Nevertheless, during colonial times, with the spreading of Victorian values, together with criticism of the concubinage system, in which the devadasis had a main role, the devadasi tradition began to be blamed by, and to be source of embarrassment to, the elite. Consequently, the devadasi system lost its high-class component, while the low castes ended up in a worse condition: losing the sanctity of their role in temples, becoming simple prostitutes, living in brothels or in specific villages. They became sex workers under the cover of being dedicated to the goddess Yellama.

The black and white used to narrate past history, and the beauty of the dresses and jewels of the last temple devadasis, clashes with the foulness of the modern ones, who, especially in the cities, live in critical conditions. Even those girls who are rescued and live in the government rescue centres are slaves of their condition: they cannot leave the place, and even those who would like to, know that there is nothing waiting for them outside. As Lakshmi, a young rescued devadasi, underlines, most of them were sold by their family and have lost faith in other people. Moreover, no one would ever be willing to marry them. Again, her words highlight the lack of alternatives: wives or prostitutes.

Nonetheless, there is an alternative solution, which is represented by Shobha. After six years of sexual exploitation she was rescued by an association, MASS (Mahila Abhivrudhi Mathu Samrakshana Samsthe), and today she is actively working for it. With the aim of eradicating the devadasi system, and spying on people to glean information about forthcoming dedications, MASS workers operate in society with great resolution: Shobha is filmed, during the Yellama’s celebration, while cutting the dreadlocks of an old woman, a representative of Yellama looking for new girls to dedicate. In her private life, Shobha managed to change her destiny and to make a difference also in her daughter’s life, investing in her education. Education, as Meena underlines, could modify this economic system hidden under the idea of the goddesses’ will.

One can only conclude that solutions to the problem should be more systematic. The lack of decisive examples in the documentary underlines the absence of unified
and concrete action to eradicate the main causes of the devadasi system: poverty, gender and caste discrimination.

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At the recent congress of the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (IUAES), held in Manchester in August 2013, I met the Iranian filmmaker, Alireza Qasemkhan. He kindly presented me with a DVD copy of the film under review, The Songs of the Persian Gulf. However, at the time the film was not yet available in an English version, so the first time I watched this film was actually on my laptop in a hotel room in Manchester, incapable of understanding what people were saying or, indeed, singing. Over the years I had frequently and experimentally shown films, when teaching visual anthropology and ethnographic film, that I knew the students would not understand the verbal expositions of due to language. One point has been to raise the issue of contextualization in film, arguing that films, or at least some films, are capable of contextualizing without using verbal forms, whether actual interviews or running dialogue. The reason for this anecdotal entry point to a review of a film should be evident. I was absolutely fascinated by the ability of the film to convey to me an understanding of what the film was all about without getting a word of what was being said, and was struck by the aesthetic beauty of the way in which it was shot, by Sadegh Souri, and edited, by Meisam Shahbabai, as well as the film’s magnificent use of sound (the sound recordist is Abbas Vadi and the sound editor/mixer Hosein Ghourcian). It reminded me of a book I had contributed to on sound in ethnographic film, my contribution (Crawford, 2010) focusing on the anthropology of the senses and the role of sound in contextualization and the production of inferred knowledge. This film reminds us that film is an audio-visual medium.

The title indicates what the film is about and although we do not get to know exactly where the film is shot, one feels that it could be anywhere in the Persian Gulf. In fact, it could almost be anywhere in the world, given the universality of sailors’ and fishermen’s songs, or for that matter songs produced in the context of any kind of hard labour. In this sense the film more generally contributes to an understanding of songs as intangible cultural heritage. The main focus of the film, or even the plot, if you like, is how these songs are threatened and the tradition dying out if nothing is done. What the film more than anything else reveals, at times using impressionistic or even haptic styles, is exactly how directly the songs and the singing grow out of the labour and lives of the fishermen and sailors. This is clearly demonstrated in the numerous shots in which we follow a fishing boat to sea, the whole crew singing along under the leadership of an old gentleman, unnamed, who is obviously the