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Material culture and the affective bonds between Hindustani immigrants in Suriname, 1873-1916

In this paper I reflect on the question how historians working on non-western history and premodern societies can learn from one another when it comes to understanding community formation. I argue that historians working on non-western and premodern societies complement each other in reflecting critically on the sometimes assumed universality of modern European categorizations and concepts. Historians working on non-western history have long hailed the creativity, resilience and agency of colonial subjects. However, enquiries into the lives, views, identities and communities formed by enslaved and indentured people are hampered by a scarcity of sources that provide their point of view. I argue that historians working on non-western history need to combine different types of sources and go beyond the textual in order to successfully engage with these realms of knowledge. This is substantiated through a case study of the affective bonds expressed through the use of material culture. Most Hindustani had to leave their closest relatives behind when they left for Suriname to work there as indentured laborers. Social and familial ties were redefined and the objects like bracelets and pots took on a new significance, signaling bonds that were forged on board the ships that took them to Suriname and on the plantations. It is made clear that visual and material sources are vital for understanding identity and community formation in colonial societies.