

UCLA Center for the Study of Religion Faculty Seminar Series:
Works in Progress

A Saint on the Move

Images of Efficacy in Devotional Diasporas of
Shirdi Sai Baba

By Dr. Polly Nooter Roberts

Followed by a Q & A with Dr. Allen F. Roberts

Professors, UCLA Department of World Arts & Cultures/Dance

Cosponsored by the Department of World Arts & Cultures/Dance

Thursday, October 27, 2011

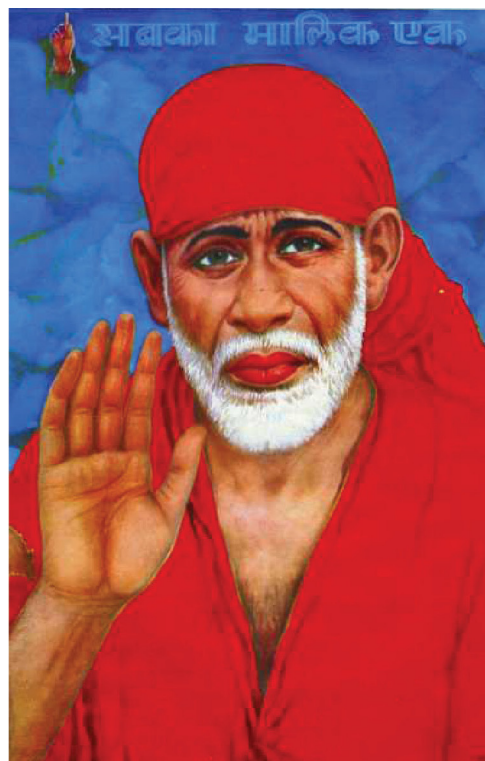
4:00PM - 5:30PM

10383 Bunche Hall

Light Refreshments will be served

“If you look to me, I look to you”

~ Shirdi Sai Baba



Abstract

Visual images are integral to the devotional practices of a dynamic contemporary religious movement based upon the life and teachings of Shirdi Sai Baba, a South Asian saint who lived from the mid-1800's to 1918 in the western Indian state of Maharashtra. Sai Baba defied religious nationalism, refused to self-identify as either Hindu or Muslim, and accepted the devotions of people of all castes and creeds, thus offering an alternative to communal ideologies. This presentation will explore how images have and continue to actively shape devotion and impact this fast-growing movement's presence and expansion in India and in communities of Mauritius, Germany, Ghana, and the US, where the Saint has an avid following. In addition to documenting the history, production, and dispersal of images central to the movement, the talk will focus on the **efficacy** of the images -- as understood through locally defined concepts of indexicality -- and their *radical performative materiality* that ensures the presence and proximity of the Saint despite diasporic dislocations.

Presenters

Mary (Polly) Nooter Roberts is Professor in UCLA's Department of World Arts & Cultures/Dance. She holds a PhD in Art History from Columbia University and served as Senior Curator at the Museum for African Art until 1994 and as Deputy Director and Chief Curator of UCLA's Fowler Museum until 2008. **Allen F. Roberts** is Professor in UCLA's Department of World Arts & Cultures/Dance and is a socio-cultural anthropologist by training with a PhD from the University of Chicago. The Robertses conduct research, write books, and curate major thematic exhibitions together, including the award-winning *Memory: Luba Art and the Making of History* (1996) and *A Saint in the City: Sufi Arts of Urban Senegal* (2003).