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Travel Writing and the Global Imagination in Muslim South Asia
Daniel Joseph Majchrowicz
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Introduction

It was in Rampur, a small town a few hours northeast of Delhi, that I first heard tell of a local library with thousands of books, but only three walls. Of course, I went to investigate immediately. I introduced myself to the head librarian of this curious institution and explained that I was writing a book on nineteenth- and twentieth-century Urdu travelogues, or *safarnama*s, and their place in South Asian social and literary history. Could I review the library's collections? I asked gingerly. The librarian quickly assured me that I was free to use whatever material I wanted, but only so long as I managed to find anything usable. "The library's still functioning," he said, "but the back wall came down in a rainstorm. A lot of books were destroyed." The travelogue section had been one of the storm's casualties.

Stepping into the main reception area of the Saulat Public Library, I saw a few men seated at tables, sipping tea and reading the newspaper. Behind them, sunlight streamed in from a cavernous opening at the far side of the room. It was true. The wall really had collapsed.[1] All of the books that had been damaged by the cave-in—including most of the library's travelogues—had been piled together in an adjoining room that lacked both ventilation and electricity. The shelves were in fantastic disarray, with hundreds of books piled about at random. Some were waterlogged, while others were brittle and ravaged by termites. A good number, though, were still intact. For a week, we picked our way through the heaps, ultimately retrieving dozens of colonial-era travelogues in Urdu and Persian. I made digital copies of them all and returned home to New Delhi to inspect our findings.

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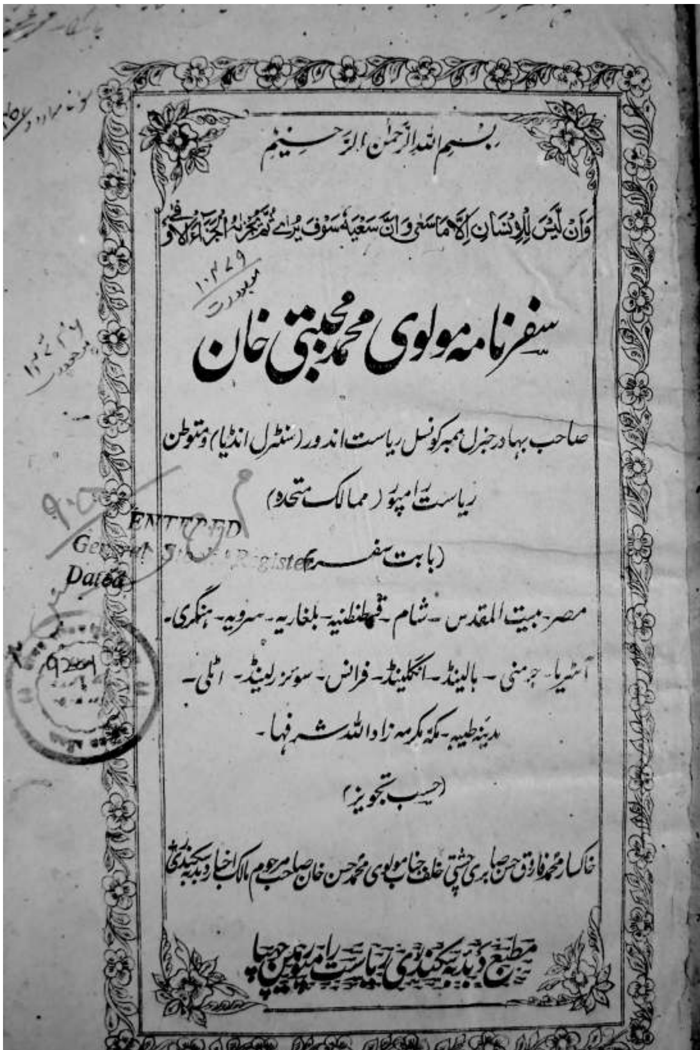
Flipping through the files, the first thing to strike me about the travelogues in Saulat's collection was how many of them were local productions. Though their subject matter spanned the globe, the books themselves came from authors or presses located in or near Rampur. Their cover pages trumpeted their author's destinations ("Mujtaba Khan's voyage … to Egypt, Jerusalem, and the Levant…"), with the place of publication ("Printed in Rampur") in a smaller font below (Figure I.1). Further inspection revealed that these books were not just products of



بسم اللہ الرحمن الرحیم

وان لیس للانسان الا ما سعی و ان سعیہ سوف یری ثم یجزاہ الجزاء الاوفی

سفرنامہ مولوی محمد مجتبی خان

صاحب بہادر جنرل ممبر کونسل ریاست اندور (سنٹرل انڈیا) و متوطن

ریاست رامپور (ممالک متحدہ)

(بابت سفر)

مصر - بیت المقدس - شام - قسطنطنیہ - بلغاریہ - سرویہ - ہنگری -

آسٹریا - جرمنی - ہالینڈ - انگلینڈ - فرانس - سوئزرلینڈ - اٹلی -

مدینہ طیبہ - مکہ مکرمہ زاد اللہ شرفہا -

(حسب تجویز)

خاکسار محمد فاروق حسن صابری چشتی خلف جناب مولوی محمد حسن خان صاحب مرحوم مالک اخبار دبدبہ سکندری

مطبع دبدبہ سکندری ریاست رامپور میں چھپا

Figure I.1 Maulvi Muhammad Mujtaba Khan's travelogue

Source: Author.

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a privileged elite either. Saulat's travelogue collection includes writing by everyone from kings to draftsmen. Collectively, the cover pages of these locally produced but globally sourced travel accounts brought another picture of Rampur into view, one that belied its seeming provinciality. Instead, they suggested that this small town was in fact closely tied, physically and intellectually, to the wider world. Through the Urdu travelogue, authors like Mujtaba Khan were able to imagine the world and represent it to their readers in Rampur and the surrounding areas using their own local lenses. Just as I had already noticed in libraries in cities and towns all across the subcontinent, in Rampur the travelogue allowed local Urdu writers to imagine the world in words, and to place that imagination before their readers.

The imaginative power of this literature is exemplified by one Doctor 'Ali Sabzvari, whose travelogue introduces Chapter 4. A turn-of-the-century dentist living in the small town of Arrah in Bihar, Dr Sabzvari had a passion for travel and a penchant for writing. Bearing scintillating titles like *Khaufnak Dunya: Jazira-i Borniyo meñ Safar aur Jangaloñ meñ Shikar* (Terrifying world: a voyage to the island of Borneo and hunting expeditions in the jungle, [1908] 1935), the exploits he described in his travelogues once enthralled Urdu readers. Naiyer Masud (1936–2017), one of Urdu's greatest short-story writers, reminisced that *Khaufnak Dunya* had been among his favorite childhood reads: "I fell in love with this book. I would read it again and again, and every time I read it, I would discover a new kind of pleasure."[2] In other words, the travel writing of an obscure dentist in Bihar helped shape how a young boy in Lucknow imagined Africa and Southeast Asia. In Urdu, travel writing was a ubiquitous medium for this kind of textual encounter with the world.[3]

This book takes up Urdu travel writing between 1840 and 1990 to show how accounts like Sabzvari's conjured an aspirational global imagination. It argues that the travelogue did more than simply describe the world as it was. It offered a means for writers to imagine, to aspire, and to share their views and visions with readers and listeners back home. And it gave people like Masud new ways to imagine the world and consider its possibilities.[4] The Urdu travelogue, this book will show, is not just a literary genre or a source for definitive facts about the past; it is also a continuous historical record of how Urdu speakers engaged with the world. This book studies that record to understand the history of its readers' and writers' global aspirations. Proceeding largely chronologically, it emphasizes the socio-historical, intellectual, and geopolitical contexts in which the Urdu travelogue was produced, while attending closely to questions of literariness, intertextuality, materiality, and circulation.

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This study begins from the mid-nineteenth century, when political and technological changes were introducing more and more Indians to an evolving world now ordered by steamship routes, railways, and an increasingly interconnected global economy. These changes made India into a central node in a transport network that circled the world.[5] Increased mobility coincided with the arrival of cheap print, rising literacy, and the recognition of Urdu as an official language in much of Britain's Indian empire. New presses mushroomed everywhere, offering a nascent reading public an ever-expanding range of books, newspapers, journals, and pamphlets.[6] As Indians fanned out across the globe, the Urdu travelogue emerged to tell their stories and propagate their global imaginations. By the late nineteenth century, printed descriptions of Penang and Mombasa in Urdu were pedestrian. Basra and Aden were household names, and Tokyo and Havana no longer seemed quite so far off. Read in isolation, these travelogues, typically by obscure authors like Dr Sabzvari, can only tell us so much. Read collectively, however, they reveal how mobility, print, and literature combined to shape South Asia's global pasts and to inform how South Asians see the world today.[7]

This book is located between the fields of history and literature. It is a social history of aspiration and ideas, but one built on the premise that the travelogue tells us the most about the past when we treat it not as a mine for information, but as a culturally grounded and temporally located literary genre with its own rules and logics. Part I shows how, between 1840 and 1880, the Urdu travelogue emerged as a hybrid of colonial and local textual traditions as it was adopted and developed by explorers (Chapter 1), indigenous rulers (Chapter 2), and schoolhouse pedagogues (Chapter 3). Part II examines the period from 1880 to 1990, when the genre moved into the mainstream. In this period, rising literacy encouraged authors to vary their style and content to match the aesthetics and aspirations of an increasingly diverse readership. These changes are traced through a focus on three major themes: pleasure (Chapter 4), pilgrimage (Chapter 5), and the 1947 Partition (Chapter 6). Together, the six chapters show how the travelogue functioned as a space for travel authors to cultivate and disseminate their own visions of the world.

By theorizing the travelogue as a literature of aspiration and global engagement, this book opens up a neglected social history while introducing new voices and perspectives on critical questions about class, language, gender, race, and power in colonial and postcolonial South Asia. Of course, with many thousands of travel accounts available for study, one study cannot do justice to the full richness of the genre's global imagination. In this book, I have limited myself primarily to writing on Asia and Africa, particularly at the expense of travel writing on Europe, which has so far received the lion's share of scholarly attention to the genre. In addition to moving beyond Europe, this book also makes a concerted effort to correct a similar academic overemphasis on male travel writers. Instead, this

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book introduces a wide range of travel writing in Urdu by women, nearly all of it previously unknown and unstudied.[8] By clearly demonstrating women's full engagement in the production of Urdu's global imagination, this emphasis adds to the belated but growing recognition of women's contributions to literary and intellectual life in colonial South Asia. It also affirms one of this book's central arguments: that even the most marginalized writers could contribute meaningfully to the cultivation of Urdu's global imagination.

To appreciate how this global imagination was cultivated requires acknowledging Urdu's specific social dynamics over the last two centuries. Urdu is among the most widely spoken languages in South Asia. In its written form, it has historically appeared primarily in an adapted form of the Perso-Arabic script.[9] The language and its literary tradition are best described as being Islamicate—a term that Marshall Hodgson famously coined to refer "not directly to the religion, Islam, itself but to the social and cultural complex historically associated with Islam and the Muslims, both among Muslims themselves and even when found among non-Muslims."[10] The Islamicate, crucially, is shared by Muslims and non-Muslims alike, in the same way that non-Christians can unselfconsciously share in European Enlightenment and intellectual practices that are derived from or associated with Christianity. Geographically, Urdu's "heartland," if it can be said to have one, has historically been located in the Gangetic plain from Delhi to Bihar. Yet the story is not so simple, for Urdu has been—and largely remains—a widely used language well beyond this "heartland." It has long existed in parts of southern India, where Urdu literature was patronized from at least the sixteenth century. It has also flourished as a language of commerce and literature in central and southern India, as well as in Bengal, Gujarat, Sindh, and, particularly, Kashmir and Punjab.[11]

Long a popular language of oral poetry, in the nineteenth century Urdu took on a more formal role when it replaced Persian as the language of law and the public sphere across northern and central India, even in regions like the Punjab where Urdu was spoken fluently only by a small minority. During this period, the use of Urdu was not limited to a single religious or ethnic group; members of all groups enjoyed largely shared access to this Islamicate language. Knowledge of it was widely considered a mark of education and sophistication. In researching for this book, I regularly encountered colonial-era Hindu and Jain pilgrimage accounts written in Urdu, such as the text that introduces Chapter 1; the language's Islamicate identity in no way prevented these non-Muslim authors from expressing their own religious identities. This cosmopolitanism survived well into the twentieth century, though it was soon contested. From the late nineteenth century, a growing movement to promote Hindi (which used a grammar identical to Urdu, but written in the Devanagari script and preferring a Sanskritic vocabulary)

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as the true language of Hindus and of the Indian public sphere contributed to the increasing sense that Urdu was not just an Islamicate language, but a Muslim one.[12] Though in popular perception this has now become the dominant view of Urdu, in fact, Urdu's transition from an "Islamicate" to an "Islamic" language is far from complete and it remains, in many ways, a transregional and trans-communal language. Streaks of this abiding cosmopolitanism can be seen through to the final chapter of this book, which engages with Urdu travel writing of the 1980s. Today Urdu remains a popular language in both India and Pakistan among Muslims and non-Muslims alike, and a common link language between people from across South Asia, and beyond.[13]

This long history and vast geography make Urdu an ideal medium for the study of the South Asian travelogue and its global imagination. Geographically speaking, Urdu is unique among the region's vernaculars for its particularly broad reach.[14] Until the transregional rise of Hindi in late colonial India, Urdu was the only vernacular linguistic tradition to gain currency across the subcontinent.[15] Urdu is also revealing because of its historical ecumenicism and wide social reach, particularly in earlier decades and centuries. The wide range of authors cited throughout this book give testament to this diversity. They also emphasize that writing in Urdu, and participating in the Urdu public sphere, was a conscious choice. Urdu's travel authors were often not "native speakers." Nor were they monolingual. Rather, the writers and readers studied in this book chose Urdu—in other words, a particular language, script, vocabulary, and rhetorical style—from a range of linguistic options.[16] Chapter 3, for instance, discusses the travel account of a colonial administrator named Aminchand. Aminchand chose to write his travelogue in Urdu, though his private correspondence reveals that he also had equal facility with both Persian and English and that he actually considered himself to be a native speaker of Punjabi. Myriad examples like this serve to underline that Urdu's history of travel writing reflects a consciously created and diverse intellectual and literary tradition.

That said, Urdu is by no means the only South Asian language with a vibrant travel writing tradition. Every major South Asian vernacular produced travelogues, and many of this book's arguments apply to these traditions too. Literary traditions in South Asia frequently spring from shared sources, and are often in dialog with one another. Urdu influenced travel writing in other languages, and was likewise influenced by them. What is more, colonialism's pervasive reach meant that every region and language in India was affected by shared stimuli in the form of colonial policies and broad social transformations. Thus, while this book focuses on Urdu, it simultaneously provides a model for the study of the genre more broadly in South Asia, and even in other British colonies.[17] To draw out these parallels,

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I regularly include references to travel writing from other linguistic traditions, South Asian and otherwise.

Urdu's Global Imagination

By chance, one of the first books we salvaged from Saulat Library's storeroom was a flimsy paperback travelogue of Burma (present-day Myanmar) by one Mirza Kazim Barlas, a small-time trader in late-nineteenth-century Muradabad, a town near Rampur. Titled *Sair-i Darya ki Pahli Mauj: Sair-i Rangun* (The first wave of a tour of the sea: a tour of Rangoon, 1892), it was the first installment in a series of travelogues by Barlas that took readers around the rim of the Indian Ocean, from the Maldives to Sri Lanka, Burma, Malaysia, and Singapore.[18] In Barlas's day all this territory belonged to the British Empire, making it more easily accessible to the Crown's Indian subjects. Indeed, by the late nineteenth century, huge numbers of them had already crossed the Bay of Bengal, a region "at the heart of the global, imperial economy."[19] However, most Indians who made the crossing came from southern coastal communities, not from the Urdu-speaking north.[20]

Barlas hoped to change that. He lamented the apathy with which "Hindustanis," or north Indians, regarded the Indian Ocean rim.[21] In his account he suggested his readers imagine these lands not as distant and irrelevant, but as a resource-rich frontier ripe for Hindustani exploitation. If only they would alter how they saw the world, he insisted, they stood to make a lot of money. Through travel they might even, he hoped, rejuvenate their own "stagnant" society. To make this argument convincing, Barlas dangled before his readers the promise of financial reward, social respect, and even conjugal pleasure. In his travelogue on Sri Lanka, Lakshadweep, and the Maldives, he first wrote:

> There is immeasurable profit to be made by leaving Hindustan for the islands and settled regions that neighbor it for both skilled and unskilled laborers, as well as for men of commerce. These islands and regions have a great need for commercial traders, but few means to address that need, for the native people of these regions are almost completely savage in their customs and disposition.

Then he turned harsh:

> The myopic people of Hindustan proper refuse to relinquish their "love of the homeland." They would rather starve than be away from their loved ones. This is why they live in penury, a penury that grows by the day.... I am writing this book to lead my countrymen to the path of prosperity.... Yes, you will face discomfort when you leave home. There will be no more soft, tender chapatis prepared for you

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> by delicate hands. But inshallah, you will acquire that [wealth] which will help you acquire those soft chapatis, those delicate hands.[22]

Barlas's travelogues thus introduced the region's languages and cultures to Hindustani readers not out of cosmopolitan curiosity, but to inspire them to travel there, and to facilitate their business transactions. His travel narrative focused on the Indian Ocean's resources, commercial dealings, and potential for profit. He even compiled a phrasebook of practical business vocabulary in Sinhala, Tamil, and Malay.[23] With "just a little sense, and this book," he avowed, readers would find financial success.[24]

Barlas's exploitative aspiration complicates some dominant approaches to exchange in the Indian Ocean. Scholarship on Indian Ocean mobility often depicts indigenous trade and cultural exchange on terms that were far more accommodating and less coercive or hierarchical than the grossly uneven systems introduced by Europeans.[25] Scholars also emphasize how South Asians supported African anticolonial movements and rejected racializing policies and practices.[26] Barlas, though, had little interest in these ideals. He wrote with a presumption of cultural and intellectual superiority. Today's perception of the Global South as the antithesis of the North perhaps inspires a tendency to assume horizontal solidarities, but Barlas's text suggests otherwise. Barlas imagined an ascendant Hindustan that would build wealth through travel, and he described his project—and imagined his world—in terms reminiscent of imperialist European travel writing on India.[27]

Critically, though, not everyone saw things as Barlas did. His view was just one in a marketplace of imaginations. Through participation in Urdu's travel writing tradition—as writers, as readers, as commentators—ordinary people like Barlas contributed their own visions to a broad, open-ended, and accessible project of "making the global."[28] The concept of globalization has been critiqued for suggesting either that global engagements spread on their own or that they are dictated to passive recipients from centers of power (whether by "the West" or by urbane elites).[29] Instead, Michael Hathaway advocates for a "world-making" approach to the discursive shifts of global engagement. He argues that "identities are formed relationally through interaction," as individuals from across a range of groups engage with and negotiate the production and circulation of ideas and imaginations.[30] This model explains how marginal figures like Barlas could become participants in this "world-making process," by contributing to what I call Urdu's global imagination through travel writing. By global imagination I mean a decentralized, socially constructed, sometimes contradictory, set of ideas, images, and desires about the world, or specific places within the world, that are produced, negotiated, and circulated through the collaborative space of literature.

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In her study of cosmopolitanism and the late-nineteenth-century Urdu novel, Jennifer Dubrow argues that "Urdu readers and writers imagined themselves as citizens of an Urdu-speaking, transregional, yet nonnational community that was global in outlook," and that literature offered a "global imaginative space" to construct a vision of the world.[31] This type of world-making process was fully operative in the travelogue, a genre typically premised on first-hand experience. To speak of Urdu's global imagination within the framework of "making the global" is to suggest that, through travel writing, every stakeholder with access to literature could contribute to discourses about the world while making space for themselves, their ideas, and their aspirations. Urdu's global imagination was not dictated solely by "great men," nor imposed on the populace by a colonial power. It was, rather, fashioned collectively from within the dialogic arena of Urdu literature.

In invoking the term "global imagination" here, I do not mean to suggest that individual Urdu readers and writers were necessarily consciously or constantly thinking "globally." Nor were they necessarily cosmopolitan actors who embraced and reveled in difference. Like Barlas, they might even see the world in distinctly un-cosmopolitan ways. The point, rather, is that Urdu travel literature encompassed the globe. Postcolonial scholarship has been critiqued for focusing on texts that "write back" to empire, neglecting other circulatory routes and pathways of exchange and interaction.[32] Rather than focus on "contact zones" between colonizer and colonized, speaking of a global imagination reflects the reality that Urdu literature engaged with the whole world, typically in ways that cannot be reduced to neat structures of asymmetrical power.[33] Dialogue between regions in South Asia was common, as was engagement with Asia and Africa. No single individual read about every part of the world, but readers had only to pick up the latest issue of their favorite monthly magazine to access new, first-person perspectives. Not everyone agreed what the world looked like or which parts of it really mattered. But, through the process of reading, writing, publishing, and reciting—even by jotting comments in the margins of library books—readers and writers negotiated collectively how to imagine it.

Postcolonial scholarship has similarly been critiqued for its emphasis on nationalism (whether Indian or Muslim nationalism), thus losing sight of "internal" heteroglossia within and between South Asian regional and social contexts.[34] A focus on Urdu's global imagination, though, emphasizes that while some travel writers did imagine the subcontinent's geography in ways that fit nationalist aspirations, this was only one way of thinking about community and belonging.[35] This book looks beyond nationalism to explore several others. Chapter 2, for instance, discusses how travel writing produced ideas of belonging

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based on kingship and aristocracy, while Chapter 5 describes how women travelers in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East imagined Muslimness as a primary marker of identity.[36]

Moving away from nationalist teleology and toward thinking globally reorients our view of the map of South Asia itself. Even within the subcontinent, Urdu travel writers encountered enormous variety. Moving through India's complex administrative and cultural spaces, they often spoke not of national unity but of insurmountable difference. They spoke of crossing borders, changing currencies, managing linguistic difficulties, digesting exotic foods, and negotiating shifting legal regimes. They wrote, in other words, as though they were describing travel abroad. And indeed, they were. A traveler on a short journey from Pune to Aurangabad crossed an international border between British India and the State of Hyderabad, to which Aurangabad belonged.[37] Meanwhile, some travels that seem clearly international were technically domestic: the legal structure of the British Raj meant that if that same traveler went from Pune to Aden, in Yemen, they never step foot on land outside the Bombay Presidency.[38] In short, what separates home from abroad, domestic from international, and what defines where exactly the local ends and the "global" begins, is opaque, negotiable.

Finally, speaking of a global imagination is meant to emphasize South Asia's enduring and multimodal global engagement. Today, South Asian travel is often imagined less as capricious, inquisitive wanderlust (a common characterization of Western travel in the mode of Elizabeth Gilbert, Anthony Bourdain, or Mark Twain), than as a purposeful movement from East to West, and from poverty toward wealth.[39] News reports frame South Asian mobility in terms of organized labor migration.[40] Yet South Asian mobility and migration take many forms, and have many destinations. As I reflect on these alternative mobilities—the ones that do not always appear in mainstream Western writing—I am reminded of a Bihari man I met while traveling in Phnom Penh in 2017 who was selling plastic whistles along the riverside. I did not buy a whistle, but he had that charming Bihari ability to make everything he said sound witty and philosophical, and so I invited him to join me for a beer. While we drank, he told me in Hindi (or was it Urdu?) about how he had wandered over to Cambodia from Thailand the previous year. He was unsure how long he would stay before heading home. I think, too, of the Kannadiga man I encountered in 2018 on the streets of Bangui, Central African Republic. We were both in the country simply to see more of the world. We conversed in a mix of Urdu and French, two lingua francas we had learned through our travels. He funded his travels by selling herbal oils and touting the benefits of a good *champi*, or head massage. His next destination, he told me, was Kinshasa.

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