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PORTFOLIO

# INDEPENDENCE DAYS

## THE WORK OF MARYAM JAFRI

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*IHA, University of Lisbon, Portugal*      *Visual Artist*

Maryam Jafri has worked across varied media including video, sculpture and photography, to interrogate cultural and visual representations of history and political economy and their impact on everyday life. Her works often combine found and original material, whether in installation or moving image. As stated by the artist, her practice is grounded in an engagement with the formal and conceptual qualities of each media, periods of extensive research and planning, and the mysterious but crucial role played by forces that lie outside deliberation and preparation such as accident, chance, and intuition.

Jafri's work, "Independence Day 1934-1975" (2009-2019), reflects her interest in heritage, archives, and the role of photography in shaping national narratives during the decolonization of Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. This project comprises over 60 archival photos from more than 30 archives, depicting the first Independence Day ceremonies of various nations across these regions. Notably, the photos are primarily sourced from public archives within the respective Asian and African countries. The first Independence Day, including its ceremonial events, is portrayed as a series of codified rituals and elaborate speeches enacted in both public and elite spaces. These events, including the swearing-in of new leadership, document signings, VIP parades, stadium salutes, and inaugural addresses, are orchestrated by the departing colonial powers. Despite their diverse geographical and temporal origins, the photographs reveal striking similarities, highlighting a political model exported from Europe and replicated globally. The photo installation is arranged as a typology, positioned between a grid and a storyboard, exploring the transitional twilight period when a territory becomes a nation-state—a topic often overlooked in colonial and post-colonial studies. The artist book *Independence Days* (2022) emerges as an expanded version of the "Independence Day 1934-1975" photo installation. Published by Buchhandlung Walther König, the book

juxtaposes 234 photographs over 10 years of research in several archives across Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, including many from rare and at-risk collections.

More recent works by Jafri, such as “Disappearance Online” (2021), address the digitization of historical images and its implications for cultural memory and copyright law. This project traces the status of key historical images from national archives in Iraq, Syria, and Jordan, examining their presence, absence, and non-appearance in both public and commercial image banks. This work complements her earlier project “Getty vs. Ghana” (2012). While browsing the Getty Images website, Jafri discovered several historical photographs from Ghana, copyrighted by Getty, which also existed in the Ghana Ministry of Information archives. These images, documenting Ghana’s independence on March 6, 1957, mark the first instance of sub-Saharan Africa’s liberation from Western rule. Jafri’s investigation revealed errors and manipulation of the original photographs, ranging from accidental to deliberate. “Getty vs. Ghana” juxtaposes these overlapping images to address contemporary issues of copyright, digitization, and foreign ownership of national heritage.

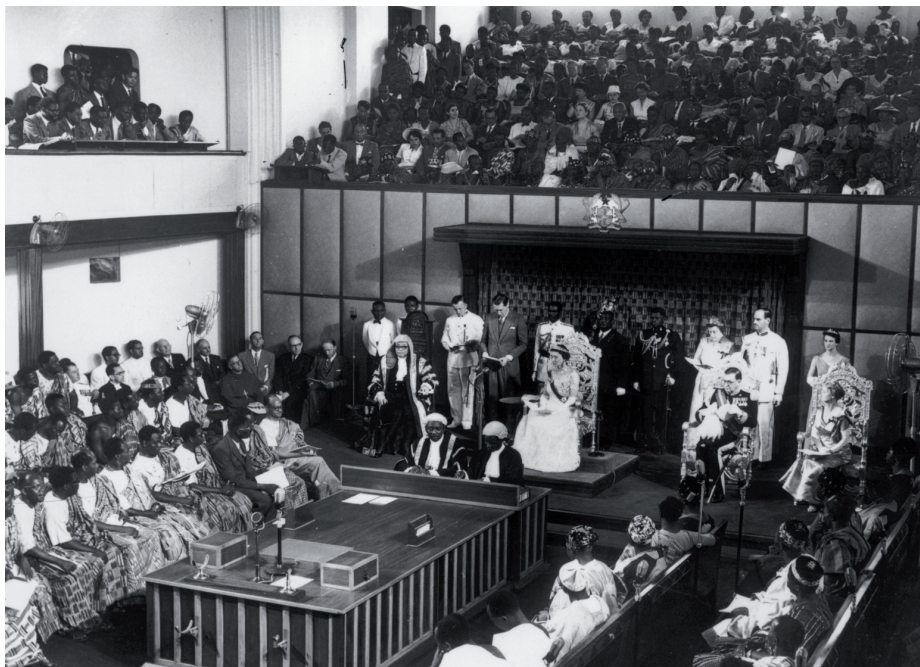
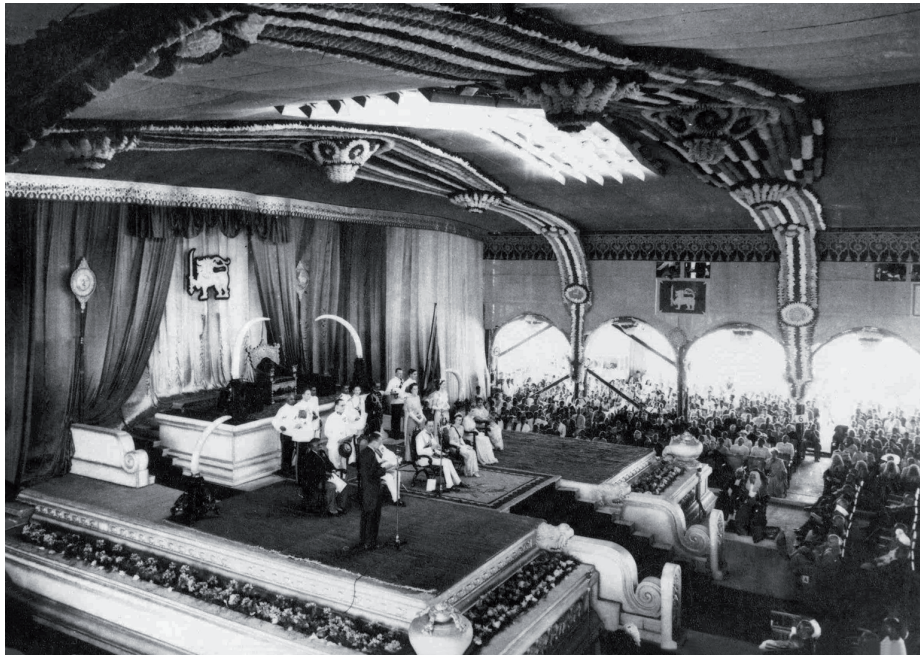
Jafri’s work highlights the lasting influence of archives and emphasizes the importance of critically engaging with historical narratives. Her artistic inquiries prompt us to reconsider our approaches to remembering, interpreting, and representing the past, advocating for a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of our shared histories.

*Sri Lanka – Ghana - Botswana 1948-1966.*

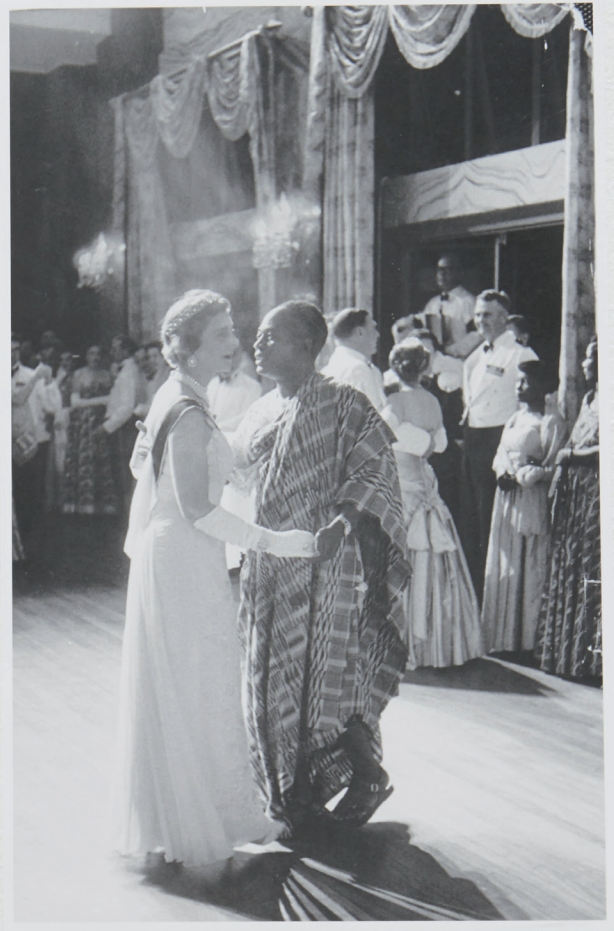
From the photo series “Independence Day 1934-1975” (2009-2019) Maryam Jafri.

Courtesy of the artist.









The left image is from the Ghana Ministry of Information, the right from Getty Images. The Ministry identifies their image as G/1180/1, Getty identifies theirs as 50405305. The caption accompanying the Getty image states *Duchess of Kent (L) dancing with Ghana Prime Minister Kwame Nkrumah (C) at the Ghana independence ceremonies*. A special note accompanying the Getty image states: *No resale application use without the prior permission of Time, Inc. Contact your local office to see if we can clear this image for you*. The back of photo G/1180/1 bears a purple stamp stating *Copyright Photographic Services, Ministry of Information, PO Box 745, Accra. All rights reserved*. The Ghana Ministry of Information charges \$4 per photograph for reproduction and licensing. Licensee must credit the Ministry.



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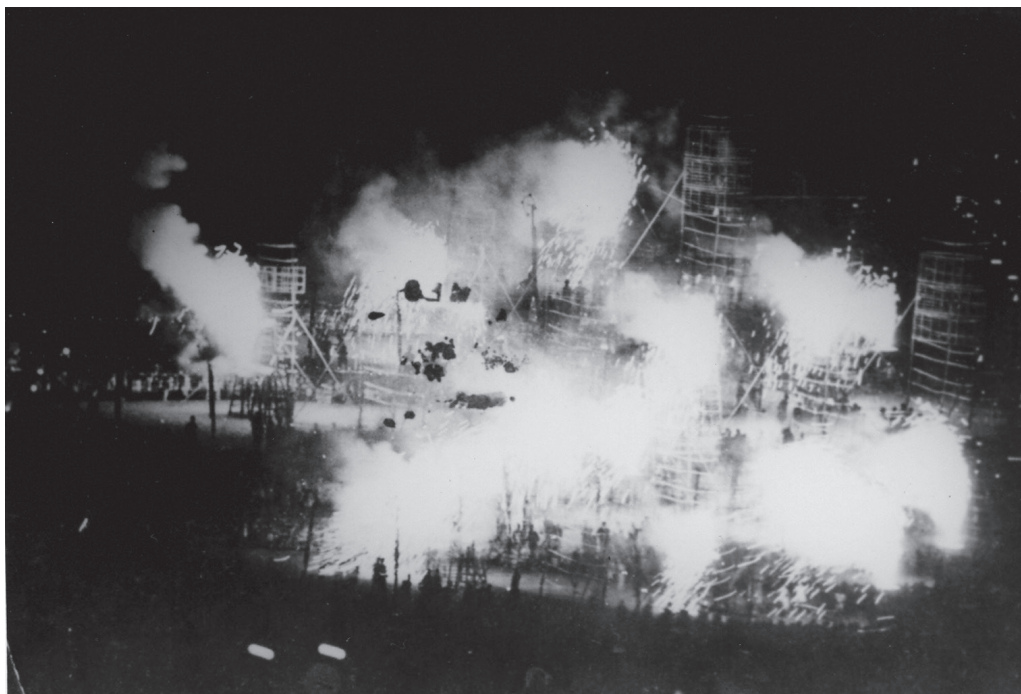
**Maryam Jafri, *Getty vs Ghana* (2012), detail.**  
Courtesy of the artist.







*Burundi-Syria-Burkina Faso 1946-1962.*  
From the photo series "Independence Day 1934-1975" (2009-2019), Maryam Jafri.  
Courtesy of the artist.







*India-Philippines-Tanzania 1947-1961.*  
From the photo series "Independence Day 1934-1975" (2009-2019), Maryam Jafri.  
Courtesy of the artist.





The top image shows Faisal I of Syria at the Versailles Peace Conference in 1919 with French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau. Shortly after this photograph was taken, Faisal I founded the National Museum in Damascus, where this photograph now rests in its archives. Faisal reigned as King of Syria for five months before being deposed by the French in 1920. The bottom image shows Faisal I, ex-King of Syria, being crowned by the British as Faisal I, King of Iraq. Low-resolution versions of the 1921 coronation image circulate widely online, but the photograph is presumed destroyed after the burning of the Iraq National Library and Archive under the US-led invasion. According to US authorities, senior staff from the Library of Congress would aid their Iraqi counterparts to rebuild the library just as the National Endowment for the Arts would spearhead the resurrection of Iraq's devastated museum sector. However, after an initial visit by a team from the Library of Congress in October 2003, no further contact has been reported.

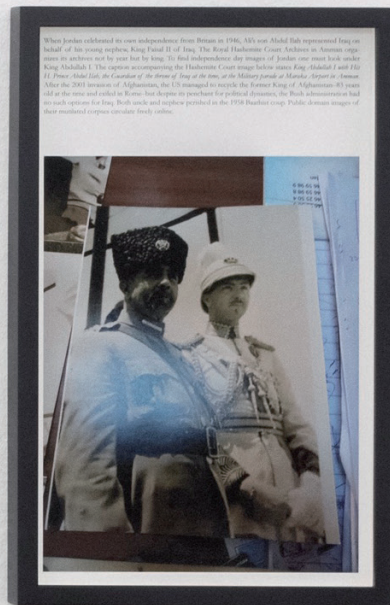


In 2010, South Carolina-based Tehrktot Media began selling images online depicting Iraq's 1932 independence from Britain. Best known for turning Alexander Gardner's photographs of the US Civil War into an app, Tehrktot Media pitched itself as a boutique stock photo agency specializing in historical imagery and an alternative to behemoths such as Getty Images and Alamy. A 2012 screenshot shows King Faisal I of Iraq ostensibly broadcasting Iraq's independence. In 2013, Tehrktot Media went out of business and the image disappeared from the internet. No further information is provided on the current status of the image and an online search reveals no results, not even at the Wayback Machine. In the Library of Congress, a photograph from the same event is available as a public domain image. The caption states *King Faysal (Faisal) I of Iraq (left) probably with his brother Emir Abdullah of Transjordan, at the palace, Baghdad, Iraq. However, the man with Faisal is not his brother Abdullah but instead his other brother, ex-King Ali, who had fled from Mecca after being deposed by the House of Saud. Both Faisal and Ali died not long after this photograph was taken, officially of natural causes. Abdullah would go on to become King of Jordan.*

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When Jordan celebrated its own independence from Britain in 1946, Ali's son Abdul Ilah represented Iraq on behalf of his young nephew, King Faisal II of Iraq. The Royal Hashemite Court Archives in Amman organizes its archives not by year but by king. To find independence day images of Jordan one must look under Abdullah I. The caption accompanying the Hashemite Court image states *King Abdullah I with His H. Prince Abdul Ilah, the Custodian of the throne of Iraq at the time, at the Military parade at Maraka Airport in Ammam*. After the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, the US managed to recycle the former King of Afghanistan—83 years old at the time and exiled in Rome—but despite its penchant for political dynasties, the Bush administration had no such options for Iraq. Both uncle and nephew perished in the 1958 Baathist coup. Public domain images of their mutilated bodies circulate freely online.

Maryam Jafri, *(Dis)appearance Online* (2021).  
 Installation view: The Blaffer Museum, Houston (2021).  
 Courtesy of the artist