

Female Deities & Devotion in Sri Lanka

Ritual, Representation & Resilience

Department of Fine Arts, University of Jaffna
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Conference Abstracts

Panel on Historicizing Devotion

PECCIAMMAN WORSHIP IN JAFFNA

A.N. Krishnaverny, Department of Fine Arts, University of Jaffna

This paper focuses on the worship of goddess Pecciamman among Hindus in Jaffna. She is also worshipped in several parts of South India and has been adopted by specific castes such as Kallars (robbers), Maravar (warriors) and the Ambalakkarak.

Pecciamman appears to be an ancient deity that has undergone name changes and shifts in sculptural representation over the course of time. There is evidence that kovils to Pecciamman, in Jaffna, have been renamed as Bhuvaneswary Amman and that she has begun to be worshipped according to Agamic rituals reserved for major deities such as Siva, Visnu, Murugan etc. For example, at the Pecciamman temple in Suthumalai, both Agamic and non-Agamic practices are followed side by side. Some non-Agamic practices include offerings of fried fish and meat, and alms givings on a mass scale (*kulirthi*). These practices are clearly meaningful to those who worship at this shrine and this paper will attempt to reflect on the reasons for the continuation of such non-Agamic practices in Jaffna.

KANNAKIAMMAN WORSHIP IN JAFFNA

Ms Krishnakumar, Department of History, University of Jaffna

The history of Kannaki worship in Jaffna must be understood in the context of colonialism, nationalism and changes in the history of local religious cults. However, patriarchal domination has not only sidelined women in Jaffna but also female deities.

This paper will focus on the Karnalingeshwarar temple, Vadukottai, and map the changes this temple, which was originally a Kannaki temple, has undergone during various forms of colonial rule (16th-19th century), during Saiva revivalism in the 19th century and during the 20th and 21st century.

PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF KANNAKIAMMAN WORSHIP AMONG DEVOTEES IN BATTICALOA

S. Kesavan, Department of Hindu Studies, Eastern University

Kannaki is one of the most popular goddesses in Batticaloa and has a strong influence over the day-to-day lives of people. She is a virgin as well as a symbol of wealth and in ancient times there was a strong connection between these two.

Panel on Transformation & Incorporation

FROM DOLL TO DEITY: ASSEMBLAGE & TRANSFORMATION

P. Ahilan, Department of Fine Arts, University of Jaffna

This paper will focus on the unusual practice of transforming a doll into a goddess through the assemblage of body parts or organs using mixed media such as cloth, wood and metals and then infusing this doll-like figure with divinity.

This process was documented at the Saivan Valavu Amman Kovil at Moolai. This kovil is located within private family land and only family members and close relatives come to worship at this shrine which does not contain an idol but rather, only two lighted lamps to signal the presence of the deity.

These kinds of family temples are known as 'Pongal Kovils' because of their annual Pongal ceremony. This is the only day the Amman appears in figurative form through the temporary assemblage of doll-like body parts by a 'Satupadikkaran' who belongs to the Saivam or Pantaram caste. This paper will analyse this transformative act of assemblage using theories of performativity and meaning making.

TRANCE/TRANS GENDERED INCORPORATION

Malathi de Alwis, Colombo

This paper seeks to reflect on the various ways in which gendered boundaries are troubled and toyed with in the veneration of goddess Pattini-Kannaki while also interrogating several 'states of being' that enable 'incorporation' with the goddess. The term incorporation here is used in the sense of merging together in a united whole or giving substance or material form to i.e., embodying.

Such merging and/or embodiment can be enabled through ritual enactments within the *koothu* and *gammaduwa* traditions, magnetism –*akarshana* (S), possession --*avesa* or *arudha* (S), *uruvardar* (T), and mediumship through trance dancers –*kalaiyadal*, *deyvam adumakkal* (T), each of which will be briefly discussed through the analysis of photographs and ethnographic data.

INCORPORATING WOMEN IN VADAMODI KOOTHU

S. Chandrakumar, Department of Fine Arts, Eastern University

This paper analyses the consequences of introducing women to play the female roles in the enactment of *Kovalan Sartiththiram* (History of Kovalan), a *vadamodi koothu* (folk theatre) written by Kathiramalai Mylvaganam, a native orthopaedic practitioner in Navatkadu (Eastern Province). Mylvaganam's *koothu* was based on the Tamil classical text, *Sillapathikaram*, and it was performed throughout the night at Echchanteevu Kannaki Amman kovil, a temple shared by seven villages in the Batticaloa district.

Understanding the localization of the story, the problems encountered by the women performers when enacting the roles of Kannaki, Mathavi, and the mothers of Kannaki and Kavunthi, the women's mastery of performance techniques, the happiness and enjoyment they derived from their performance, and the way their performance was received by the audience will be some of the issues that will be discussed in this paper.

The paper will also address the reformulation of the *koothu* tradition with the involvement of the Department of Fine Arts, Eastern University, in 2002 as well as during the period, 2011-2012. The Department used experimental processes such as community-based theatre to involve the participation of women, from the villages of Seelamunai and Komathurai, as *koothu* performers.