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The incorporation and transformation of a ‘Hindu’ goddess: the worship of Kannaki-Pattini in Sri Lanka

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The worship of goddess Kannaki-Pattini is unique to Sri Lanka, a country in which one can discern two strands of worship that illuminate both the precarity and resiliency of a ‘Hindu’ ‘other’ within a primarily Sinhala Buddhist polity. This article will focus on the transformation of Kannaki into a unique Hindu deity as well as the incorporation and transformation of this same deity into a Buddhist one –worshipped as Pattini. This complex form of co-habitation/syncretism is explored through the concept of ‘multireligiosity,’ as four major ‘world religions’ co-exist within Sri Lanka: Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. Divergences and convergences of origin myths and arrival narratives will be analysed along with a consideration of certain sacred spaces of ‘multireligiosity’ associated with this goddess that seem to be fissuring at the seams in a post-war context of Sinhala Buddhist hegemony and expansion.

O Kannaki Amman, Mother, bless us!
Life is arduous
The crops have failed and the earth is parched and cracked
The dust is rising with the failing rains
When we hear your anklets tinkling and
We see your miracles, tears flow from our eyes
O Kannaki Amman, Mother, rain your blessings on us!

(Plea for rain chanted by women at the Kannaki Amman Kovil, Vantharamoolai, Batticaloa District. Translation: Udhayani Navaratnam; English Adaptation: Malathi de Alwis)

The goddess descends from the wind and cloud and sky
She looks at the sorrows of Sri Lanka with her divine eyes...
With compassion and kindness protect us mortals
O Seven Goddess Pattini come into your flower throne

(Excerpt from the *Pahan Pujava* to Pattini Amma, quoted in Obeyesekere 1984: 82)

Introduction

The worship of Goddess Kannaki-Pattini in Sri Lanka offers several fascinating conundrums. Kannaki's origins are deeply rooted in *Chola Nadu* (currently Tamil Nadu) and she was first enshrined in *Chera Nadu* (currently Kerala) according to the *Cilappatikāram* (Tale of an Anklet), one of the five great, classical Tamil epics, which movingly narrates her trials and tribulations before she was elevated to the status of a goddess. Unfortunately, there are no longer any temples to Kannaki in Tamil Nadu although a few shrines to her do exist in Kerala, where she is worshipped as Bhagavati, an avatar of goddess Kali. It is quite the reverse in Sri Lanka, where Pattini-Kannaki is devoutly worshipped in every province of the island. Unique ritual cycles associated with Kannaki (Fig. 1) are observed by Tamil Hindus in the eastern and northern regions of Sri Lanka while Pattini (Fig. 2) is the only female deity venerated within Theravada Buddhism, the dominant religion of Sri Lanka. Catholics and Muslims also visit her shrines, on occasion.

This article will historicise and contextualise the two main strands of worship (Tamil Hindu and Theravada Buddhist), which illuminate both the precarity and resiliency of a 'Hindu' 'other' within a primarily Sinhala Buddhist polity. I am placing 'Hindu' in quotes here as Pattini-Kannaki's religious identity has been disputed, an aspect on which I will reflect later in this article. The primary foci of this article will be: firstly, the transformation of Kannaki into a unique Hindu deity venerated by Tamil Hindus, the largest minority in Sri Lanka; and secondly, the incorporation and transformation of this same deity into a Buddhist one—worshipped as Pattini—by Sinhala Buddhists, the dominant community in Sri Lanka.

Such complex forms of co-habitation/syncretism could perhaps be best explained through the concept of 'multireligiosity,' given the fact that four major 'world religions' coexist within Sri Lanka: Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity (Walters 2004). This concept will be discussed at greater length below.

This article is based on extensive fieldwork conducted by myself, with photo documentation by my friend and colleague, Sharni Jayawardena, over the course of several years – 2010–2014. We visited a variety of Pattini and/or Kannaki shrines in every province of Sri Lanka and were participant observers in myriad rituals that were conducted at these locations and elsewhere. Many hours were also spent speaking to and interacting with ritual practitioners as well as devotees. Some key shrines were visited multiple times and over several years, in order to evaluate continuities and discontinuities



Figure 1. Painting of Kannaki Amman at Kannaki Amman Kovil, Kalaiyodai, Jaffna District (Photo by Sharni Jayawardena)



Figure 2. Painting of Pattini Amma at Ampitiye Pattini Devale, Panama, Ampara District (Photo by Sharni Jayawardena)

over time. Some of the photographs and insights gleaned from this research have been uploaded onto the website we created, www.invokingthegoddess.lk as we wished to foster an interactive medium through which discussion and debate could be continued, post-research. We have also toured many regions of Sri Lanka, as well as India, Japan, Canada and the USA, with our mobile exhibition, *Invoking the Goddess: Pattini-Kannaki Devotion in Sri Lanka*. This article draws on and re-frames some of the text I wrote for our website while also reflecting on certain responses we received from the viewers of our exhibitions.

This article will begin by addressing the purchase of ‘multireligiosity’ and then proceed to explore some ‘origin’ myths and arrival narratives. It will also dwell on several key moments in the colonialist and nationalist history of Kannaki-Pattini worship in Sri Lanka that illuminate the dynamic interplay of incorporation and transformation in confrontations with the ‘other’, resulting in divergent trajectories of worship among Sinhala Buddhist and Tamil Hindu devotees of Pattini-Kannaki. The concluding section will briefly consider two rare, sacred spaces of ‘multireligiosity’ associated with this goddess while highlighting certain post-war fissures that are beginning to surface and do not bode well for future encounters with this ‘Hindu’ goddess within a predominantly ‘Buddhist’ polity.

Encounters with the ‘other’

The term ‘syncretism’ has primarily been used in Sri Lanka to describe the ‘presence of alien substances within a religion’ that nonetheless effects no change in that religious tradition because difference has not been erased (Walters 2004: 33-4). Such a formulation, notes Walters, not only fails to take human agency into account but also assumes that individual religions represent neat, mutually exclusive categories (Ibid). ‘Hinduism’ is a particularly ‘notorious example of the ahistoricity of discoursing’ on ‘religions’ rather than people who constitute them, ‘because “Hinduism” defines so extensive a range of ideas and practices, over such a long period of time, that it is all but meaningless and often counterproductive analytically’ (Ibid: 37). Not only do the ‘Hindu deities’ in Buddhist temples in Sri Lanka span a vast range of Hindu forms from the late medieval Kali to Vedic deities such as Indra, Walters observes, but they all have their own history in Sri Lanka: ‘the meeting of ‘Hinduism’ and ‘Buddhism’ has not been singular’ (Ibid). Thus, discussing ‘Hindu influence’ or ‘Hindu-Buddhist syncretism’ has prevented scholars from ‘seeing how dynamic these many meetings have been’ (Ibid).

Walters posits the term ‘multireligion’ – an idea that he terms is still in need of a definition – as better suited to understanding such dynamic ‘meetings’ that were often ‘constitutive of change’ (2004: 35 & 39). In other words, multireligion aptly captures, both descriptively and analytically, situations in which ‘adherents to differing religious traditions in differing times and places’, inhabit the same space (Ibid: 41).

Viewing the worship of Pattini-Kannaki in Sri Lanka as a series of dynamic, multireligious ‘meetings’ or ‘encounters’ is useful for several reasons. While the origins of her worship are clearly in India, the iconography, beliefs and ritual traditions associated with this goddess are unique to Sri Lanka. In fact, as noted above, one can discern two unique strands of worship in Sri Lanka, one particular to Tamil Hindus and the other to Sinhala Buddhists, with significant variations within both communities due to regional specificities. Convergences however are minimal because, while both communities agree on the goddess’s historical origins and share a repertoire of beliefs and certain rituals and practices associated with her, including two important ‘games’ performed in her honour, it has not led to ‘any form of unity or reciprocity of consciousness’ (Obeyesekere 2004: 16). I will return to the latter argument towards the end of this article.

Her stories

The historical origins of Kannaki-Pattini, as noted above, have rarely been in dispute. Many Sri Lankan Hindus and Buddhists had no hesitation in pointing to the *Cilappatikāram* as offering the first textual account of Kannaki, the daughter of a wealthy trader domiciled in Puhar, the capital of the Chola Kingdom. A chaste and loyal wife, she suffers silently when her husband, Kovalan, leaves her to take up with the accomplished courtesan Madhavi with whom he has a daughter, Manimekalai.¹ When Kovalan returns penniless to Kannaki, she accepts him with open arms and hands him one of her gold anklets containing rubies, so that he can sell it and they can start life anew.

Kovalan and Kannaki set off for the city of Madurai, in the Pandyan Kingdom, and while Kannaki remains on the outskirts of the city, Kovalan ventures forth in search of a buyer for the anklet. However, this is not to be, as the Pandyan King’s goldsmith, who has stolen the queen’s golden anklet containing pearls, frames Kovalan for the theft and the king orders his beheading. Kannaki, incensed by this unjust execution, confronts the king and proves the innocence of her husband by dashing her other anklet on the ground, thus revealing that it contains rubies, not pearls (see Fig. 3). This is the pivotal moment in the epic as is also attested by the prologue:

We shall compose a poem, with songs,
To explain these truths: even kings, if they break
The law, have their necks wrung by dharma;
Great men everywhere commend

¹ Manimekalai is the chief protagonist of the eponymous Tamil epic poem written by Cīttalai Cāttanār, as a sequel to the *Cilappatikāram*. It recounts the philosophical search and subsequent conversion to Buddhism, from Jainism, of the protagonist. A section of the text is set in Nainateevu, an island off the coast of Jaffna, located in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka, see Daniélou and Iyer (trans), 1989.

wife of renowned fame; and karma ever
Manifests itself, and is fulfilled.
We shall call the poem
The *Cilappatikāram*, the epic of the anklet,
Since the anklet brings these truths to light
(Parthasarathy 1993: 21).

The enraged Kannaki then wrenches out her left breast and flings it upon the city of Madurai which goes up in flames killing all wrong doers within its walls (Fig. 4). Kannaki gains such power due to her exemplary loyalty and *karpū* (chastity). For this very reason, the gods allow her to resurrect her husband who is subsequently elevated to the status of a god. Kannaki, in turn, is taken up into the heavens and made a goddess.



Figure 3. Kannaki proves Kovalan's innocence by dashing her anklet on the floor. Wall painting at Kannaki Amman Kovil, Mahiladiteevu, Batticaloa District (Photo by Sharni Jayawardena)

Variation vs incorporation

The textual traditions of both Sri Lankan Hindu and Buddhist Kannaki-Pattini devotees while following the general trajectory of the *Cilappatikāram* narrative, also display interesting divergences: the Hindu texts show considerable regional variation while the Buddhist texts incorporate the goddess into a unique Buddhist ethos.

In the Batticaloa District (Eastern Province), the Tamil text that is chanted during the annual Vaikasi festival season (May-June) is known as *Kannaki Valakkurai* (Kannaki's



Figure 4. The wrath of Kannaki, performance of classical and modern fusion dance drama, *Mekala*, October 2013 (Photo by Sharni Jayawardena)

Demand for Justice). In the Jaffna District (Northern Province), it is known as the *Kovalan Kathai* (Kovalan's Story), and in the Mullaitivu District (Northern Province), it is known as the *Silambu Kural* (The Anklet's Voice). Each version is a variant of the narrative in the *Cilappatikāram*, often with localised re-workings and sub stories such as sea battles, paeans to local kings and castes and even the introduction of colloquialisms (Sukumar 2009). Sivasubramaniam notes that when the section on the death of Kovalan is recited, devotees would go into mourning and begin to scold the King of Pandya in 'filthy language' and sing *Theri paattu* (lewd songs) which has become a separate genre of literature, in the Eastern Province (2003: 7). *Kulirttu pattu* (Cooling songs) are also a central component of the *Kannaki Valakkurai* and are sung at the very end of its recitation in order to cool Kannaki's anger. Unfortunately, no serious study has been done of the variations that appear in these different texts and/or local enactments though Obeyesekere does note in passing that Pandit Kandiah's edition of the *Kannaki Valakkurai* (1968), introduces references to conflicts between different castes along the East Coast while a large part of the text is 'devoted to legitimising the religious orthodoxy of the *karaiyars*' (a Tamil sea faring/fisher caste similar to the Sinhala caste of *Karava* —more on the latter below) (1984: 571).



Figure 5. Chanting of *Kannaki Valakkurai* from a handwritten text, Kannaki Amman Kovil, Kannan Kuda, Batticaloa District (Photo by Sharni Jayawardena)

Since each *kovil* (Hindu temple) has its own copy of the text, some still using handwritten versions (Fig. 5), it is also possible that additional, localised variations or events specific to that *kovil* and its environs are introduced. Folk dramas such as the *Kannaki-Kovalan Koothu* and *Kannaki Vasantham Koothu* as well as folk songs such as the *Kannaki Oonjal* (swing songs) and *Malaiyaha Pattu* (rain songs) also reiterate popular narratives that have probably been inspired by the *Cilappatikāram* or vice versa.

The *Pantis Kolmure* (Thirty-five ritual texts) is the key corpus, written in Sinhala, used by Buddhist practitioners of Pattini and though there might be some differences in versification, from region to region, there is a striking similarity in the substance and content of the verses (Obeyesekere 1984: 24). While most of the events narrated in the *Cilappatikāram*, especially parts 1 and 2, appear in this corpus as well, it includes many Buddhist elements with the goddess having seven births before she is born as Pattini, her offering alms to previous Buddhas, and by the ‘power of her deeds’, aspiring to Buddhahood herself (Ibid: 25). Obeyesekere observes that it is ‘virtually certain’ that the authors of the *Pantis Kolmure* ‘adapted Tamil ritual texts’ (1984: 588). *Kolmure* means ‘protection’ in Tamil and thus gives further credence to the argument that this text is a translation of a Tamil text, notes Bala Sukumar (2009: 29).

The successful incorporation and transformation of Kannaki into a Buddhist Pattini is clearly indicative of a Buddhist hegemony at work, reminiscent of the Karaiyar hegemony Obeyesekere notes is reflected in the *Kannaki Valakkurai*. However, while the latter insertion takes place within an already Hindu ethos, the former neatly incorporates a 'Hindu' 'other' into a Buddhist ethos. There are many Sinhala folk texts that also reference events mentioned in the *Cilappatikāram* such as the *Pattini Hella* (Pattini's Tale), *Palanga Hella* (Palanga's Tale), *Vayanti Malaya* (Garland of Diamonds), *Salamba Santiya* (Blessings of the Anklet), and *Gajaba Katava* (Gajabahu's Story).



Figure 6. Pattini and her maid servant Kali (in red), played by two chief priests, set off in search of Palanga (Kovalan) during the *Gam Maduwa* ritual at the Ambepussa Pattini Devale, Kegalle District (Photo by Sharni Jayawardena)

However, for Tamil Hindus devotees, the most shocking and troubling aspect of the Buddhist incorporation of Kannaki, in the *Pantis Kolmure* as well as in the enactment of certain *Gam Maduwa* (village hall) rituals, was the appearance of Kali as Pattini's maid servant (see Fig. 6), who massages Pattini's body with oil and carries her mistress's suitcase 'like any servant in a Sinhala household' (Obeyesekere 1984: 244 & 260). I would argue that this sense of shock primarily arises from the clearly articulated/visible subordination of a powerful Hindu deity such as Kali to a Buddhicised Pattini. For Sinhala Buddhists, according to Rohan Bastin, Kali is not only Pattini's 'tamed demoness servant' but also her mistress's successor 'to whom Pattini directs people's worship as she recedes

from active participation in the world in order to pursue her Buddhist quest for enlightenment and release' (1996: 69).

Authorship and identity

The authorship of the *Cilappatikāram* has been attributed to the Jain poet writing under the pseudonym Ilango Adigal (Prince-Ascetic), reputed to be the brother of the famed Chera king, Senguttuvan, who is mentioned in this epic as having consecrated the first statue of Kannaki, thus enabling her veneration in the Chera Kingdom (Kerala). However, according to historian Nilakanta Sastri, there is no evidence that this king had a brother (1955: 397). Gananath Obeyesekere goes a step further by noting that Ilango Adigal as well as Cīttalai Cāttanār, the author of *Manimekalai*, are 'mythic figures' (1984: 605). The *Cilappatikāram* is most commonly dated to around 2nd century CE though this too has been disputed by Nilakanta Sastri who dates it somewhat later, to around the 5th or 6th centuries CE (Ibid: 398).

While the *Cilappatikāram* makes many references to historical events and personalities, it is doubtful that it can be treated as a reliable source of history as it has exaggerated historical events and magnified the achievements of ancient Tamil kings (Nilakanta Sastri 1955, Obeyesekere 1984). It clearly draws on the rich oral folk traditions of South India and I encountered several oral folk variations during my field research in Sri Lanka as well. Nonetheless, such arguments have not shaken the firm belief among both Hindu and Buddhist devotees in Sri Lanka regarding the authorship or the historical veracity of the *Cilappatikāram*.

The distinct Jain overtones of the *Cilappatikāram* has also led Gananath Obeyesekere to argue that Kannaki is a Jain goddess, not a Hindu one, and that this is the reason for her being so easily assimilated within a Sri Lankan Buddhist polity (1984: 509-516). He further posits that it was Buddhists from Kerala, fleeing an increasing Hindu hegemony in India (between the 8th and 13th centuries), who first introduced the Pattini cult to Sri Lanka: 'they translated the texts and adapted her cult to suit the new culture' (1984: 509). The Hindu antecedents of Kannaki worship in Sri Lanka are also attributed to Buddhist migrants from Kerala who settled on the East coast and were Hinduised (Ibid). This Hinduism, unlike what was practiced in South India, retained the goddess as a folk deity rather than assimilating her with Kali or Durga (Ibid). While these are both very interesting postulations, they have not been absorbed into popular beliefs nor have they influenced other scholarly work on Kannaki-Pattini worship in Sri Lanka. The perpetuation of certain hegemonic narratives raises interesting questions about what people wish to believe and why.

In the following sections, I will discuss how hegemonic narratives of arrival and origin myths as well as textual and scholarly traditions have all grappled with the notion of an 'alien' other that requires incorporation and/or transformation in order to become a part of a 'fully' Sri Lankan Hindu or Buddhist polity. The convergences and divergences

with regard to both sets of worshippers is particularly fascinating and will be explored further below.

Origin myths²

The most popular myth associated with Pattini devotion in Sri Lanka, supposed to have been introduced to the Island in 2nd century CE, is intertwined with military conquest and plunder. The historical text, *The Rajavaliya* (a narrative of kingship that is dated to around the 17th century), is often quoted to substantiate the historicity of this argument: When King Gajabahu rescued 12,000 Lankan prisoners from the Chola Kingdom and captured an additional 12,000 Cholans as prisoners, 'he also took away the jewelled anklets of the goddess Pattini and the insignia of the gods of the four *devales*, and also the bowl-relic [of the Buddha] which had been carried off in the time of King Valagamba' (1900: 48). A similar narrative also appears in the folk text, the *Gajaba Katava* (Raghavan 1951).

Some Buddhist and Hindu devotees and ritual practitioners link this event with those mentioned in the *Cilappatikāram* by claiming that Gajabahu subsequently built a *devale* (Hindu temple visited by Buddhists), to enshrine this anklet, in his capital, Anuradhapura. He also inaugurated a *perahera* (procession) to venerate Pattini which circumambulated the city with the anklet. 'Evidence' for this event is provided in what is now believed to be an ancient editorial comment inserted in the *Cilappatikāram*: 'Gajabahu of Lanka ... built a temple with a sacrificial altar for Pattini to whom daily offerings were made. Thinking, 'She will end hardship, and bestow favors,' he established an annual festival in the month of Adi (August-September). Then, 'it rained without interruption: the crops never failed, and the land overflowed with abundance' (Parthasarathy 1993: 278; see also Rasanayagam 1984: 73).

This tradition is believed to continue today in the annual Asela Perahera, the most sacred and important Buddhist pageant in the country. Pattini's ornaments as well as those of Visnu, Kataragama and Natha (the other three guardian deities of the island)³ are carried in procession through the streets of Kandy, in August. However, the marginalisation of the four guardian deities is clearly articulated through the practice of giving pride of place to the sacred tooth relic of the Buddha. The sacred tooth relic was only introduced to the Asela Perahera in the 18th century, on the advice of some Buddhist monks from Siam (Thailand) who had been shocked to note the prominence given to the four guardian deities of Lanka (Seneviratne 1963).

Certain Buddhist ritual practitioners also associate the water cutting ceremony performed at all Pattini *devales* as well as the Temple of the Tooth Relic in Kandy, usually

² This section and the one that follows draw extensively from the text I originally wrote for our website www.invokingthegoddess.lk.

³ While Visnu and Kataragama are perceived as primarily Hindu deities who have also been Buddhicised, though not to the same extent as Pattini, Natha remains a primarily Buddhist deity and is often perceived to be an avatar of the Maitreya Bodhisattva.

after the annual *perahera*, with the commemoration of King Gajabahu's journey to the Chola Kingdom – he parted the ocean by striking it with an iron mace and thus walked across to the Chola capital. This event is recounted in the *Gajaba Katava* and is sometimes performed during *Gammaduwa* (village hall) ceremonies (Obeyesekere 1978).



Figure 7. Water-cutting ceremony of Kadadora Pattini Devale, Ruwanwella District (Photo by Sharni Jayawardena)

The claims of invasion and plunder mentioned in the *Rajavaliya* have been further substantiated by Tamil scholars who have conjectured that King Gajabahu returned to Lanka with Kannaki's anklet, *via* Sambuthurai (also known as Jambukola Pattinam), located at the northern tip of Lanka, and that his first stop was at Anganamai Kadavai, where he built a temple for her (Sukumar 2009; Krishnarajah 2004; Rasanayagam 1926; Satkunam 1976; Sittrambalam 2004; Sivasubramaniam 2003). This conjecture is supported by the argument that the oldest Kannaki *kovil* in the island is located at Anganam Kadavai where a colossal statue, presumably of King Gajabahu, had been built facing this temple (Ibid). This statue, according to Rasanayagam (1926), was broken by an elephant over a century ago and a fragment of its leg and head, discovered in the *kovil* premises by archaeologist P.E. Pieris Deraniyagala several decades later, were deposited in the Jaffna Museum (Ibid).

Such claims notwithstanding, devotees and religious practitioners at Thambiluvil Kannaki Amman Alayam, in the Eastern Province, insist that it is their *kovil* that is the most ancient in the country. This claim is also based on proximity to port of arrival, with

practitioners and devotees noting that King Gajabahu disembarked at the port of Tirukkivil, a mere stone's throw away, which was previously known as Naga Munai as it was peopled by the Naga tribe.⁴ They further noted that King Gajabahu came bearing three sandalwood statues of Kannaki, made under the supervision of King Senguttuvan, one of which he gifted to the shrine he erected at Urakkai, a short distance from Thambiluvil. The location of this shrine was fortuitous as a pigeon flew out from the underbrush, at this spot, calling out 'kannaki, kannaki' as King Gajabahu was making his way through the forest. The shrine at Urakkai, along with the statue, was later moved to Thambiluvil.

Some scholars have argued that it was also King Gajabahu who ordered the building of temples to Kannaki all over Lanka resulting in the proliferation of her cult across the island, be it in the form of devotion to Kannaki or Pattini (Rasanayagam 1926; Satkunam 1976). Indeed, the ancient text *Thambiluvil Ursuttri Kaviyam* mentions that there is a Kannagi Amman *kovil* in every village in the Batticaloa district (Satkunam 1976; Sittrambalam 2004). Currently, there are more than 60 Kannaki Amman *kovils* in the Eastern Province. Thirty of these are mentioned in the *Thambiluvil Ursuttri Kaviyam* while an additional six are mentioned in another ancient text, the *Pattimedu Ursuttri Kaviyam*. Many of these temples are presumed to have been built in the latter part of the 18th and early 19th centuries (*Virakesari*, June 2 2012).

There is an interesting confluence here of an authorising historical narrative that orders the Lankan landscape in a process similar to the one discussed by Pradeep Jeganathan (1996) with regard to the 'discovery' of the ancient capital of Anuradhapura. While certain Kannaki *kovils* in the north and east vie with each other to claim original provenance, they also seek to associate particular geographical spaces and even supposed 'archaeological' evidence with the presence of King Gajabahu, the authorising sovereign. Obeyesekere (1984: 399), on the other hand, refers to the *Rajavaliya* narrative as a 'colonisation myth' that was probably improvised in later years to explain the prevalence of South Indian settlements in the hill country – the *Rajavaliya* ends the narrative about Gajabahu by saying that he 'caused the supernumerary captives to be distributed over and to settle in these countries, viz., Alutkuruwa, Sarasiya pattuwa, Yatinuwara, Udunuwara, Tumpane, Hewaheta, Pansiya pattuwa, Egoda Tiha, and Megoda Tiha' (1900: 48-49). Obeyesekere's thesis is also supported by statements that appear on the website maintained by members of the Karava community, a Sinhala sea faring/fisher caste, http://karava.org/religious/the_pattini_cult. The Karava community, which originated from Kerala, still retains clan names such as Pattini-Hennadige, while some ancestral Karava homes are referred to as Pattini Gederas, notes the website.

⁴ In an interesting twist, the wikipedia page for Thambiluvil now cites our website to substantiate this 'legend'! See: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thambiluvil>

Narratives of arrival

While the popular origin myth of Kannaki-Pattini worship in Sri Lanka has been buttressed by historical narratives and their geographical correlates, the Hindu narratives of Kannaki's arrival in Lanka are only buttressed by faith and belief although a certain geographical tracing upon the northern and eastern landscapes of Lanka has also occurred. Hindu devotees, particularly those resident in the island's eastern and northern regions, believe that Kannaki, after destroying the city of Madurai, crossed over to Lanka in order to cool her anger and visited two locations in the north and seven locations in the east of the island, all of which now have important *kovils* to Kannaki Amman. 'Not surprisingly, there are many claims and counter-claims regarding the specific sites that were visited by Kannaki with ritual practitioners and devotees recounting miraculous events that had taken place to confirm that the goddess had indeed stopped at their particular *kovil* site' (www.invokingthegoddess.lk).

Some Hindu devotees in the North claim that Kannaki first stepped onto Lankan soil at Sambuthurai, which interestingly parallels scholarly substantiations, discussed above, of King Gajabahu's return to Lanka with Kannaki's anklet. Kannaki then rested at Sudumalai and Mattuvil (site of the renowned Panrithalachi Kannaki Amman Kovil) before heading East (www.invokingthegoddess.lk). However, such claims have currently been overshadowed by Sinhala Buddhist assertions that Sangamitta Theri (the daughter of King Asoka) stepped onto land at this same spot, referred to in Sinhala as Dambakola Patuna, while bringing a sapling of the Bo tree under which the Buddha attained Enlightenment. Several statues and paintings of Sangamitta Theri are also scattered around the Buddhist temple precinct that dominates this area now. The reiteration of this narrative of arrival, so central to the propagation of Buddhism in Lanka, has also been cleverly amalgamated with the 'uniting of Sri Lanka through the vanquishing of a thirty-year scourge of terrorism' by 'Vishwa Kirthi Sri *Tri-Sinhaladeshvara* Sri Lanka Janadhipathi Athigaru Mahinda Rajapakse' by means of a large plaque that has been erected at this site post war (emphasis mine). The use of the word '*Tri-Sinhaladeshvara*', not used anywhere else on the island, to my knowledge, is particularly telling as it declares President Rajapakse as the overlord of the three ancient Sinhala kingdoms of Ruhunu, Maya and Pihiti.⁵ This not only recalls a period of sovereignty and independence but also stresses that the land belongs to the Sinhalese (Dissanayake 2000).

There is also a significant number of Hindu devotees who believe that Kannaki sought sanctuary in Lanka in the form of a five-headed Naga or king cobra – note iconography in Fig. 1. This was after Kovalan broke her heart with a second betrayal – when Kannaki stitched up Kovalan's body parts and brought him back to life, he arose uttering Madhavi's name. In this narrative, Kannaki first makes landfall at Nainateevu and

⁵ I'm grateful to Pradeep Jeganathan for a lengthy discussion of this terminology. See also his article: <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/two-or-three-things-i-know-about-my-country/>

then visits Seerani, Anganam Kadawai, Alavetti and Suruvil, all located within the Jaffna District (www.invokingthegoddess.lk). Interestingly, many shrines to Naga deities can be found along this route (Ibid).

Another group of devotees in the North, while acknowledging that Kannaki first arrived in Nainateevu, in the form of a cobra, claim that she then proceeded along a much longer and different route through the Jaffna peninsula that found her stopping at Kopay, Mattuvil, Velambirai, Kachchai, Nagar Koil, Puliyampokkanai and finally, Vattrappalai (www.invokingthegoddess.lk). Certain devotees in the East claim that Kannaki Amman first stepped onto Lankan soil at Vantharamoolai, which in Tamil means 'place of arrival', and finally took up residence deep in the forests of Koraveli (Batticaloa District) 'because she found other shrines in the midst of human settlements too noisy' (Ibid). This site is greatly venerated today and thousands upon thousands of devotees flock to the two-day festival that is held here, during the month of Vaikasi.

However, Hindu devotees and ritual practitioners in all regions of Sri Lanka are in agreement that the tenth place Kannaki Amman visited was Vattrappalai, in the Mullaitivu District (Northern Province). This belief is further substantiated through etymological arguments that Vattrappalai is a corruption of its original name Patthappalai: *pattham* – tenth and *palai* – resting place. Vattrappalai is associated with many wondrous miracles that endorse it as Kannaki's chosen abode; devotees also shared cautionary tales of unbelievers and disrespectful British colonial officials who received their comeuppance, at this shrine. Sculptures and clay pots (see Fig. 8) used at Vattrappalai, as well as a unique, annual ritual associated with the shrine, recalls the arrival of Kannaki Amman at Vattrappalai. An old woman approached some young boys who were playing at this site and asked them to erect a small hut for her and to then light a lamp for her as dusk was falling. The boys said they were very poor and had no oil, so she asked them to bring her some sea water with which she lit the lamp. She then sat down, announced she was very tired and asked them to scratch her scalp until she fell asleep. When the boys began to do so, a thousand eyes stared back at them. Terrified, they fled home and urged their parents to come and meet this extraordinary woman, but when the adults reached the site, she had disappeared. They were convinced that the boys had encountered Kannaki Amman (*kann* means eyes, in Tamil) and thus built a shrine to her at this site and instituted the tradition, practiced even today, of lighting a special lamp using sea water.

This *kovil* was caught in the crosshairs of battle, particularly during the last few months of the civil war, but it has recently witnessed a major revival with a new *gopuram* being erected and lakhs of Hindu devotees, from all over the island, attending its annual festival in May. In the 19th century, British administrator, J.P. Lewis, noted that many Sinhalese from the North Central Province would attend this festival, 'though they appear to hold little intercourse with the Tamil people when they come' (1895: 265). Sadly, it is



Figure 8. Thousand-eyed pot, Kannaki Amman Kovil, Vatrappalai, Mullaitivu District (Photo by Sharni Jayawardena)

quite rare now to see any Sinhala people at this festival, with the exception of military personnel who provide free meals, water and medical aid to the devotees.

Ritual practitioners at Vatrappalai also sought to place the shrine within the genealogy of the *Cilappatikāram* by sharing a story of a goldsmith from Madurai, believed to be a descendent of the goldsmith who deceived Kovalan, who brought Kannaki's golden anklet, golden cane, some seeds and a small drum (*udukku*) to Vatrappalai and set up residence there (see also Supiramaniam 1976). While Pattini is believed to physically manifest at all her *devales* and many miracles are associated with these places, I have not encountered narratives of her 'arrival' from South India like those I heard at Hindu shrines in the North and East.

Colonial and nationalist challenges to devotion

Devotion to Pattini-Kannaki has withstood many challenges, over the centuries. The first colonisers of Sri Lanka, the Portuguese (1505-1658), were quick to vandalise, burn and destroy many Hindu and Buddhist places of worship in their zeal to propagate their own religion, Roman Catholicism, on the island. For example, many Buddhist and Hindu devotees I met were emphatic that the most revered Catholic shrine to the Virgin Mary, at Madhu (Northern Province), was originally a Kannaki-Pattini shrine. This belief is confirmed by Ragupathy (1987) as well as British civil servant, R.W. Levers' *Manual of the North-Central Province, Ceylon* (1899): 'At the present day the offerings are generally taken to St. Mary's Church at Madu, which is considered by the Buddhist and a great many of the Tamil pilgrims, who resort there, as the Temple of Pattini Amma (Amman Kovil).' Obeyesekere notes that he interviewed Buddhists 'who visit the Madhu shrine during the annual festival, and they simply believe they are worshipping the goddess Pattini' (1984: 480).⁶ Devotees had pointed out the Saint Sebastian Church near Colombo as also being a former shrine to Pattini (Ibid), while http://karava.org/religious/the_pattini_cult makes the following claim:

Under Portuguese rule the ancient *Pattini Déváles* in the western coast of the Kotte kingdom had been replaced by St. Anne's churches whilst St. Marys' replaced *Máriamman Kóvils*. Some of the St. Anne's churches coming from Portuguese times are at Wattala, Bolawalána Negombo, Palangaturai and Talawila. St Anne's Kochchkade north of Negombo is significant as it is located in Palangaturai, the harbour named in honour of *Palanga*, the consort of goddess *Pattini*.

Several centuries later, the threat to Pattini-Kannaki devotion came from within the Hindu and Buddhist religious traditions, although it was clearly in opposition to Christian

⁶ An interesting debate regarding whether this church had actually replaced a Pattini shrine, in light of no archaeological evidence being available, took place between Professor Obeyesekere and Dr Pinto, in several issues of the *Sunday Times*, soon after Pope Francis conducted a mass at the Madhu shrine, in January 2015.

missionary denigration and ridiculing of these religions. The 19th century Buddhist revivalist and reformer, the Anagarika Dharmapala, and the Hindu reformer, Arumuga Navalar, both sought to abolish the worship of subordinated, animistic, non-*agamic* (non-Sanskritic/Brahmanic) deities like Kannaki-Pattini who were perceived as polluting the purity of Hinduism and Buddhism.⁷ Navalar once scathingly referred to Kannaki as a ‘*Camana Camaya Cetticci*’ –a Jain Merchantess (quoted in Ragupathy 1987). Many Kannaki temples during this period were re-named after *agamic* goddesses such as Durga, Rajarajeshwari, Bhuvaneshwari and Parashakti and their architecture and rituals were re-structured in accordance with *agamic* principles.

However, recent research on such name changing and re-structuring have highlighted the complicated negotiations that took place in such contexts. For example, the son of the Chief Trustee of a Kannaki Amman *kovil* had died soon after the re-naming of the shrine as Rajarajeshwari Amman Alayam. This was perceived as a sign of Kannaki Amman’s displeasure so the *kovil* trustees had swiftly reverted to its original name (Krishnakumar 2014). The Kannaki Amman Alayam at Sudumalai (Jaffna District) had gone through a series of changes, first becoming a Pecciamman *kovil* —at which point devotees had been allowed to make offerings of fried fish and meat— and then transforming into a Bhuvaneshwari Amman *kovil*. After the latter transformation, a compromise had been reached where lower caste devotees had to stop offering fish and meat but were nonetheless allowed to continue offering eggs to the goddess, an equally sacrilegious practice within an *agamic* temple! (Krishnaverny 2014).

The Anagarika Dharmapala reviled traditional Hinduism, referring to sculptures of Hindu deities at Bodh Gaya as ‘monstrous figures’ (quoted in Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1987: 217). He also faulted Christianity as well as ‘polytheism’ and ‘vicious paganism’ (clearly referencing Hinduism here) of promoting ‘vulgar practices of killing animals, stealing, prostitution, licentiousness, lying and drunkenness’ among an ‘ancient, historic, refined people’ i.e., the Sinhalese (Guruge (ed) 1965: 482). The late Venerable Gangodawila Soma Thera, a 20th-century Buddhist reformer who fashioned himself after the Anagarika Dharmapala, frowned upon the presence of Hindu deities in Buddhist temples and declared that he would not visit temples that had *devalas* (shrines to Hindu deities) (*Daily Mirror*, August 29 2016). Even today, many middle-class Buddhists in Colombo have defiantly declared to me that they do not visit Pattini shrines as they only believe in worshipping the Buddha, the Buddhist stupa and the Bodhi tree.

⁷ The term *agamic*, commonly used by Tamil Hindus in Sri Lanka, refers to Sanskrit scriptures that chiefly focus on the construction of *kovils* (temples), the placement of particular deities within them and forms of worship associated with these *kovils* (Grimes 1996). For example, *kovils* to major deities within the Hindu pantheon such as Siva, Vishnu, Murugan (Skanda/Kataragama/Kartikeya) and Pillaiyar (Ganesh) would follow *agamic* principles whereas more ‘folk’ deities such as mother goddesses —Kannaki Amman, Mariyamman, Pecchi Amman, Kadalachchi Amman etc— and serpent gods (Naga Thambiran) and serpent goddesses (Naga Poosani) would follow *non-agamic* principles resulting in much simpler religious structures and rituals.

Post-war developments

The greatest storm weathered by Kannaki Amman devotees, primarily in the North and East, was the three decades of war (1982-2009) that traumatised, maimed and killed devotees, ritual performers and ritual practitioners, and damaged or destroyed places of worship. Kannaki Amman *kovils* were abandoned as populations fled shelling, the advance of troops and/or the declaration of High Security Zones. They were desecrated due to rapes that took place within them and were shunned by those who felt that the goddess had abandoned them. Week-long, annual festivals at Kannaki Amman shrines (as well as at many other Hindu shrines), that would stay open day and night, became occasions for the forced conscription of children, by the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam). However, her shrines were also places of refuge for those who were displaced, tortured, or made mad with grief, and to those whose only recourse was to seek divine intervention when all else had failed (www.invokingthegoddess.lk).

It is noteworthy that the board of trustees of many Kannaki Amman temples in the Wanni that were either damaged or destroyed during the war have sought to re-build according to *agamic* principles and have recently been taking out full-page advertisements in Tamil newspapers to announce their *kumba abishekam* (consecration). Videos of these rituals are often posted on the internet so that devotees in the diaspora, who are often the chief funders of such renovations, can stay abreast of major events occurring at their (former) local temple. Interestingly, many of these temples have also dropped the *agamic* names they had adopted in the 19th century and reverted to their original name of Kannaki Amman Alayam —I even noticed one or two of these *kovils* in Jaffna placing an additional cardboard sign in Sinhala announcing ‘Pattini Devale’, presumably to attract the hordes of tourists from the South who began visiting this region, post war. While this was clearly for monetary gain, it was heartening to note that a shared heritage was being signalled by such boards especially in the face of what many northerners perceived to be an invasion of insensitive gawkers of war ruins, from the south.

This return to honouring non-*agamic*, independent and powerful goddesses, I would argue, is a direct result of the suffering experienced by Hindu devotees in the war zones of the North who sought refuge in a variety of religious rituals, in the face of unrelenting violence and injustice. Psychologist Jane Derges who noticed a marked increase, from 1996 onwards, in the ritual practice of *thukku kavadi* (hook swinging) among young Tamil men (in the North), who had escaped incarceration and torture at the hands of the Sri Lankan military, also observed an increase in worship of Amman (mother goddesses) such as Kaliyamman and Mariamman in this region, along with instances of spirit possession among the latter’s female devotees (2013: 70). This was confirmed by a group of Kannaki Amman devotees celebrating *Panguni Thingal* at the famed Panrithalachchi Kannaki Amman *Kovil*, who poignantly recalled, ‘Kannaki Amman epitomises *karpu* (chastity), *vidamuyarchi* (perseverance) and *nithi* (justice). This sets her apart from the rest

[of the ammans]...These are qualities we have held onto, that have given us *nambikkai* (hope) throughout the years of war.'

Gendered articulations

Kannaki-Pattini is a fascinating and complex model of womanhood. She is the chaste and loyal wife of Kovalan-Palanga, despite his infidelity and betrayal. But she is also 'the outraged and vengeful widow who tears out her left breast and sets alight an entire city in her determination to redress injustice' (www.invokingthegoddess.lk). It is Kannaki-Pattini's ambiguous oscillation between docility and loyalty as well as anger (however righteous it might be) and revenge that has restrained many parents from naming their daughters after this goddess, confessed several Hindus as well as Buddhists. However, it is these very aspects of the goddess that also attracts many women who become 'possessed' by her and eventually become her priestesses, although this remains a rather marginalised profession given that all the main Pattini and Kannaki shrines are controlled by male priests.

One such Sinhala Buddhist priestess I encountered had set up a little shrine in her garden to several 'Buddhist' deities such as Pattini, Devol and Suniyam and 'Hindu' deities such as Kataragama (Skanda) and Pillaiyar (Ganesh). She had started to become 'possessed' by Pattini soon after her husband had been 'disappeared' during the second JVP (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna) uprising, in 1990. She often spoke in tongues while conducting rituals to Pattini and was regularly consulted by those in her neighborhood regarding a variety of personal matters. Sasanka Perera (1995) also mentions a case where both the father and daughter, sole survivors of a government-sponsored death squad massacre of their entire family, during the JVP uprising, regularly became possessed by similar Buddhist deities as well as various incarnations of Goddess Kali.⁸ The young daughter, when possessed by Goddess Pattini, constantly repeated the following words: 'This little girl has suffered much. I know who the culprits are. They will all be punished once this girl is mature enough to wield all the powers of Pattini' (quoted in *Ibid*: 53). This young girl also claimed the ability to locate missing persons and was consulted by many families of the 'disappeared'. Clearly, both mediums discussed above had internalised their inability to procure justice and take revenge to such an extent that they had begun to get possessed and thus acquired direct access to divine intervention.

Piyawathi Pattini Amma, of *wanniyalitto* (indigenous tribe) descent, from Dalukana (North Central Province), had also been consulted regarding 'disappeared' relatives, during the JVP uprising. She proudly noted that she had located ten 'disappeared' persons through a particular form of divination utilising banana bark:

⁸ The mother, two sons and a daughter were killed. The father and one daughter escaped because they were not at home that night.

Goddess Pattini's summons were so strong that one 'disappeared' person actually came to my doorstep. Another person sent a letter to his relatives. I received this gift from my grandfather and I also got the *varama* (permission) to do this kind of divination from Hindu and Buddhist deities located at many important shrines in Sri Lanka such as Navagamuwa, Aluth Nuwara, Kebellawa, Kataragama and Munneswaram. My grandfather's spirit also speaks through me and I can make predictions in three languages – Sinhala, Tamil and Adivasi.

Piyawathi is now invited to different parts of the country – 'even Colombo', she noted proudly – to perform this service despite it being a rather costly endeavour, as a complicated *pooja* has to be first performed to propitiate Goddess Pattini.

Anthropologist Patricia Lawrence (1990, 2000) who closely interacted with Saktirani, a woman oracle (*vakku solluratal*) in Batticaloa (in the 1990s) described what a crucial role she played, both as a diviner and healer, in the lives of many desperate families whose children and spouses had been tortured, arrested or 'disappeared'. In fact, Lawrence argued that the 'one distinct exception' to the 'oppressive silencing' that was in force in the war zones of the east was the 'emotional outpouring' that was enabled at local Amman temples (2000: 179). Oracles at these shrines came into increasing prominence during the 1980s and early 1990s 'rather than collapsing along with the health care infrastructure and the judicial system during the prolonged conflict' (Ibid).

These oracles not only created safe spaces within which the local populace could articulate their despair, anxiety and fear but they could also 'embody, interpret, and acknowledge the injury of war' (Ibid). 'Voicing the incoherent sounds of the tortured, representing injury on behalf of those silenced,' observed Lawrence, 'Saktirani transforms absence into presence, giving pain a place in the world' (Ibid: 193). Sociologist Selvy Thiruchandran also encountered similar women oracles during her post-war research on women's relationship with religion. She described how Anet, a Burgher-Tamil Catholic woman who practiced scissor predicting (*katarikol chattiram*) in Batticaloa, during the war, had placed herself in grave danger when she had mentioned the names of particular people as being responsible for 'disappearances' and kidnappings, while possessed. 'The LTTE had taken offence that she was involving them and warned her that she should not mention names of any person in the case of abductions' (2013: 123).

The only Kannaki Amman priestess I met in the Northern Province (Fig. 9), at a small shrine in Puloly West (Jaffna District), noted with pride and satisfaction that she had built the shrine herself, undergoing great hardship, after a woman in the neighborhood had begun to be visited by the goddess. This priestess as well as her two women assistants were emphatic that the only reason their village escaped the violence and pillaging that took place during war time, both under the IPKF (Indian Peace Keeping Forces) and the Sri Lankan military, was the powerful presence of Kannaki Amman at this shrine.



Figure 9. Kannaki priestess flanked by her two assistants, Puloly West, Jaffna District (Photo by Sharni Jayawardena)

Fracturing communities

The very ancient and powerful Ampitiye Pattini Devale in Panama (Eastern Province) is located in a village populated by many Tamils and Sinhalese who have inter-married for several generations. Due to this unique population mix, the village has managed to avoid several violent encounters with the Tamil militants despite a large percentage of male youth joining the Civil Defence Force. The villagers believe that Panama was spared the ravages of the Tsunami of 2004 due to the intercession of Pattini Maniyo whose apparition was seen suspended over the village on the day of the disaster.

Panama has become nationally renowned for the annual *An Adeema* (Horn Pulling) or *An Keliya* (Horn Play) that takes place there for 13 days, during the month of August.⁹ *An Keliya* is performed to venerate Pattini and is associated with a playful period in her life (not mentioned in the *Cilappatikāram* or the *Pantis Kolmure*) when she and her husband, Palanga, sought to ‘hook’ a *Sapu* flower (*Michelia champaca*) with the aid of two forked sticks. In the process, their hooks got ensnared and a tug o’ war ensued between them. Pattini was the victor, to her great glee. She and her maidservants clapped and danced and teased Palanga much to his annoyance.

I will not address the intricacies of this ritual nor its symbolism here, as I have already discussed these aspects in the photo essay that appears on our website,

⁹ While this ritualised ‘game’ used to be played in many parts of the country, even in the 1950s and 1960s, there are very few places in Sri Lanka that practice it now (Obeyesekere 1984). However, a similar ritualised game, *Kombu Muri* or *Kombu Vilaiyadu*, performed in honour of Kannaki is seeing a post-war resurgence in the Eastern Province.

www.invokingthegoddess.lk. Nor will I discuss the commonalities and differences between this ritualised game and a similar game —*Kombu Muri* or *Kombu Vilaiyadu*— that is performed in honour of Kannaki in Tamil villages in the Eastern Province. Rather, what I wish to briefly discuss here is an interesting convergence of Buddhists and Hindus and even some Muslims, on the last two days of the *An Keliya* festival which is open to the public —no women are allowed during the 11 days that precede it. As noted above, Buddhist devotees of Pattini and Hindu devotees of Kannaki, rarely attend the important rituals that are performed in *kovils* and *devales* respectively, though they may stop by briefly and pray at each other's shrine. This is partly the reason why Obeyesekere noted that the sharing of a goddess and even having beliefs and some rituals in common didn't necessarily lead to 'any form of unity or reciprocity of consciousness' between the two sets of devotees (2004: 16).

However, the convergence of all three religions, on the last two days of the Pattini festival at Panama comes closest to enabling such a 'unity and reciprocity of consciousness', I would argue, due to the crossing of boundaries by devotees that I have not witnessed at other Pattini-Kannaki shrines, with the exception of Dalukana (see below) and other multireligious spaces such as Sri Pada/Adam's Peak/Sivanoli Padam (see de Silva 2011 and also this volume, Fernando 2011), Kataragama/Katiragamam (Obeyesekere 1977 and 1978; Goonesekera 2007) and Munneswaram (Bastin 2002).

Many white-clad Buddhist women seeking children will hold a coconut and perform *pirathattai* – rolling on the ground thrice around the *devale*, in the sweltering sun and upon scorching sand (temporarily cooled by the pouring of water). Similarly, both Buddhist and Hindu women will have their mouths pierced (*adayalam gaseema*) with the *vel*, the lance of God Murugan or Skanda, whose shrines near Panama, at Kebilitta and Kataragama, are greatly revered.

The piercing of the mouth symbolises the renunciation of speech, thus ensuring greater focus of one's thoughts upon the deity. Many Tamil Hindus who viewed photographs of these Buddhist women, at our mobile exhibitions, literally could not believe their eyes as they had never encountered Buddhists putting themselves through forms of ritual penance that are widely believed to be 'Hindu' (Fig. 10).

It was equally surprising to encounter a Muslim woman palm reader who had brought a large group of Muslims with her from Kalmunai, a predominantly Muslim town further up the coast. Her relatives noted that she regularly became 'possessed' by Pattini though she herself didn't wish to speak with me as she was preoccupied with caring for her two Muslim patients/clients for whom she performed individualised healing rituals at the threshold of the Pattini Amman shrine. Middle-class Muslims in Colombo expressed both astonishment and horror, when I mentioned these activities, declaring them to be *haram* (forbidden) within Islam. I decided against exhibiting photographs of this woman's ritual performances to ensure her safety and privacy.



Figure 10. Young Buddhist woman pierced with Murugan's vel, Panama Ampitiye Pattini Devale, Ampara District (Photo by Sharni Jayawardena)



Figure 11. Image of Pattini Amma being taken in procession around the village of Panama, Ampara District (Photo by Sharni Jayawardena)

Unfortunately, not all Buddhists in Panama are sanguine about these kinds of multireligious encounters. A young man who had served in the Civil Defence Force during the war and was currently struggling to find satisfactory employment in his village, and whom I met in connection with wildlife tourism rather than the Pattini festival, declared several times that Panama was a '100 percent Sinhala Buddhist village'. Similarly, the Chief Buddhist monk at the ever-expanding Buddhist temple at Panama was at pains to inform me that he had ensured that no Muslim would be allowed to reside in Panama. 'The same goes for any LTTE supporters', he added as an aside.

I also noticed that the *deva perahara* (Fig. 11), conveying an image of Pattini atop a winning horn, which follows a carefully worked-out route that encompasses all four divisions of the village – north, east, south and west – and visits all homes that seek to welcome her was now being inordinately delayed at the Buddhist temple, due to a *bodhi pooja* (veneration of the Bo tree) that had been planned at the same time, resulting in the *kapurala* (*devale* priest) having to extend his ritualised traversal of the village to the next morning. Interestingly, while the *poosaris* (*kovil* priests) at both the ancient and new Pillaiyar (Ganesh) *kovils*, paid obeisance to the Pattini image, the chief monk at the Buddhist temple made it clear that the Buddha was paramount in this village, not Pattini, in a lengthy *bana* (sermon) he gave to the *perahara* participants while the Pattini statue was conspicuously placed on a lower seat than him.

Similar power battles were witnessed during my research at Dalukana, another fascinating multireligious Kannaki Amman shrine located in a community predominated by *wanniyalletto*, many of whom have now intermarried with Sinhalese Buddhists. Interestingly, it was the latter that had invited the *poosari* of a neighboring Pillaiyar *kovil* to officiate at the Kannaki shrine in the village that shared space with Mariamman (another independent Hindu goddess very popular in the East as well as the hill country) effectively marginalising the *wanniyalletto* community and the ancestral deities they had constructed to guard the two goddesses. The previous year, the chief of the *wanniyalletto* (Fig. 12) had been the Master of Ceremonies and it was his community that had decorated the *kalyan kal* (symbolising Kannaki's wedding) as well as conducted all the *poojas*.

A heated argument broke out on the last day of the festival over the *wanniyalletto* consuming meat within the premises of the shrine. Some of the Sinhala Buddhists who had appointed themselves trustees of the Kannaki shrine were remonstrating with the *wanniyalletto*, saying that they were desecrating the sanctity of the shrine, conveniently ignoring the fact that the jurisdiction of this shrine had originally lain with the *wanniyalletto*, who had sought to propitiate the goddess in keeping with their identity as hunters and meat eaters.



Figure 12. Chief of the Wanniyaletto, Dalukana Pattini Devale, Polonnaruwa District (Photo by Sharni Jayawardena)

Conclusion

In this article, I have sought to explore the complicated and dynamic interplay of incorporation and transformation that takes place, across the centuries, in the worship of a ‘Hindu’ goddess within a primarily Buddhist polity. Such a process, I noted, followed two distinct trajectories within the tiny island of Lanka with firstly, the transformation of Kannaki into a unique Hindu deity venerated by Tamil Hindus, the largest minority in the country, and secondly, the incorporation and transformation of this same deity into a Buddhist one – worshipped as Pattini – by Sinhala Buddhists, the dominant community in the country.

While I have highlighted how origin myths, arrival narratives, ritual texts and enactments and religious reformers alike have struggled to place their own, unique Hindu or Buddhist ‘stamp’ upon this goddess, I have also noted how there nonetheless remain a few spaces of multireligiosity that enable a more porous intermingling of various Buddhist, Hindu and even Muslim elements of worship. Sadly, such spaces are rapidly being eroded within a post-war context of increasing Sinhala Buddhist hegemony, Sankritisation of Hindu deities, and bifurcations along rigid religious lines, particularly in the larger cities. The ritual space that is offered to women, not merely as devotees of Pattini-Kannaki, but as mediums, oracles and priestesses, however marginalised they might be within the broader Hindu or Buddhist religious traditions within which they operate, is also an important one and warrants longer-term study in a post-war context. 🙏

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