



## THE PATTINI WORSHIPPING CULT AND INDIGENOUS APPROACH TO NEGOTIATING NATURAL DISASTERS IN SRI LANKA

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### INTRODUCTION

This paper explains how folk religious practices and belief systems of ordinary villagers living on the eastern coast of Sri Lanka have given them early warning of the disaster enabling them to prepare for it and successfully manage disasters in general and natural disasters in particular. In another way, it is about the people's embodied cultural capacity to negotiate with the natural and manmade disasters. In times of strife, the Goddess Pattini appears in the dreams of a few holy people in the village and provides forewarnings about precarious situations. Prior to the tsunami, this led the entire village to gather in the village shrine room, the Ampitiya devālaya, to perform rituals which acted as a mechanism for awareness creation and preparation that reduced the disaster risk of the community and ultimately saved their lives.

### METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted between the years 2010-2012 in Pānama a village in the eastern coast of Sri Lanka. The researcher stayed in the village with a research assistant in order to grasp the phenomenological lives of the villagers. During this long fieldwork a lot of ethnographic interviews were done and participant observation, informal discussions and key informant interviews were the modes of data collection. Eminent themes were elicited for the purpose of this paper out of the narratives collected from the villagers.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The village Pānama falls within the jurisdiction of the Ampara District Secretariat. Frequently described as “border villages”, wherein the everyday lives of “ordinary people” (often referred to as (S:) sāmānya minissu) were sandwiched between the LTTE and government armed forces and up until May 2009, they were, in effect, battlefields. In Pānama, members of two ethnic groups, i.e., Sinhala and Tamils, who have been engaged in conflict elsewhere for more than three decades, live together in one social system, inter-connected by kinship and marriage, religious beliefs and practices, in a caste-based economic and social system. The villagers have created a unique social system in which people's status and roles have been defined along caste lines which make a base for the everyday collaborations. They do not problematize ethnic border differences but are highly conscious of caste boundaries that shaped intra- and inter-ethnic relationships through both a caste-based classificatory scheme of marriage and kinship and religious rituals, despite recollections of wartime when people kept a suspicious eye on ethnic “others”. The social equilibrium pact that allows Sinhala and Tamils to live together as high and low-caste groups (happily or unhappily for some) bound together by cosmological powers, maintains the sexual and kinship ties.

Nur Yalman (1967) identified Pānama as a “bicultural community” located on the borderline between two cultures. Furthermore, Yalman saw Pānama society as a “shatter zone” caught between two cultures, an amalgam characterized by synthetic Sinhala and Tamil cultural patterns due to the long period of isolation that produced its own unique system. But, Pānama should not be considered in total isolation. I endorse Yalman's recognition of Pānama as a blend of Sinhala and Tamil social systems. He observed this amalgam in kinship, caste and religion; the three spheres creating the traditional idiosyncratic social system of Pānama. He saw the prospects of Pānama becoming isolated and integrated with other parts of Sri Lanka due to greater mobility, the option to be Sinhala or Tamil, and to cleavages that were becoming entrenched. However, these events have not happened as he envisaged in 1955.



Pānama has four castes: Goyigama and Vellālar, Dhobi, Barber, and Padu. This is a combination of Sinhala and Tamil castes which forms one unique social system in the village. In general Sinhala high-caste Goyigama and Tamil high-caste Vellālar are identified as equal status caste groups by writers such as Sabaratnam (2001). In their everyday social lifeworld, Pānama people use kinship terminologies to address fellow villagers. Some such commonly used terminologies are: māmā, (S: uncle), bāppā (S: big father- fathers' brothers), nandā (S: aunt), seeyā, muttā (S: grandfather) āchchi (S: grandmother), akkā (S: elder-sister), nangi (S: younger-sister), aiyā (S: elder-brother), and malayā (S: younger-brother). The high-caste Tamils were also given the same social positions according to what I overheard in day-to-day conversations. The usage of uncle and aunty in relation to washermen and washerwomen is also observed; redi nendā (S: Dhobi woman) and redi mamā (Dhobi man). Yalman (1967) identified that the Pānama kinship pattern is as an amalgam of Sinhala and Tamil systems. This is a result of Sinhala-Tamil mixed marriages, binna (S:), through which they establish blood-relations, rettai uravu (T:) or le nekama (S:) in all the caste groups respecting the fact that marriages happen between parallel caste groups in the Sinhala and Tamil communities. However, the marriage between two different castes is banned and those who do so are compelled to leave their high caste status. This situation led nearby villagers to call Pānama people kawalam (S: mixed) – a discourse which has a long history as Yalman observed a similar situation in 1955. Inheritance happens through the binna marriage practice that exists in the village.

Worshipping Goddess Pattini and God Kōvalan (T:), Gana deiyō (S:), popularly known as Vināyagar (T:) or Lord Ganapathi of the Hindu pantheon, and God Murugan (T:), Kataragama deiyō, Kanda Kumāra (S: God Kataragama) is part and parcel of the long-lasting religious traditions of the village. Goddess Pattini plays a very important role in shaping the belief system of the villagers as the deity responsible for prosperity and safety and as the main guardian deity. The annual religious festivals, Ankeliya (S: horn-pulling) or Kombu Vilayattu (T:) rituals of Pānama start with the participation in the annual religious festivals of Kataragama devālaya (shrine) that last for fourteen days. The Hindu Tamil devotees start their annual pilgrimage on foot (S: Pāda Yātra or T: Pāda Yāttirai) from Jaffna Nallur temple, traveling through Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Pottuvil to Pānama and walk about 450 kilometres in total, including traversing the Yāla National Forest to reach Kataragama (the place of the God Kataragama is also identified as Kataragama).

Worshipping of the Goddess Pattini is crucial for the Pānama people. The locals believe that Pattini has saved the villagers from many calamities, including the Asian Tsunami in 2004 and attacks by LTTE on various occasions. She appeared in the form of an army of soldiers and routed a group of LTTE combatants when they came to attack the village. On another occasion, she appeared in a dream to Moorthi, a Vellāla Tamil man married to a Sinhala lady. In the dream, she warned the villagers about the Tsunami a few months prior to the incident. The villagers performed rituals after hearing of Moorthi's dream. The Tsunami claimed only one life in the village despite its three-pronged attack. There are many such narratives, which reflect and verify the locals' faith in the Goddess Pattini. Other gods are also worshipped. Thomas J. Trawick (2007:147) relates similar situations of charisma and collective articulation. Prior to Goddess Pattini appearing in Moorthy's dream, she had appeared in a dream of the lay clergyman of the Yatipila devālaya of Ampitiya shrine. Since Yatipila Kapuva the lay clergyman who saw the dream was a novice and had assumed duties at the shrine only four to five years earlier, the Goddess Pattini had appeared in Moorthy's dream.

In Moorthy's dream, the Goddess Pattini had told him that she had appeared in a dream to the Kapu Mahattaya (or S: Kapuva) but he had not done anything and suggested that Moorthy should do something about it. Moorthy then shared this story at the village bazar. Then all of them got together and performed a pūja with the stuff needed for the pūja collected from the



villagers. The Tsunami wave hit the country within a few weeks' time of the Sakkara dāne (special alms giving). Such almsgiving was done in various other similar shrines located in the boundaries of the village.

The tradition of worshipping Goddess Pattini could be considered as a way of collecting information on disasters and learning the ways of minimizing vulnerabilities by a group of warriors who deserted the upcountry after the defeat of the 1818 rebellion. Those who left the upcountry gradually learned the art of living with the harsh realities of the environment under duress of killing in the hands of white soldiers. The main subject matter examined in this paper, prewarning of the disaster, helps me discuss more embodied expressions of commongrounds in assisting the existence of people by way of embodying culture which is the local knowledge and art of living and assuring wellbeing for all. My definition of "commongrounds" derived by combining Pierre Bourdieu's idea of habitus and Michael Jackson's notion of the existential and intersubjective lives of human beings is:

"...inhabitants' continuous and creative efforts to live and relate to each other in fields of common endeavour informed by embodied (conscious or unconscious) understandings of the social and material world. To put it slightly differently, commongrounds involve shared dispositions and abilities to use cultural resources in distinctive, pragmatic and creative ways that best match emerging situations and contingencies, while taking account of external forces/limits that threaten local social living in its meeting of existential needs" (Piyarathne 2018:7).

The culture and heritage explored above under commongrounds could be also interpreted from the point of self and embodiment. Since the human body has been considered as a background feature in traditional ethnography, it has often remained implicit in anthropological theories of culture, "which historically have been cast in terms such as symbols, meanings, knowledge, practice, customs, or traits" (Csordas 1999: 181).

## **CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS**

This research paper basically discusses how the ordinary villagers in Pānama came to know about tsunami in advance. The study shows the capacity of embodied culture and heritage that has facilitated people in dealing with natural or manmade challenges such as the tsunami effectively. This can be interpreted as a bodily capacity to grasp the vulnerabilities and maximize the chance of living via the embodied grasp of the environment.

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