Ethno-Indology

Heidelberg Studies in South Asian Rituals

General Editor
Axel Michaels

Volume 15

2018

Harrassowitz Verlag · Wiesbaden

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The Goddess's Embrace

Multifaceted Relations at the Ekāmranātha Temple Festival in Kanchipuram

2018
Harrassowitz Verlag · Wiesbaden

Cover illustration: The goddess's embrace, depicted on the eastern side of Ṛṣi Gopura, Ekāmranātha temple, Kanchipuram, 2009.

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über http://dnb.dnb.de abrufbar.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek
The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the internet at http://dnb.dnb.de.

For further information about our publishing program consult our website http://www.harrassowitz-verlag.de

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Printed on permanent/durable paper.
Printing and binding: Memminger MedienCentrum AG
Printed in Germany

ISSN 1860-2053
ISBN 978-3-447-11134-8

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Acknowledgements

This book is based on my doctoral dissertation, which I defended in 2013 at the University of Oslo. The publication was made possible through financial support offered by the Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages (IKOS) and Axel Michaels, editor of the Ethno-Indology Series. I thank them for their generous funding.

This book owes to several people. First and foremost, I wish to thank all the people in India, who made my field research a positive and fruitful experience, in particular the priests and participants of the Ekāmranātha temple festival for sharing their thoughts and knowledge with me.

My greatest thanks go to my supervisor Ute Hüsken for her genuine interest, prompt responses, and thoughtful comments. David Shulman deserves special thanks, not only for generously taking the time to translating the Tamil texts, and supplying me with a copy of the *Ēkāmparanātar Ulā*, but also for his inspiring enthusiasm and warm hospitality during my stay in Jerusalem. I am truly indebted to Harry Falk for teaching me Sanskrit, guiding me through my studies, and for his generous support and wonderful trips to India.

For help with fieldwork, I am grateful to my research assistant, Narayanan Subramanian, for his patience, manifold advice and organization of practical things. Many thanks for hospitality and warm-heartedness in Kanchipuram go to Nagaswamy Gurukkal, Anand Gurukkal, K. Balasubramanyam, R. Narayanan, Avinash S. Kumar and Raja; in Thanjavur to Dr. Sudarshan from the Saraswati Mahal Library and Dr. Kulathooran from Tamil University; in Pondicherry to Dominic Goodall and Valérie Gillet from the École française d'Extrême-Orient; in Chennai to Ravi and Ramanadhan Vaidyanaat from the Agama Academy, and special thanks go to M.D. Muthukumaraswamy, director of the National Folklore Support Centre (NFSC), and members of his staff, in particular Arun, Dhivya and Sarah for their assistance and a great festival time. For help with translations, I am grateful to my Tamil teacher, Dr. S. Arokinathan in Pondicherry, and A.K. Selvadurai in Kanchipuram.

I would like to thank the Faculty of Humanities, University of Oslo, for granting me the doctoral stipend, and the Department of Cultural Studies and Oriental Languages for an excellent working environment. I am particularly grateful to the members of the Oslo South Asia Symposium for their feedback and fruitful discussions over the years.

I wish to thank my friends for having a lot of fun, and for their encouragement and belief in me. I am deeply grateful to my parents for their unlimited love and support throughout my life. Finally, very special thanks go to my husband Jan for being there.

Oslo, 30. August 2018 Kerstin Schier

Notes on Transliteration and Translation

Transliteration

Indian words have been transliterated according to standard academic conventions for Sanskrit. Gods, temples, and historical persons, as well as Sanskrit and Tamil words are written with diacritics. Personal names of my interviewees, language names, dynasties and geographical designations like states, towns, rivers, mountains are written in common transcription without diacritical marks. However, when the geographical names occur in the source text, I use diacritics in the translation. Thus, for example, for the town Kanchipuram the names Kanchi, Kāñcī, and Kacci may occur.

Problematic was the rendering of names given in inscriptions. Different spellings occur and since some names are not known to me, I reproduce the names of historical persons and dynasties as given in the ARE volumes, although they are not consistent.

Texts written in Tamil have the Tamil ending –m, such as *Periyapurāṇam*, whereas texts written in Sanskrit are without the ending –m, such as *Skanda Purāṇa*.

Generally I give preference to the Sanskrit spelling, because my background is Sanskrit. Moreover, many technical terms are derived from Sanskrit. Thus, for example, I write Sanskrit *abhiṣeka* instead of Tamil *apiṣēkam*. However, if I came to know the word basically in its Tamilized form, or when it was mostly used in this form, I give its Sanskrit equivalent in parenthesis. For example, I use Tamil *tīrttavāri* instead of Sanskrit *tīrthasnāna.*

Translation

All interviews and conversations I had with interviewees have been interpreted from Tamil by my research assistants. Some of them have been paraphrased. Further, some translations from Tamil by my research assistant are rather drafted. I have used single quotation marks for this type of quotes. Double quotation marks refer to accurate quotes from written sources.

Whenever I quote informants, I have stayed as closely as possible to the translation of my research assistant. Sometimes, I have added information in brackets to explain terms, and in square brackets in order to clarify the narrative of the interviews.

Abbreviations

ARE – *Annual Report on Indian Epigraphy*, New Delhi.
BṇḍP – *Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa*
EI – *Epigraphia Indica*, New Delhi.
HR&CE – Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Department
KāVi – *Kāmākṣīvilāsa*
KM (Ś) – *Kāñcīmāhātmya* (Śaiva)
KM (V) – *Kāñcīmāhātmya* (Vaiṣṇava)
KP – *Kāñcippurāṇam*
MW – Monier Williams Sanskrit-English Dictionary (http://www.sanskrit-lexicon.uni-koeln.de/mwquery/)
PP – *Periyapurāṇam*
SII – *South Indian Inscriptions*, Mysore.
SkP – *Skanda Purāṇa*
Skt. – Sanskrit
Tam. – Tamil

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Introduction

Numerous gods and goddesses are worshipped in India. Many of them, like humans, are married, and this is a reason to celebrate. Especially in South India, the association of god and goddess is celebrated in festivals that re-enact the deities' marriage year by year. Male gods, who have more than one wife, may have several marriage festivals a year. Mythological narratives are often linked to the festivals, and serve to explain the circumstances in which the divine marriage came to occur at that particular place.

This book focuses on the annual re-enactment of the divine marriage at one particular place: the Śaivite Ekāmranātha temple in Kanchipuram, in the South Indian state Tamil Nadu. On the tenth day of the temple's major annual festival (*mahotsava*), under the auspicious star *uttiram* in the Tamil month of Paṅkuṉi (mid-March to mid-April), the marriage of the god Ekāmranātha (a form of Śiva) and the goddess Kāmākṣī from the neighboring Kāmākṣī temple is celebrated—at least this is what is described in written sources. Kāmākṣī is venerated as an independent, powerful goddess, representing the most prominent 'seat of the Goddess' (*śaktipīṭha*) of South India. She is recognized as a manifestation of the goddess Lalitā Tripurasundarī of the Tantric Śrīvidyā cult, and has her own ritual tradition and temple in Kanchipuram. Her role, as independent goddess and consort of Ekāmranātha, is continuously negotiated. This is reflected in the myths of Ekāmranātha and Kāmākṣī, which allude to alternate roles and to a wide-ranging conceptualization of the deities' relationship dependent upon texts and sectarian identities.

Decisively influenced by Fuller's (1980) analysis of the divine couple's relationship in Madurai, my initial objective was to examine the implications and effects of this complex relation of Ekāmranātha and Kāmākṣī in Kanchipuram, as expressed in myths and rituals, especially in the ritual re-enactment of the deities' marriage during the annual temple festival at the Ekāmranātha temple. Rituals both reflect and create hierarchies, therefore, I enquired whether the sacred marriage presents an 'ideal relation' from a Śaivite point of view, or if there are breaks and/or inconsistencies in the ritual process. If so, these might indicate tensions and asymmetries in the relation of Ekāmranātha and Kāmākṣī, and between the human actors connected to the two temples, in particular, their priests.

However, after my first field trip and festival participation I learned that in the contemporary marriage rituals, Ekāmranātha is married to Ēlavārkuḻali, his consort housed in a shrine at the Ekāmranātha temple, and not to Kāmākṣī. Kāmākṣī attends the wedding celebrations as bridesmaid, together with the goddess Āti Kāmākṣī Kāḷikāmpāḷ. Moreover, the expected interactions and negotiations between the priests of the two temples were nonexistent. These discoveries brought new dimensions to my research project. I realized that my previous knowledge, gained from textual studies, transmitted a picture of the events different to that which I experienced while being at the place. Further, it showed me the importance of setting the temple's written tradition in relation to contemporary ritual practices.