

**Dancing Boats of Krishna:
the riverine temple culture of Kerala and the vañci-p ?? u songs**

RESEARCH PROJECT OBJECTIVES/ HYPOTHESIS:

Home to several religions, Kerala has been shaped for centuries by coexistence of radically different communities. A complex network of their relations made a dense social fabric against the landscape of backwaters, rivers and lavish greenery fed by monsoon rains. Sacred groves, churches, mosques, shrines and temple complexes dotted this space of competition for local domination. Some developed as pilgrimage centers in the circuits of movement of regional and trans-regional patterns. Some evolved into nodal points of economic and cultural importance for religious groups that shared the narrow space between the Western Ghats and the Arabian Sea. A challenge to researchers, Kerala defied concepts and ideas deployed to account for cultural, social or religious phenomena of the Indian Subcontinent. The temple culture of central Kerala remains little explored as a network of interconnections in terms of social, religious or literary practices. It appears to have developed in relationship to rivers and water ways that shaped customs and beliefs, animated imagination, inspired forms of literary and art expression. The project attempts to portray this unique cultural complex hypothetically conceptualized as 'the riverine temple culture' through identifying its constitutive elements shared across the region marked by the Krishna temples of Ambalapuzha to the West and Aranmula to the East. A specific attention shall be focused on cyclic festivities based on the Pampa river and their literary component in the form of vañci-p ?? u. Classified as folk boatmen songs, the vañci-p ?? u accompany a two-month season that features ceremonial visits of huge, ornamented snake-boats to the Aranmula temple, dance-like parades and races on the river in front of the temple. The project shall identify conventions, topics, and formal characteristics that made the songs into a genre that eventually spilled over into the realm of the early modern literary culture of Kerala. The academic interest in Kerala has been marked by the asymmetric development of studies concerned with elitist culture of one particular community of Kerala brahmins or high culture temple theatre, on one hand and the religion or folk art considered as belonging to lower social strata on the other. The project attempts to test the hypothesis that the relatively little known temple culture may offer a unique vantage point to integrate the two perspectives through focus on space and places.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

The project situates itself across disciplines and methodologies offered by literary history, social history and comparative religions. It favors perspectives opened by the so called spatial and mobility turn in the humanities, understood here as a predilection for representing the object under investigation by phenomena observed in their repeated mobility patterns and networked through constant movement reproducing the shared cultural space out of the circuits and trajectories left by people, ideas, texts and other objects of cultural importance. A study of the written sources and their circulation shall be complemented with that of textual practices and onsite field study of the repeated festive events that remain predominantly performative in their character and function.

RESEARCH PROJECT IMPACT:

The project shall offer a portrayal of the regional temple culture through the micro-historical spatial perspective. It shall propose an alternative to the often stereotyped array of concepts with which scholarship tends to view South Asia as homogenous cultural space. Recognized as one of the thirty two original settlements of Nambudiri Brahmins, the Aranmula of today has been deprived of Nambudiri population and is witness to a new project of international airport construction that may spell the end to the unique riverine temple culture of Kerala.