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The Sense of Self in Early Modern South India and Southeast Asia: Overview of the Volume

The present volume of *Cracow Indological Studies* opens with **David Shulman**'s essay which brilliantly outlines the guiding idea underlying all articles collected here. As astutely pointed out by Shulman right at the beginning of his discourse, "a rich literature of personal introspection, of a new kind, emerged, beginning in the late 15th century and accelerating in intensity through the 16th to 18th centuries." This is then the literature, which is examined, from different angles and in different contexts, in the subsequent papers where the opinion voiced by Shulman is put to test and abundantly substantiated, largely as a result of the research based on various sources investigated as part of the project *The New Ecology of Expressive Modes in Early Modern South India*,¹ in which some of the authors of the articles presented here are involved.

The first case study, a contribution by **Talia Ariav** and **Narsh Keerthi**, is devoted to a Sanskrit *campū* titled *Nilakanṭhavijaya* written by Nilakanṭha Dīkṣita, one of the best-known authors of 17th-century South India. It narrates the frequently revisited story of churning the Ocean of Milk, traditionally handed down in many different ways: by word of mouth, in the form of sophisticated poetical compositions, and through the works of painters and sculptors, among others. However, it so happens that very different aspects of the narrative come to be

¹ <https://neemerc.huji.ac.il>.

highlighted each time the story is showcased. One might assume that in the case of this particular *campū*, the coincidence of the author's name, Nīlakaṇṭha, with the first part of the title could not have been accidental; rather, the concurrence seems to have been purposefully introduced and creatively exploited in the narrative. To this end Śiva's pivotal role in the mythic event is foregrounded and utilised. Thus, Śiva's poison drinking feat, an act which earned him the epithet of the Dark Throat, appears as an important narrative juncture, probably even more so to a Śaiva devotee, and Nīlakaṇṭha the writer was indeed one. Taking this event as the theme, Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita goes on to produce in his composition a series of highly evolved biographies of several different actors participating in this epic scene of churning the Ocean of Milk. However, the biographies in question appear to have been constructed with the vision of the sharedness of the selves in mind, the notion which the authors, Ariav and Keerthi, expound in these words (p. 57):

Sharedness is a philosophical way of accounting for the ratio of one and many, but it is also a mode of being in the world. It can be similarly applied to the identification we began with, of Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita and Nīlakaṇṭha-Śiva. The author is the real protagonist of this work.

This and other insights gleaned by Ariav and Keerthi from the analysis of the original text show the complexity of Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita's work and give us a better understanding of his work, his views, and his personality.

Śiva is also the central subject of another article in the present volume, this time showing him as the being, who, in order to save his devotee, Mārkaṇḍeya, kills Kāla, Death or Time. The paper, authored by **Hemdat Salay** and referencing the Don Handelman model (2014),² analyzes the *Kālavadhā Kāvya* of Kṛṣṇalīlāśuka, a poet also known as Bilvamaṅgalam, most probably hailing from Kerala. This 14th-century

² In the first essay "Myth of Murugan" contained in his *One God, Two Goddesses: Three Studies of South Indian Cosmology*, Handelman shows the changing nature of divinity, from abstraction to physicality.

scholar, through his works, introduces his readers “into the literary and philosophical worlds in which he was deeply immersed.” His *Kālavadha Kāvya* documents the religious milieu of Kerala in which the two gods, Śiva and Viṣṇu, as well as their devotees, live in a harmonious relationship. The reflexive-reflective tension inherent in Śiva’s manifestation is inseparably linked to the contraction and expansion of Śiva’s self-awareness. Such an understanding of the dynamic generating the cycle of Śiva’s life undoubtedly grows out of Kṛṣṇalīlāśuka’s reflections formed in the intellectual environment in which he lived and worked.

Sivan Goren-Arzony concentrates on *Bhāṣānaiṣadhacampu*, a Maṇipravāḷam retelling of the story of Nala and Damayantī, which originated in Kerala in the 16th century. This particular episode, found also in the *Mahābhārata*, is probably the most often told and retold story in India, presented in various ways, in manuscripts illustrated by elaborate miniatures, stage performances, or as parts of other narratives;³ hence the question, under such circumstances, what else—novel and worthy of admiration—could one offer to entice the literary audience after a work of such a calibre as Śrīharṣa’s famous *Naiṣadhacarita* was already there for the taking? It turns out that the poet known as Maḷamaṅgalakkavi, by selecting Maṇipravāḷam as the language of his retelling, has chosen a unique path characterized by “a dual expressive mode, one which resonates with the concept of ‘high and low:’” dense literature of the Sanskrit style with an admixture of the performative, the local, giving us a thought-provoking, besides being hilarious, text. The in-depth analysis presented by Goren-Arzon shows, however, yet another underlying pattern embedded in the poem, namely “[an] intensified interest in the depiction of the individual, encapsulated in his or her separation from other individuals, possibly a shift to the portrayal of individuality *per se*.”

Dimitry Shevchenko’s study focuses on the *Naṭāṅkuśa*, a Sanskrit treatise on the Kūṭiyāṭṭam theatre, composed most probably in 15th-century

³ For how the story of Nala and Damayantī could have been associated with the narrative tradition of the Dhola-Mārū theme, see: Szyszko 2012.

Kerala. In his paper, Shevchenko undertakes an inquiry into the nature of the philosophical debate on a specific acting technique known as *pakarnnāṭṭam* employed routinely in the Kūṭiyāṭṭam performance and objected to by the author of the treatise. This technique relies on the practice whereby one and the same actor, in the same costume and make-up, is used to impersonate different characters. The *Naṭāṅkuśa* argues against this practice, considering it inappropriate—a single actor’s mind cannot accommodate many selves. As Shevchenko suggests, the Kūṭiyāṭṭam theory thrives on the tension between the two non-dualisms: Śāṅkara’s Advaita and the non-dualist Śaivism. He further highlights the fact that it was “the common practice among the Brahmanical scholars to freely transport methods and ideas across śāstric disciplinary boundaries.”

Yet another Sanskrit treatise on teatrology, the *Bālarāmabharata*, authored by Kārtikā Tirunāḷ Bālarāma Varma, the ruler of Travancore (r. 1758–1798), is the subject of an analysis by **Agnieszka Wójcik**. The royal author is certainly a worthy follower of the Bharata tradition, not only continuing the work on the *nāṭyaśāstra* but also enriching it with elements of the local dance tradition, which might be particularly noteworthy. The focus of the paper, however, is not on the theoretical issues or artistic innovations discussed in the *Bālarāmabharata*, but Kārtikā Tirunāḷ Bālarāma Varma’s personal statements regarding himself, his family, and his court. Rāma Varma’s way of crafting his persona and presenting himself as a ruler, patron, and connoisseur of art as well as a scholar and writer, is what draws Wójcik’s attention. The way the author introduces himself in the opening part of the treatise says a lot about what was important to him and how he understood his role as a continuator and patron of certain traditions and, at the same time, a leader setting new trends. It is intriguing to track down his choices in sketching his own self-portrait that he wants to present to his contemporaries, but also to posterity.

Anna Lise Seastrand introduces one more person living in the 18th century, in South India; he was connected to a temple, in this case, the shrine of Śivakāmasundari in Citamparam which, incidentally, is

embellished with fascinating murals. Some of those 18th-century murals relate the history of the sacred place and the construction of the temple as narrated by the temple *talapurāṇams* (Skt. *sthalapurāṇa*) composed by the members of *maṭams* (Skt. *maṭha*). The murals of Cītamparam offer several portrait-like images of the members of this religious institution. One figure is of particular interest—a realistically depicted ascetic, who towers over gods and men alike (Figs 1, 5). Judging by the inscription accompanying the murals, his name is Ampalavāṇa Tampirāṇ. As Seastrand points out, his depiction offers a “highly individualized image, a true portrait in the conventional sense of mimetic figuration.” With the help of inscriptions, all together seven portrait figures may be identified with great certainty; five of those have been depicted against a mint green background. Such convention, with green used to signal someone’s importance, is best known from the work produced at the imperial Mughal courts, as Seastrand reminds us. Adopted in southern India, “it distinguishes figures who are not only important, but whose reality as historical figures, as specific individuals, is no less important than their transcendence of a single moment as exemplar: exemplary king, lover, and devotee.”

The articles collected in the current issue of *Cracow Indological Studies*, and briefly discussed in the overview, are introduced by David Shulman in his key-note essay. The main body of the volume consists of a section made up of six specific case studies which may be approached in two different ways. For one, it is possible to view the two articles having as their starting point Tamil Nadu as a sort of nesting frame for the other four. Thus the section starts with the contribution of Talia Ariav and Naresh Keerthi on the literary work of Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita, an author active in the Kaveri delta; Anna Lise Seastrand’s article, discussing works of artists from the same geographical area, that is, Tamil Nadu, closes the section and the volume. The remaining four articles, located between those two in the core, middle segment, deal with literary works created in and related to Kerala. In this way, the ‘geographical’ organization of the volume becomes one of the dimensions of ordering and pursuing the essays. Another way of organizing and

reading the articles might be through the lens of genres which the discussed works present. The first three articles, authored by Talia Ariav and Naresh Keerthi, Hemdat Salay and Sivan Goren-Arzonny respectively, focus on the texts belonging to the *campū* and *mahākāvya* genres. The next two deal with technical texts (*śāstra*), namely scholarly treatises on drama (by Dimitry Shevchenko and Agnieszka Wójcik). Anna Seastrand's article discusses an altogether different artistic genre, the painting. Whatever the way one may choose to group the essays, all of them have one thing in common: they show how individuality is perceived in works created in a particular area and in a particular time frame. For this very reason, works of all seven authors are published here in a single volume, under the telling title, *The Sense of Self in Early Modern South and Southeast India*.

References

- Handelman, D. 2014. *One God, Two Goddesses: Three Studies of South Indian Cosmology*. Leiden–Boston: Brill.
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