

In Conversation with the Kolam Practice

Auspiciousness and Artistic Experiences among Women in Tamilnadu, South India

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Abstract

In Conversation with the Kolam Practice: Auspiciousness and Artistic Experiences among Women in Tamilnadu, South India, by Anna Laine. Doctoral dissertation 2009, Department of Social Anthropology, School of Global Studies, University of Gothenburg, Box 700, 405 30 Gothenburg, Sweden. ISBN 978-91-628-7701-9

This anthropological study explores the kolam, a South Indian practice where women daily draw geometrical images in front of their homes to invite the deities. Through this practice, women engage in social and religious processes. They generate an auspicious atmosphere and become constructed as feminine beings. Temporal and spatial rhythms are defined and reproduced, and the house is made into a home. At the same time, the practice provides a space for exploration where kolam makers can experiment with changing circumstances and values. The study investigates the kolam both as a performative process, and as a material result, and the ethnographic material is treated from anthropological perspectives on art and gender. To grasp the practice from a wider perspective, multi-sited fieldwork has been employed, among various castes and classes, both in rural and urban areas of Tamilnadu.

The aim is to contribute to anthropological understandings of and approaches to images, aesthetics and artistic practice. The efficacy of images in the constitution of social relationships plays a central part in the dissertation. The notion of aesthetics is defined as multisensorial and embodied in everyday life. The aesthetic aspects of the kolam are presented as local social aesthetics; an experience founded in local cultural morality, and continuously reproduced and contested in a specific social environment. The concept of agency is connected to an efficacy embedded in the kolam image, as well as to an artistic capacity within the kolam makers; the interaction between these relations is examined. The dissertation discusses anthropological approaches to photographic images. Photography is used as a field method, and an important part of the presentation consists of photographic essays. Experimentation with the ambivalence of images, as well as the relation between text and image, is central to this work.

Key words: anthropology, kolam, visual culture, multisensoriality, aesthetics, art, artistic practice, photography, gender, efficacy, agency, Hinduism.