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FINAL DRAFT

Syncretising ways of doing, seeing and becoming in children's faith-inspired text-making and conversations around texts at home

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Abstract

This article examines the faith-inspired text-making of two siblings of Sri Lankan Tamil Hindu/Saiva heritage growing up in present-day London and the post-production conversations around the texts with one of the authors. Conceptually, we combine insights from syncretic literacy studies with an approach to faith as cultural practice. We argue that a syncretic lens can be enriched by an explicit focus on children's faith-inspired texts as material objects that open up possibilities for new meaning making. Our analysis points to the exploration of faith identities as a process of becoming that can be open-ended and potentially unpredictable.

Cet article examine la rédaction de textes inspirés par la foi de deux enfants d'héritage tamoul hindou/saiva sri-lankais et les conversations qui s'ensuivent autour de ces textes. Sur le plan conceptuel, nous combinons les connaissances tirées d'études sur les littératies syncrétiques avec une approche de la foi en tant que pratique culturelle. Cette approche syncrétique peut être enrichie par une focalisation explicite sur les textes en question en tant qu'objets matériels ouvrant des possibilités de créer de nouvelles significations. Notre analyse montre que l'exploration des identités religieuses est un processus de devenir parfois ouvert et potentiellement imprévisible.

Key words: syncretic literacies, faith as cultural practice, faith identities, team ethnography, scrapbooks

Introduction

There is growing recognition of the enduring significance of faith in shaping the everyday lived experiences of many children and adults as they strive to navigate increasingly multilingual, multicultural, multiethnic and multifaith societies worldwide. Often considered as a very private, deeply personal matter, the centrality of faith in many people's lives is frequently pitted against dehumanising representations or misrepresentations of faith communities in media discourses (Baker, Gabrielatos, McEnery 2013). Additionally, within educational research, children's faith literacy learning is frequently ignored or rendered problematic, especially in relation to school literacies (Genishi and Dyson 2009, Skerrett 2013). Yet, for many children and adults faith can support agency and foster a positive sense of self and belonging. This is especially true for individuals and communities that have faced discrimination, racism and social exclusion (McMillon and Edwards 2000, Height 2002, Peele-Eady 2011). Rather than dismiss the role of faith in contemporary societies, we argue for a sustained analytical attention to understanding how children and adults draw upon diverse faith contexts to shore up their identities, belief systems, languages and cultural traditions in a post-secular world. To this end, we examine the faith-inspired text-making of two siblings of Sri Lankan Tamil Hindu/Saiva heritage growing up in present-day London. The children's text-making took the form of a scrapbook. It was complemented by digitally recorded conversations around the texts the children crafted at home with one of the authors (Arani Ilankuberan) after the scrapbook was completed. The scrapbooks and conversations were conceived and produced as part of a three-year team ethnography of children's language and literacy learning and identity affirmation in faith settings in London.

Conceptually, we situate our work within literacy studies and an emergent body of work that has viewed faith as cultural practice. Despite seminal studies by Scribner and Cole (1981), Street (1984) and Heath (1983) to mention a few, the study of faith as cultural practice remains a peripheral topic in the academic literature (see Rosowsky 2015, Lytra 2019 for overviews). Nevertheless, existing work has illustrated the unique contexts for learning that faith affords to children and adults, both in the scope and nature of the literacy practices involved as well as in fostering senses of identity and belonging to a wider community spanning across generations, time and space. Becoming a member of the faith community consists of not only acquiring symbolic knowledge, moral and spiritual beliefs, language and literacy skills to engage in religious ritual but also becoming socialised into religious frames of understanding and interpretation of the self and the world (Heath 1983, Gregory and Williams 2000, Gregory, Long and Volk 2004, Lytra, Volk and Gregory 2016).

In this paper, we combine insights from syncretic literacy studies which have sought to uncover children's creativity, intentionality and expertise in language and literacy learning (Gregory, Long and Volk 2004, Gregory, Volk and Long 2013) with an approach to faith as cultural practice (Lytra, Volk and Gregory 2016). While recognising the central role of language in both oral and written form in sustaining, developing and spreading faith literacy practices, a syncretic lens goes beyond an exclusive focus on language and the interrelationship between languages. It investigates how languages are entangled with broader communicative repertoires of everyday cultural practices, material and symbolic resources (Lytra, Gregory and Ilankuberan 2016a, 2017). We argue that a syncretic lens can be enriched by an

explicit focus on the examination of children's faith-inspired texts and talk as processes of identity exploration. Concurring with Pahl and Roswell (2006, 2011), we understand children's faith-inspired texts as material objects that combine words and images and are tied to individual, familial and collective narratives. Moreover, children's texts can open up possibilities for the rehabilitation of memories and stories of journeys and for new understandings (Reyes 2009). This conceptualisation of children's faith-inspired texts examines processes of identity formation from a moving and provisional perspective, as a process of becoming that is at times open-ended and potentially unpredictable resembling "lines of flight" in Deleuze and Guattari's (2004) sense. It aligns with new materialist perspectives and a posthumanist stance in language education and applied linguistics that has propelled us to "rethink[ing] our relationship with everything we consider non-human: animals, objects, nature, the environment and much more" rather than focusing on "humans as above all others" (Pennycook 2018: 1). This relational emphasis calls for decentering the human subject as the sole knowledgeable and agentive meaning maker and hence our relationship with objects that are viewed as having an agency of their own (: 14; also Bennett 2009). We view these theoretical perspectives as complementary: syncretic literacy studies have focused on how "children exercise agency over their own learning" (Gregory, Volk and Long 2013: 313) and how they actively combine aspects of semiotic repertoires, artifacts and interactional patterns from different sources in their learning (ibid: 314). A posthumanist stance redresses the analytical emphasis on children's agency; it stresses relationality and an understanding of texts as material objects imbued with "thing" power and vibrancy (Bennett 2009), of children and their families' rich and complex linguistic, scriptal and other semiotic repertoires, feelings, histories, narratives and memories. This understanding of children's faith-inspired

texts moves to the centre of analysis the biographical, subjective and aesthetic dimensions in processes of identity construction in faith settings, which have hitherto received limited attention. They alert us to how these dimensions might be intertwined with broader processes of transnational mobility, technological innovation and cultural transformation and the potential and constraints for new meaning making they engender, as cultural practices are adopted, adapted or changed in a new context. In this paper, we seek to address the following questions: a) how do children weave together diverse aspects of their linguistic/scriptal, cultural, aesthetic knowledge and resources, moral and spiritual beliefs with the biographical and subjective dimensions in their faith-inspired text creations and conversations about texts? and b) how do children express and perform their developing understandings and interpretations of the self and their place in the world as a process of becoming?

In the following sections, we discuss the orienting theories that underpin this study by bringing together insights from syncretic literacy studies and faith as cultural practice. Then, we outline our collaborative team ethnography and the role of children's scrapbooks in our research methodology. Using a syncretic lens, we proceed with the data analysis starting from the contexts, practices and mediators of children's faith literacy learning and then we move to the close examination of the texts and conversations around them. We conclude with implications for research and practice on faith literacies and identities in transnational contexts.

Orienting theories

Faith literacies and the syncretic nature of children's faith literacy learning

The work we discuss is guided by an understanding of faith as an essential part of culture; a cultural practice that is socially and historically situated and embedded in specific local and global contexts (Gregory and Williams 2000, Heath 1983, Lytra, Volk and Gregory 2016). Conceptualising faith as cultural practice examines faith in social activity, in people's histories of participation in faith activities and rituals, resonating with Geerzt's (1973: 112-3) assertion that it is "out of the context of concrete acts of religious observance that religious conviction emerges on the human plane". At the same time, this understanding of faith acknowledges that each person may experience and participate in faith literacy practices in deeply personal and theological ways. It, therefore, emphasises the subjective or experiential dimension of faith experience alongside the social. This conceptualisation of faith is in line with an understanding of literacy as socio-cultural practice that highlights the interconnections between processes within the individual and the social world- the social, cultural, historical and ideological dimensions of literacy practices (Barton and Hamilton 1998). Literacy practices are, thus, shaped by social relationships and different values, attitudes and feelings. Social actors, in turn, hierarchise different ways of practicing literacy and attribute value to certain literacy practices while disparaging and marginalising others (Street 1984).

Studies of faith as cultural practice have explored children's faith literacy learning and religious socialisation in bilingual/multilingual settings across diverse faith contexts, including religious education classes, religious and faith-inspired schools, homes, places of worship and other community settings. A key insight from these studies is that faith bridges formal and informal learning practices and unsettles the artificial boundaries between home and school literacies (Peele-Eady 2016, Volk 2016). It

allows for the flow of language and literacy resources, spiritual and moral beliefs, values and dispositions across spaces, timescales and generations with the purpose of shaping faith learning and learning more generally (Fader 2009, Kenner et al 2016, Sagoo 2016). The additional spiritual and moral dimensions distinguish the purpose of faith learning from learning in other contexts: the knowledge, competences and performances learnt and perfected over time are the means to participate in religious ritual with the purpose of ultimately building a relationship with a higher and eternal being (Gregory and Lytra 2012).

Recent scholarship on the syncretic nature of children's faith learning has also provided guidance. It builds upon earlier work by Duranti and Ochs (1996) within the Samoan American community in urban Los Angeles. The authors introduced the notion of syncretic literacy defined as "intermingling or merging of culturally diverse traditions [that] informs and organises literacy activities" (: 3). In cross-cultural encounters, they argued, one cultural system rarely simply replaces another one; rather social actors "may include incorporation of any culturally diverse values, beliefs, emotions, practices, identities, institutions, tools, and other material resources into the organization of literacy activities" (ibid). In their 2004 edited book *Many Pathways to Literacy: Young Children Learning with Siblings, Grandparents, Peers and Communities*, Gregory, Long and Volk (2004) extended this conceptualisation of syncretic literacy to foreground the creativity, intentionality and transformative potential of syncretism as children actively intertwine diverse cultural threads form home, community and school knowledge and experience - sometimes in harmonious and sometimes in contradictory ways - into a single interactional fabric to create something new. Syncretism is thus understood as "a creative process in which people

reinvent culture as they draw on diverse resources, both familiar and new [focusing] on the activity of transformation" (Gregory, Long and Volk 2004: 4). Exploring cross-cultural encounters through a syncretic lens foregrounds how children may reconcile and build upon cultural practices from diverse contexts as well as the contradictions, clashes and tensions arising out of these encounters (Volk 2013).

In the context of our ethnographic study of children's language and literacy learning in faith settings we investigated how children learned important sacred and devotional texts in four faith communities (Ghanaian Pentecostal, Polish Catholic, Tamil Hindu and Bangladeshi Muslim) (Gregory et al 2013). We examined children's creativity and inventiveness as they syncretised a range of language resources (Qu'ranic Arabic, different forms of literate and vernacular Tamil, Twi, Polish and English), textual practices (translation and transliteration) and experiences across home, school and community to make sense of their learning and their place in the world with the expert mediation of faith teachers, parents, siblings and other community members. In Lytra, Gregory and Ilankuberan (2016, 2017), we studied children's faith-inspired texts in the form of scrapbooks and the conversations around them as syncretic texts. Our investigation revealed how through the creation of these texts children internalised, expressed and performed their developing understanding of religious rituals, symbolism and beliefs associated with the Hindu/Saiva faith and forged links across generations, continents, settings, experiences and discourse genres. We argued that these texts functioned as discursive and identity spaces to explore their emergent religious subjectivities in ways that reinforced the intimate link between Tamil language, culture and the Saiva/Hindu faith but also challenged reifications of

language, culture and identity (: ibid). In the following section, we turn to a discussion of faith identities in contexts of increased mobility.

Faith identities and becoming a member of the faith community

Our understanding of the constitution of faith identities is premised on the view of identities as multiple and relational, negotiated and performed in discourse and through social and embodied behaviour in everyday interactions (Pavlenko and Blackledge 2004). Identities are, thus, understood as process rather than as product, as something we do rather than as simply something we are, as social actors use their meaning making resources to take up, foreground, downplay or resist particular identity dimensions and position themselves and others in particular ways under particular conditions. These negotiations partly reflect human agency while recognising that institutional, social, political, and historical forces and processes of migration, globalisation and technological transformation can create and constrain possibilities for identity performances (Kroskrity 2001). At the same time, we are cognizant that static and essentialised notions of faith and faith identities are important. They are often associated with individual and collective projects of linguistic and cultural maintenance in response to assimilationist and discriminatory policies and practices (Baquedano-López and Ochs 2002). Indeed, our theoretical orientation may be at odds with how children, parents, faith teachers, faith leaders and other community members may at times reify, or romanticise faith identities, by stressing, for instance, the intimate link between language, ethnicity and religion. Rather than regarding fixed and fluid orientations as mutually exclusive, we view them as mutually contingent. We attend to how and under what conditions children

orient to and perform fixed and fluid orientations as they negotiate religious belonging in text and talk.

Research at the intersection of faith as cultural practice and faith identities has been concerned with how children develop affiliation with and belonging to the faith community. Becoming a member of the faith community involves processes of socialisation in and alignment with the social and cultural expectations, norms, values and dispositions of the faith community. It also raises important questions about what counts as membership and who decides, how children come to demonstrate responsibility and authority of membership across faith activities, rituals and contexts as well as how co-membership is constructed and how membership might change across generations and social spaces (Lytra, Volk and Gregory 2016). Baquedano-López (2000, 2008) illustrated how children learned particular ways of speaking, reading, narrating and behaving to construct a shared identity and a shared past invoked through language and to interpret texts in culturally appropriate ways in the context of Spanish-based religious education classes. The author postulated that the children's narrative tellings opened up a discursive space "to narrate being Mexican, locating themselves across a distal colonial past in Mexico and their immediate postcolonial present as immigrants in Los Angeles" (2000: 450). Ek (2005) similarly showed how through uniting past, present and future and sustaining a transnational identity, children were urged to construct their individual and collective identities following "*el camino*" (God's path) in a Spanish-medium Pentecostal Church (Ek 2005: 77). Also in the US, Peele-Eady (2011) explored children's development of a "membership identity" in the context of the Black Church understood as "the intersection of what children learn and how they come to represent this knowledge in

the church context" (: 57). Several studies have pointed to the intersectional nature of faith identities and the co-articulation of faith with other social identities, such age, gender, ethnicity, race, or successful learner identities (see Souza 2016 for further discussion, also Ilankuberan forthcoming 2020). Fewer studies have explored tensions in navigating religious belonging. For instance, Auleear Odowally (2016) illustrated how at particular moments and in particular spaces children may seek to strategically compartmentalise their different social identities and keep the social worlds of the school, the home and the religious education classes separate. In the case of the adolescents described in Rumsey's (2016) study, tensions may lead to rejecting the Amish way of life and leaving the Amish faith community altogether.

In this paper, we extend our earlier work on children's faith-inspired text-making by focusing on processes of identity exploration that unite both fixed and fluid identity orientations. In particular, we examine how the biographical, subjective and aesthetic dimensions are interconnected with spiritual and moral ones as children express and perform religious belonging in present-day London. We view children’s faith-inspired texts and talk about texts as material objects that are recipients of affect and memory and have an agency of their own (Bennett 2009). This conceptual stance allows us to investigate how children's text-making and talk about texts may open up new and potentially unexpected possibilities for meaning making in cross-cultural encounters. By focusing on flows of resources, texts, discourses, identities and people within transnationally connected spaces we explore how cultural practices might be adopted, adapted or transformed in present-day London and the possibilities and limitations for meaning making and identity work they engender. We argue that this conceptual stance urges us to re-think faith identities and becoming a member of the faith

community not in terms of a fixed linear path but as a process of becoming that is dynamic, shifting and multi-faceted.

Methodology and research design

The data presented draw on a larger study entitled "Becoming Literate in Faith Settings: Language and Literacy Learning in the Lives of New Londoners". This was a three year collaborative team ethnography aiming to investigate how sixteen children aged between four and twelve (at the beginning of the fieldwork) from Bangladeshi Muslim, Ghanaian Pentecostal, Polish Catholic and Tamil Hindu communities develop their language and literacy learning through faith activities in London. From 2009 to 2013, we formed a team of eleven researchers sharing different linguistic, cultural and ethnic backgrounds, age, gender, professional and educational circumstances, religious and no religious beliefs. We adopted a case-study approach, working in four research pairs where a new researcher who was a member of the ethno-linguistic community (and in three out of the four case studies) was paired with a more senior research partner who was not (in three out of the four cause studies). Vally Lytra and Arani Ilankuberan formed one of the research pairs and worked with children of Tamil Hindu/Saiva heritage and their families. Underlying our different "insider/outsider" positionalities was the recognition that as researchers we approached the faith settings with long-held assumptions, beliefs and stances. Rather than regarding researcher positionality as a fixed attribute, we understood it as dynamic and shifting over time, interactionally achieved and negotiated throughout the research process (Lytra forthcoming).

The team ethnography was multi-sited, spanning across three social spaces: places of worship, religious education classes and children's homes. During the first year of the ethnography, the research team investigated the broader historical and sociocultural contexts of children's faith socialisation in London. We collected demographic and historical data about the four faith communities and the places of worship. We then wrote up accounts of our observations at the places of worship and religious education classes in the form of field narratives in order to document the rich, multi-layered religious practices, rituals and events we observed. These we shared, discussed and commented on online and in pair and team meetings with the purpose of developing multi-voiced research narratives that captured the different understandings, representations and beliefs of team members (Gregory and Lytra 2012). Towards the end of the first year in collaboration with faith leaders and faith teachers, we identified sixteen families we would work with closely for the next two years.

At the beginning of the second year, we gave each key participant child an A4 size scrapbook with multicoloured pages and asked children to write, draw and stick what they considered important about their faith and they wanted to share with the researchers. At the end of the year, the researchers went through the scrapbooks page by page together with the key participant children. In the Tamil Hindu/Saiva case study, the children's siblings who had co-authored the scrapbooks participated in the conversations with Arani Ilankuberan, which were also video-recorded. The siblings took turns to conceive and produce their entries. Sometimes they mobilised their parents' help asking for family photographs, clippings from community magazines and leaflets or assistance with drawings and information they wished to include in their entries. To our knowledge, siblings did not work on any entries together.

Cognizant that researching faith literacy practices in children's homes may appear intrusive, we gave each family a digital tape-recorder, a camera and a light-weight, easy-to-use video camera and asked family members to select, (video) record and take photographs of daily religious rituals and special religious celebrations for us. We observed and video recorded the children at their religious education classes. Finally, we interviewed the children, parents, faith leaders and faith teachers. For our interviews with the children, we adapted the "draw and talk" method (Coates and Coates 2006) where the children made drawings, including mind maps, as they were talking with the researcher about their language and literacy learning and faith identities. In the third year, the children themselves took up the role of the researcher. With help from the project team, children drafted questions to ask either a grandparent or an older member of the faith community about the role of faith and how faith practices had changed intergenerationally and in the London setting.

A key concern of our research team was a commitment to ensuring that the voices of children were not simply heard but that they actively shaped the co-production of our ethnographic narratives. To this end, we used visual and multimodal research methods and in particular the creation of scrapbooks alongside more traditional ethnographic methods. From the start, we did not seek to constrain the children with the "right" way to craft their scrapbooks; rather, we were interested in exploring the biographical, affective and aesthetic potential of scrapbooks and the opportunities for narrating the self they might open up. This epistemological stance was in line with our analytical focus on the syncretic nature of children's faith literacy learning and led to the creation of unique and highly personalised texts combining writing in multiple scripts with drawings, photographs, newspaper cuttings and stickers and the use of different

materials. Following the completion of the scrapbooks, researchers engaged in conversations with the children about their text-making. The purpose of these conversations was to explore with children the process of creating their scrapbooks, their decisions and intentions. They allowed children to reflect upon their own and their families' rich and complex multilingual and multiscriptal repertoires and other semiotic resources (symbols, images, narratives), the ways in which these resources circulated in local and transnational networks and were deployed to express their faith experiences. In the Tamil Hindu/Saiva case study, the fact that Arani Ilankuberan had grown up and had been schooled in the same area, had worshipped at the same Temple from an early age and had attended similar religious education classes with the children contributed to the dialogic nature of the conversations around the children's text-making. The high degree of co-construction of the conversations revealed how the researcher shared many aspects of the children's life worlds and a deep understanding of the culturally valued practices, religious rituals and beliefs of the faith community. The conversations around the children's text-making illustrated the dynamic and situated process of knowledge co-construction and the role of researcher subjectivity in shaping the data generated (Lytra, forthcoming).

Ethical issues were equally significant as researchers must ensure the safety and well-being of all participants, especially children. Team members maintained good working relationships with families, faith leaders, faith teachers and other community members. At the beginning of the study, participants were briefed about the research project and gave their informed consent. Periodically, participants were consulted about their right to withdraw given the longitudinal nature of the study. Permission to observe, interview, film, photograph, audio and video record children was obtained

from parents at the beginning and throughout the course of the research. At the end of the study, all participants signed letters of agreement, allowing project team members to use the data for public dissemination, including uploading a selection of the data on the project website. We also asked participants to decide on the use of pseudonyms and where requested we have used them.

A syncretic lens affords a multi-layered analysis of the data (Gregory, Volk and Long 2013). Our analysis starts with a focus on the cultural contexts and practices in children's faith literacy learning as well as the mediational tools (language being one of them) and the mediators of learning in the home and community. Then, we move on to examine how children drew upon different cultural threads from home, community and school knowledge and experience to combine and layer meaning, to make sense of their faith literacy learning in unique and highly personalised ways and to articulate their faith identities as a process of becoming. We explore how children may build upon and reconcile resources and practices from diverse contexts but also the tension arising out of these cross-cultural encounters. We focus on one scrapbook entry, which consists of the drawing of a *kolam* accompanied by an explanatory text and the talk about the text-making that followed between the children and Arani Ilankuberan.

Findings

Contexts, practices and mediators of learning

Drawings of *kolams* emerged as a recurring image across the children's scrapbooks. *Kolams* are a form of intricate geometric line drawing created on the threshold of one's home, in the early morning before sunrise or before sunset in many parts of

South India and to a lesser extent in Sri Lanka. Traditionally, learning to draw a *kolam* was considered to be a gendered cultural practice seen as one of many household duties girls were socialised into from an early age. Slowly nurtured over time, girls first observed their mothers and other more competent female members of the family create different images out of white rice flour and more recently commercially available chalk, stone or ink powders. Through observation and practice, girls developed their knowledge of and ability to produce a range of simple and more complex patterns and their appropriateness according to religious festivals alongside the requisite dexterity and procedure. From a sociocultural perspective, learning to create a *kolam* introduces girls to "historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills" (González, Moll and Amanti, 2005: 133) valued in Tamil culture and intertwined with the Hindu religion. Besides their aesthetic value, Ascher (2002) explains that these ephemeral drawings on the threshold serve to guard the house, ward off evil and welcome visitors. Smit (2013: 7) adds that *kolams* have an auspicious function transforming the entrance of the house into a sacred space and serving as "an invitation to all, especially deities like Lakshimi, the Goddess of prosperity". Equally importantly, drawing a *kolam* out of edible rice powder that can be eaten by ants, birds and other small animals has a spiritual and moral dimension, of showing one's "concern for all living creatures" (: ibid). Laine (2012) argues that a *kolam* functions at two levels: "a material object that all is well in the house, and as a cultural idea where completeness and balance is sought as a form of ordering chaos" (: 3).

Used to adorn the children's scrapbooks, images of *kolams* revealed a familiarity with this art form in this transnational community too. In this paper, we have chosen to

discuss in detail one example of a *kolam* designed by one of the older children in our study, Sunthiru. Sunthiru (twelve years old) and his sister Chantia (nine years old) were born and brought up in London. The children and their family are part of the growing Sri Lankan Tamil Hindu communities in East London. Originally from Sri Lanka, their parents relocated to the UK as part of the later waves of Tamil migration in pursuit of better educational and work opportunities (Daniel and Thangaraj 1995). The family are Saivites. A branch of Hinduism, Saivites believe that Lord Siva is the ultimate deity. Faith plays a very important role in the children's life. During his interview with Arani, Sunthiru reflected on the role of faith in his life and the purpose of faith learning in the context of the religious education class he attends on Sundays in providing him with a spiritual and moral compass. He explained:

> In all the religions it's the same thing, leading onto one path, they teach us like I said not just in Hinduism but every all the other religions how you can lead a good life, and prayers, things like morning prayers, food that is holy and what to avoid.

According to Sunthiru, the purpose of faith learning is to "lead a good life", a message, he argues that is shared by all religions, not only Hinduism. As Adely and Seale-Colazzo (2013) remind us, "educational efforts are always about creating particular kinds of people" (: 342). The cultivation of spiritual and moral selves is the explicit focus of religious education in particular. Often referred to by many devotees as "a way of life" rather than a religion, Hinduism unites a variety of seemingly divergent faith practices and beliefs giving devotees the freedom to practice their faith in highly individualised ways (Jacobs 2010). The freedom to choose one's path

towards building a relationship with a higher being was echoed in Sunthiru's comment to Arani that the faith teacher in the religious education class he attended did not try to impose faith practices, rituals and beliefs onto the students. Rather, the faith teacher took up the role of mediator of faith learning, building mentoring relationships with the children "by guiding [students] on the right path":

> There is like a moral to every lesson. Like it all builds up in one thing, how you should be behaving as a student and learning. Like it's all about education and how you should be living. And master he'll say things but he won't like force it onto you saying you should be vegetarian, only by guiding you on the right path.

The message of providing guidance to "the right path" is a common one in many other religious contexts (Ek 2005, Peele-Eady 2016). This message may appear incompatible with Sunthiru's assertion of the importance of choice rather than imposition and of personal experience and interpretation in making faith and faith learning relevant to one's own life. He explained that faith infused and flowed across spaces (home, school, community), connecting the self and the world by providing moral guidance emphasised through the use of deontic modality: "how you should be behaving as a student and learning, [...] how you should be living". To this end, both children kept a spiritual diary, which contained a list of prayers, religious rituals and celebrations and which they observed individually or with other family members at home. Much of their faith learning was in the form of religious stories and rituals, which was mediated by their mother and their maternal grandparents who also lived in East London. In his interview, Sunthiru described how his grandfather regularly

narrated faith stories to the children, which were integral to the Hindu worldview, focusing on the plot, characters and moral of the story while his grandmother further explained parts of the story the children didn't understand. Other sources of faith learning included graphic novels the children had purchased during a family trip to South India. Retellings of some of these faith stories with their moral messages also appeared in the children's scrapbook. Additionally, the siblings attended religious education classes provided by the Tamil school (Naalvar Tamil Academy) on Sundays and participated in another faith class and the regular collective singing of *bhajans* (religious songs) organised by the Sai Spiritual Education School (Balavi class) on Saturdays.

Their spiritual and moral learning was mediated through a range of language and literacy resources, notably spoken and literate forms of English and Tamil and Sanskrit. The children used all three languages to varying degrees of competence for devotional purposes. For their scrapbooks in particular the children carefully crafted their texts in English drawing on spoken and literate forms depending on topic, genre and the accompanying image. Fragments of Tamil and Sanskrit script appeared infrequently. They were strategically placed in the children's text-making to represent a particular religious concepts or practice. Additionally, Tamil names of God and names of Tamil Saints and characters from faith stories were routinely transliterated into English. The choice of language reflected the children's language and literacy abilities and revealed a distinct shift to English among the children's generation that has been reported in other studies of Sri Lankan Tamil diasporic communities too (Canagarajah 2008, 2019). Both children rated English as their strongest language and reported speaking to each other in English, although Sunthiru remarked that at home

they were encouraged by their parents, grandparents and other family members to "speak Tamil". He added that his sister was more proficient in speaking Tamil than he was. Even though both children attended Tamil school on Sundays to develop their literacy skills, within the extended family unit, speaking Tamil appeared to be emphasised over reading and writing in Tamil. This emphasis did not in any way undermine the family's desire to pass onto to the children a Tamil cultural identity alongside Hindu/Saiva moral and spiritual values and beliefs.

Syncretic literacies and the formation of faith identities

In the conversation following the completion of the scrapbook, Sunthiru explained to Arani that he used a guide from the internet to create his *kolam*. A cursory look online reveals the breadth and diversity of materials, techniques and styles readily available, including the circulation of *kolams* in sticker form that can be purchased online and have a more permanent quality.

Image 1: "Example of Kholam" (the original spelling of kholam in Sunthiru's scrapbook has been retained)

Drawing on the rich visual imagery of Hinduism mediated via new technologies, Sunthiru's representation of the *kolam* combines geometric shapes with different colours to create a symmetrical drawing. The drawing is characterised by precision and complexity and it is accompanied by an explanatory text in English. Sunthiru and his sister, Chantia, crafted similar texts reminiscent of the school genre of explanatory texts to accompany many of their drawings of religious rituals, ceremonies and objects they created for their scrapbook. When asked about the source of these texts Sunthiru mentioned using a reference book on Hinduism in English the family had at

home. In the accompanying text entitled "Kholam" followed by the word in Tamil script, Sunthiru wrote:

"Tamil people decorate the paths of their houses with Kholam, which is design using rice flour in different colours.

Most people decorate their houses during the Diwali festivities.

The religious significance of placing Kholam patterns is so that humans are ensuring there is food for the smaller creatures of the world such as ants.

For this reason the person placing the Kholam must make sure that the rice flour they use is edible as otherwise many creatures would die".

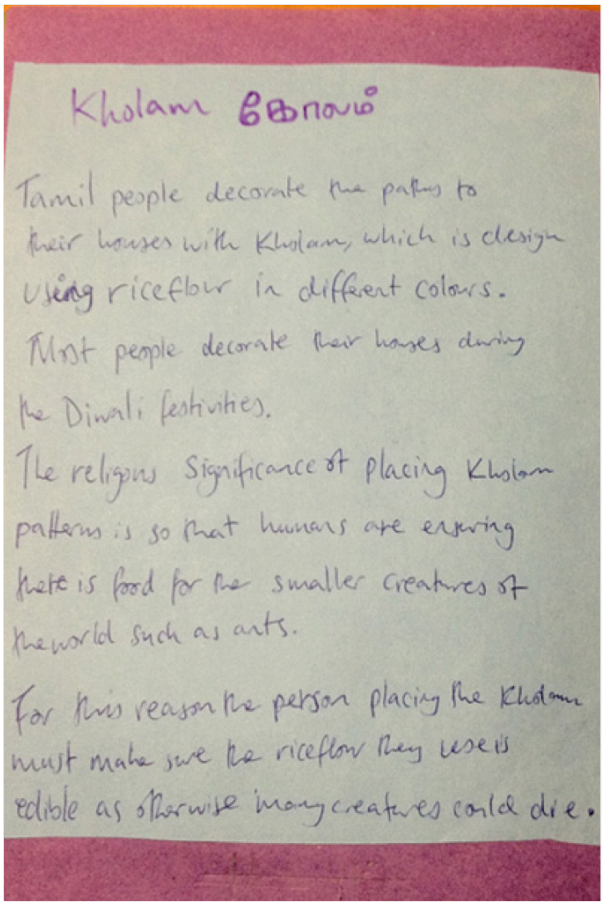

Image 2: "Kholam"

In his text-making, Sunthiru brings together diverse cultural threads from home, community and school knowledge and experience to combine and layer meaning. Using the affordances of the school genre of the explanatory text, he unites the aesthetic and the affiliational with the symbolic, spiritual and practical significance of drawing a *kolam*. First, he invokes Tamil ethnicity and how it is manifested in the cultural practice of drawing a *kolam* to decorate the path of one's house. The invocation of Tamil ethnicity exemplifies the strong link between Tamil culture, ethnicity and religion that repeatedly emerged in our case study (Lytra, Gregory and Ilankuberan 2016a, b, 2017) and has been documented by other scholars too (Perara 2018, Canagarajah 2008, 2019). Additionally, creating a *kolam* has an aesthetic and symbolic function associated especially in the diaspora with celebrating religious holidays, such as *Divali*. Linked to the latter Sunthiru stresses the moral responsibility of humans to care for "the smaller creatures of the world" which he contrasts to the practice of using non-edible flours that would cause "many creatures [to] die". The moral responsibility towards all beings is tied up with the practical significance of drawing a *kolam* (to provide food for small creatures), which also emphasises its ephemeral character.

Sunthiru's text-making unites and reconciles diverse aspects of linguistic, scriptal, cultural, aesthetic and school-related knowledge and resources with moral and spiritual beliefs from online and offline sources. The faith-inspired text-making opens up a space to explore his developing faith identity in highly personalised and unique ways. This ties back to his assertion in the second interview excerpt discussed in the previous section of the importance of choice and of personal experience and interpretation in making faith and faith learning relevant to his own life within a

Hindu/Saiva spiritual and moral frame. It resonates with Tusting's (2015) study of children's writing in a First Communion Preparation class in a Roman Catholic parish where the purpose of writing was to provide children with "new ways of seeing themselves, as a special individual, with a particular role to play in their communities, and the responsibility to make active choices" rather than as a means "to construct Catholic identity as allegiance to the Church as an institution, or as assenting to a particular set of beliefs" (: 248).

Equally importantly, Sunthiru's faith-inspired text-making points to how a particular cultural practice might be adapted and changed when it travels from one cultural context to another and which of its multiple meanings may be imparted to the next generation and which may not, for instance, the drawing of the *kolam* as a gendered everyday practice and its apotropaic symbolic meaning. In the conversation that ensues with his sister and Arani, Sunthiru reiterates the aesthetic, moral and practical dimensions of the cultural practice.

Excerpt 1:

1Arani:	OK, so can you talk about the *kolam*?
2Sunthiru:	Mmm (glancing at the text) kolam is something people use
3	to decorate their paths
4	but that's not the only reason they do it
5	its also that ants have something to eat
6	and don't have to work so much
7	so in places like India and Sri Lanka
8	it's quite common

9 so that's why they use rice flour

10 because certain people use different flours

11 but some of these aren't edible

12 so rice flours are the best one to use for the ants

13Arani: so it also like giving [food to the ants

14Sunthiru: (nods head in agreement) [providing food for the ants

15Arani: providing food and also de[corative

16Sunthiru: (nods head in agreement) [decorative

17 Arani: yeah OK excellent

The conversation around the text-making of the *kolam* serves to make explicit implicit knowledge and reinforce important cultural and social values and beliefs of the faith community, on this occurrence the Hindu/Saiva moral stance of caring for all living creatures. It is worth noting that this moral and spiritual stance linking humans, animals and the natural world is co-constructed between Sunthiru and Arani, through overlapping talk (lines 13-16) and gesture (Sunthiru nods his head in agreement, in lines 14 and 16). The co-occurrence of talk and gesture as semiotic resources to communicate their shared moral and spiritual stance aptly illustrates how shareness is performed rather than taken for granted by virtue of co-membership in the faith community. It echoes the conversations between Benny and his grandmother, which underpinned a home worship service/Bible reading/reading lesson, documented by Volk (2016), and stressed the moral message of obedience to authority. In both examples, through aligning with the cultural and social values and beliefs valued by the faith community, children come to express and perform their faith identities. These identity performances unite what the children have learned (i.e. the moral

messages of the faith Sunthiru referred to in his interview excerpts) with the different ways this knowledge can be deployed to make sense of the self and one's understanding of the world and their place within it. In Sunthiru's case, this is achieved through a moral stance that emphasises responsibility and accountability towards all living creatures. Therefore, children come to learn that it is through concrete actions and behaviors that faith identities are enacted and membership in the faith community is constituted.

Using the children's text-making as a point of entry, Arani further probes into the children's personal experience of this art form by asking them if they routinely draw a *kolam* on the threshold of their home. Similar to the peacock feather carefully pasted on the cover of another scrapbook crafted by Thiani and Thianan we discussed in Lytra, Gregory and Ilankuberan (2016a), the image of the *kolam* triggers unexpected chains of memories and stories. As we argued, it "allows us to foreground connections between objects and their stories, which may otherwise, remain less visible" (: 150). Moreover, it provides further evidence of how transplanted cultural practices might be adapted, and changed in a transnational context and illustrates potential tensions between the children's articulations of their faith identities and their lived experiences.

Excerpt 2:

1Arani:	so do you guys do kolam outside your house?
2Sunthiru:	(smiles uneasily and shakes his head)
3Arani:	no
4Sunthiru:	no
5Chantia	(smiles uneasily)

6Arani: no

7Sunthiru: the pavement is all dented so it would come out a bit weird

8Arani: (laughs) a bit weird but

9 when you go on holiday to India or Sri Lanka have you seen

10Sunthiru and Chantia: yes (nodding in agreement)

11Sunthiru: yes we've seen quite a few

12Arani: what's the biggest *kolam* you've seen?

13Sunthiru: well actually somebody did one at school

14 once like the whole hall

15Arani: the whole hall wow!

16Sunthiru: yeah

17Arani: and what did they do it with?

18Sunthiru: it was like

19 they had like lots of chalks

20 and powders

21 and different things

22 it was about two classes which made it together

23Arani: and was this in your primary school?

24Sunthiru: (nodding) yeah primary school

25Arani: oh that's fantastic ok

While Sunthiru and Chatia confirm their familiarity with the visual imagery of the *kolam* through their travels to India and Sri Lanka (line 10), they acquiesce that they did not engage in the practice of drawing a *kolam* on the threshold of their house in London (lines 2-5). In her study of *kolam* making among the Sri Lankan Tamil

communities in London, Laine (2012) documented the low visibility of *kolams* in outdoor spaces. She argued that this appeared to be connected with concerns of "not to offend" the neighbors and efforts to "blend in" with the majority population by overtly expressing belonging through visual signs (: 3). As Sunthiru mentioned to Arani at the beginning of their conversation, he had used an internet source for inspiration to draw his own *kolam*. It would appear that in this transnational context the intergenerational transmission of drawing a *kolam* through observation of and guidance by more skilled practitioners may be increasingly mediated by non-human interaction and digital technologies (see also Laine 2012). Smit (2013) reported that the traditionally gendered practice of drawing a *kolam* is undergoing transformation among Tamils in India too. This seems to reflect broader changes within Indian society with regards to traditional gendered roles and responsibilities and attitudes towards career and family influenced by the demands of urban life (ibid). In his explanation to Arani, Sunthiru refers to the uneven terrain in front of their door-step, which could affect the aesthetic outcome of the *kolam* ("it would come out a bit weird", line 7). Perhaps sensing the children's unease, Arani ratifies Sunthiru's explanation and inquires where the children might have seen the biggest *kolam*. Sunthiru shares a memory from his primary school days where two classes came together to create a gigantic *kolam* that covered the entire floor of the school hall. In his narrative, Sunthiru stresses the monumental size of the work of art that required a range of materials (lines 19-21) and the energy and skill of two classes to complete the project (line 22). The scale of the project elicits surprise and positive evaluation on Arani's part (lines 15 and 25). The transposition of the *kolam* from the threshold of the house to the school hall is an apt illustration of how faith literacies might travel into the mainly secular mainstream school and the majority society more generally.

The *kolam* the two classes created becomes a syncretic text that unites aesthetic elements from Indian/Sri Lankan cultural traditions with what appears to be a school-based arts project using lots of different colours and materials. The creation of the *kolam* embodies tension that is an inherent element of the syncretic process: the making of the *kolam* is adapted and transformed in order to fit the school curriculum and context. While Sunthiru and Arani evaluate this experience in positive terms perhaps because of the broader visibility it afforded to the cultural practice beyond the confines of the minority ethnic community, it would appear that this cultural transformation divests the drawing of the *kolam* of its moral and spiritual anchoring. The multiple layering of meanings of the *kolam* seems to be lost in the school space and its significance seems to be mainly confined to its aesthetic appeal. This cultural transformation also points to broader societal questions concerning the relationship between faith and schooling to which we will briefly turn in the conclusion of our paper.

Conclusion

The analysis of syncretism as an active, transformative process demonstrated how Sunthiru's faith-inspired text-making and talk about text united and reconciled diverse elements of linguistic, scriptal, cultural, aesthetic and school-related knowledge and resources with moral and spiritual beliefs from online and offline sources to create something new. It illustrated how moral and spiritual beliefs and values (on this occurrence caring for all living creatures) can provide important and powerful interpretative frames for children to make sense of the self and their place in the world and to explore faith identities in highly personalised and unique ways within a Hindu/Saiva worldview. The emphasis on increasingly personalised expressions of

faith over institutionalised ones reflects broader societal changes. Individual religious belief, practice and affiliation are seen as evolving and changing and diversity within faith practices and beliefs have been amplified by global mobility and technological change (Hemming 2015).

Moreover, the analysis extended our understanding of the relationship between faith literacies and identity processes in cross-cultural encounters. By viewing Sunthiru's faith-inspired texts as material objects that open up possibilities for new meaning making, we traced how he expressed and performed what Peele Eday (2011) has called "a membership identity", that is "an identity of knowing how to be a member and how to do memberlike things" (: 57). Rather than viewing faith identities as simply something we are or we have inherited, we sought to illustrate how faith identities were interactionally achieved through talk and gesture and how faith values and beliefs were co-constructed and reinforced in discourse rather than assumed by virtue of co-membership in the faith community. By examining how the cultural practice of drawing a *kolam* and its multifarious meanings were adopted, adapted and changed when transported in the local London context, we were able to illustrate how faith literacy practices and identities were dynamic and evolving. We were also able to demonstrate potential tensions between the children's articulations of their faith identities and their lived experiences. Our analysis indicated that rather than following a fixed and linear path becoming a member of the faith community is a process of becoming that is fluid and multi-faceted. Additionally, our analysis pointed to the dynamics of space (home, school, digital spaces) and how they can actively shape but also constrain cultural practices and their meanings; the transposition of the *kolam* from the threshold of the house to the school hall being one such example. The

potential of an analytical focus on space and history in identity formation (Kramsch 2012) and digital technologies (Rosowskey 2018), which were only touched upon in this paper, can provide fruitful avenues for further research into faith literacies and identities.

Finally, we see our work as contributing to a line of scholarship within literacy studies that has sought to foreground the richness and complexity of languages, literacies and cultural heritages and traditions that exist beyond mainstream schools in homes and communities and a commitment to challenging deficit accounts of children and their families who are not affiliated with the dominant languages, cultures, and religions (Heath 1983, Gregory and Williams 2000, Gregory, Long and Volk 2004, González, Moll and Amanti 2005). In our previous work (Lytra, Gregory and Ilankuberan 2016a, b), we asked to what extent and in what ways the wealth of religious knowledge of symbols, practices, languages and scripts, moral and spiritual beliefs travel into children's mainstream schools and might contribute to school learning and achievement. While this question has been outside the scope of our research project, Sunthiru's narrative of the drawing of a monumental *kolam* in his primary school provided a glimpse of possibilities and limitations. For education researchers and practitioners, Sunthiru's narrative brings to the fore pertinent questions concerning the role of faith, faith literacies and identities in mainstream schools perceived as mainly secular spaces: How might mainstream schools accommodate students' and teachers' religious and non-religious beliefs, practices and identities in a post-secular world? In what contexts, under what conditions and who decides?

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