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## **Ethnography**

### **Vally Lytra**

#### **1 Background, history, and key terms**

Religion is central to the everyday experiences of many individuals and communities worldwide. As a force for learning and socialisation and as an important marker of identity, it can provide a sense of membership and belonging within and across generations. The social and cultural practices in religions are shaped by individual as well as institutional, social and ideological forces and processes, instantiated locally, translocally and globally. Specific ways of utilising language and literacy can also be seen as a social practice that individuals draw upon for meaning making and building social relationships (Barton and Hamilton 1998). Language and literacy practices are then historically situated and embedded within power relations and societal discourses of distinction, where some languages and literacies become dominant and others are frequently silenced or considered irrelevant or problematic (Genishi and Dyson 2009).

An emergent body of interdisciplinary scholarship has examined the intersection of language, literacy and religion from a social and cultural practice perspective.

Methodologically, this body of research uses *ethnography* as a key conceptual approach to understanding social interaction for systematic knowledge building and the generation of theory. Although recognising the intellectual antecedents of ethnography in anthropology and sociology, there is no consensus about what counts as *ethnography* (Hammersley 2018). Simply put, ethnography refers to the description and interpretation of people's behaviours and attitudes in an attempt to make sense of the world from their perspectives. Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) observe, "the ethnographer participates, overtly or covertly, in people's lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions; in fact collecting whatever data is available to throw light on the issues with which he or she is concerned" (p. 2).

Ethnography goes beyond merely describing people's social and cultural practices, but captures the complexity and multilayeredness of social experience, and social rules and patterns. In this respect, ethnography "describe[s] the apparently messy and complex

activities that make up social action, not to reduce their complexity but to describe and explain it" (Blommaert and Jie 2010, p. 11-12). Doing ethnography is, thus, an interpretivist and inductive process: the empirical data guide the ethnographer to the application of particular theories rather than the other way round. Ethnography is also *reflexive*; ethnographers are part of the social world they are studying and that they actively shape that world.

The following excerpt is from a six-page narrative documenting my second visit to the Sri Murugan Temple in Newham, East London. My visit to the Temple was part of a multi-sited, three-year collaborative team ethnography entitled "Becoming Literate in Faith Settings: Language and Literacy Learning in the Life of New Londoners" (the BeLiFS project), supported by the Economic and Social Research Council, UK. The study investigated how sixteen children aged between four and twelve develop their language and literacy learning and belonging through religious activities in London, UK. The children and their families were part of the Bangladeshi Muslim, Ghanaian Pentecostal, Polish Catholic and Tamil Hindu/Saiva religious communities that have grown in numbers from the 1950s onwards. The research team consisted of eleven researchers sharing a wide range of linguistic, cultural and ethnic backgrounds, age, gender, professional and educational circumstances, research experience, religious and non-religious beliefs and worked with four families from each community, their religious leaders, teachers and older community members.

Taking a case study approach, four research pairs were formed where a new researcher who was a member of the ethno-linguistic community (and in three out of the four case studies of the faith community) was paired with a more established researcher who was not (in three out of the four case studies). Arani Iankuberan (who was visiting the Temple with me that day) and I formed a research pair working with the children and the families from the Tamil Hindu/Saiva faith community.

When I enter the Temple I am immediately struck by how busy it is even though the Temple has just opened its doors. I can hear chanting coming from the loudspeakers. It sounds like a woman chanting solo. Arani explains that it's a *suprabhatham*, a devotional song typically sung early in the morning. It is believed that listening to the chanting confers a positive vibration for the whole day. The chanting is pervasive almost drowning out all other human voices and activity. You almost feel transported into a spiritual realm and I come to appreciate what I read some time ago about the divine

character of Hindu temples enabling people to feel the presence of God. This feeling of being transported into a spiritual realm is compounded by the intense smell of incense burning. I am overwhelmed and I seek refuge in the chairs lined up on the left side of the Temple, close to the temple of Ganesh (also referred to as the elephant god). I wonder if regular worshippers feel the same way every time they enter the Temple and whether a non Greek-Orthodox would feel the same way when entering a Greek-Orthodox church, for instance, and being confronted with a huge dome with the depiction of Christ the Saviour and the intricate frescos, mosaics and icons lining the walls from top to bottom. (Tamil Temple, 6.10.2009).

This extract is an example of a field narrative crafted by the researchers visiting and engaging in participant observations in their own research site as well as the sites of other project members. The field narratives were written during the first year of the ethnography and aligned with our aim "to produce rich descriptions of ceremonies, rituals and events in the places of worship across settings" (Gregory and Lytra 2012: 200). Keeping the field narratives allowed the researchers to make their experience explicit and accessible to others. Drafting the field narratives allowed the project team members to reflect upon their own research site, compare it with that of others and ultimately develop a deeper awareness and understanding of both their own site and that of others. Moreover, it supported the creation of more multi-voiced ethnographic accounts that better represented the multiple perspectives of project team members.

*Participant observation* is the scholarly term for observing, talking, and listening to the research participants as the former try to make sense of the lives and social activities of the latter. Ethnographers write up accounts of their observations either during or soon after the events and activities they have observed in the form of field notes. Similar to field notes, field narratives are a form of representation of participant observations (see Emerson et al., 2011). The project team conceived field narratives as "a written dialogue, an interactive way of teaching and learning from each other, and a way of sharing emotions with those who have deeply held belief in their faith" (Gregory and Lytra 2012, p. 197). Like all forms of representation, field narratives are partial accounts that are generated through processes of selection. Field narratives were shared, discussed, and commented on online and during pair and team meetings as the research team members with different backgrounds and degrees of knowledge of the religious practices under study sought to understand the role of religion in

children's learning and identity affirmation within and across the different faith communities.

Hymes' (1996) asserts that "our ability to learn ethnographically is an extension of what every human being must do, that is learn the meanings, norms, patterns of everyday life" (p.13). In the excerpt above, I am trying to make sense of a new and largely unfamiliar religion and some of the faith literacies of Hindu/Saiva Temple. By observing, reflecting upon and documenting some of the routines and activities, I am trying to gain insights into the religious setting, make explicit the assumptions taken for granted by members of the community and share these insights with my co-researcher and the other members of the team. My account represents my encounter with the Temple first and foremost as a sensorial, embodied and affective experience (Lytra, Gregory and Ilankuberan 2016). I comment on the buzz of activity even though the Temple has just opened its doors to devotees, the chanting of a devotional song that can be heard from the loudspeakers and the intense smell of incense burning. I also share the feelings of wonder and awe this encounter generates which forces me to sit down in one of the chairs at the side of the Temple and contemplate whether similar feelings might be experienced when others unfamiliar with my own faith enter a Greek-Orthodox church for the first time.

The field narratives crafted allowed us to make explicit our own long-held assumptions, stances and positionings. They demonstrated how our researcher identities were interconnected with other identity aspects and our lived experience, mediated via language and literacy as well as other communicative resources. They also illustrated the learning process an ethnographer undertakes as they enter a new setting and become socialised into its norms and routines. This learning process is essential, especially in the case of a researcher who is not a member of the religious community under study.

## **2 Key topics, questions, and debates**

### *Knowledge construction and representation*

Early ethnographic descriptions of religion as situated cultural practice have drawn upon social psychology, anthropology, and literacy studies, in particular New Literacy Studies (see, for instance, the seminal studies by Scribner and Cole (1981) among the Vai in Liberia, Street (1984) in Iran, and Heath (1983) in the US). These studies

questioned traditional conceptualisations of literacy as a set of neutral skills and competences, developing instead a sustained analytical focus on the relationship between situated interaction and practice and macro-level structures and ideologies. They foregrounded the entanglement of the cognitive with the socio-cultural, historical and ideological dimensions of language and literacy learning through religious practice. Moreover, they examined literacies in everyday life, extending the investigation of language and literacy learning beyond schools and classrooms to include religious contexts as rich sites for teaching and learning in their own right, thereby challenging dichotomies between learning in religious settings and learning in other settings.

In a comparative ethnography of children's early language socialisation in two communities, Heath (1983) demonstrated how children from white and black working class communities become socialised in and through language in different ways in their home and respective communities, including places of worship and religious education classes. Children fused elements from religious narratives, vocabulary and modes of discourse learned in religious settings with broader repertoires of everyday, social and cultural practice and verbal activities with the purpose of sustaining their moral and spiritual development. Equally importantly, Heath's study alerted language and literacy researchers to the discrepancy between the sense of validation, expertise, and belonging that children experienced within their homes and communities and the low academic expectations of their mainstream schools and teachers who often framed their competences in deficit terms. From an ethnographic perspective it exemplified how general claims about macro-level structures and processes such as challenging teachers' deficit perspectives of working class students' abilities are anchored onto the close examination of micro-level data, such as specific language and literacy activities, linguistic and cultural features.

Indeed, religious learning is unique in that the language and literacy practices practiced, performed and perfected over time are a means to build a relationship with a higher and eternal being. Learning in and through religious practice entails not only acquiring symbolic knowledge, moral and spiritual beliefs, language skills and interaction patterns to participate in religious ritual but also becoming socialised into religious frames of making sense of the self and the world often mediated intergenerationally (Heath 1983, also see studies in Gregory, Long and Volk 2004,

Lytra, Volk and Gregory 2016). At the same time, it acknowledges that each person may experience and engage in religious practice in deeply personal and theological ways.

Language socialisation and sociocultural approaches have been frequently drawn upon as influential frameworks for studying the intersection of language, literacy and religion from a social and cultural practice perspective. The *language socialisation paradigm* has as its starting point that social actors are socialised through and to language (Schieffelin and Ochs 1986); it is concerned with how "through the process of learning with and from others, we learn through language but also acquire relevant language forms", both synchronically and across the life span (Baquedano-López 2016, p. 71). Language is key resource for meaning-making and for the development of membership in religious communities and has been central to the maintenance, development and spread of religion and religious practices.

Religion and religious practices have also affected language maintenance, shift and change across generations, time and space (see Souza 2016). Studies deploying a *language socialisation* lens have examined the interrelationship between languages, literacies, interaction and learning in a range of diverse and stratified minority and migrant contexts. For instance, Avni (2012) explored the intertwining of learning different varieties of Hebrew with English and the articulation of multiple identity options in a Jewish (secular) primary school in New York. In another study of Hasidic (nonliberal) Jewish girls' language socialisation across home, school and community, Fader (2009) illustrated that language use is linked to the development of modes of thinking, interpreting, feeling and behaving, including religious beliefs and practices, in culturally appropriate ways. In particular, her study revealed how the learning of different forms of Biblical Hebrew, Yiddish, English, and Hasidic English was connected to the girls' acquisition and display of gendered roles and identities that were infused by a Hasidic form of femininity. Baquedano-López (2000) demonstrated how the ideological orientation of using Spanish in religious education classes reinforced the link between language, religion and ethnicity among school-age Mexican immigrant children in a majority English diasporic context. Knowledge and practice from home and community settings, including faith settings, went largely unrecognized in supporting language proficiency and identity affirmation in mainstream school contexts.

*Sociocultural approaches* start from the learning contexts in which a sense of belonging are developed and sustained through participation, apprenticeship and appropriation with the support of more experienced group or community members. Learning thus takes place between individuals (interpersonal) through situated interaction and practices and within the individual (intrapersonal) through internalised cognitive processes (Vygotsky 1978). While recognising the importance of language in learning and identity construction, using a sociocultural lens urges us to investigate language as one of a wealth of mediational tools, focusing instead on the role of cultural contexts and practices, the breath of mediational tools and mediators for learning across families and communities (Rogoff 1990). In this sense, it examines the interconnection of language with other repertoires of semiotic resources, for instance gesture, posture, music and rhythm, dance and movement as well as images and artifacts, to uncover how sociocultural contexts impact on what is learned and how that is learned.

In our longitudinal ethnography in religious settings (the BeLiFS project), Kenner and colleagues (2016) illustrated how children developed successful learner identities and a sense of agency with the expert mediation of supportive parents, faith teachers and other faith community members. The dispositions, abilities and positive expectations cultivated could then be leveraged within and beyond the Bangladeshi Muslim and Ghanaian Pentecostal religious settings respectively to sustain children's learning in mainstream schools. Souza et al (2016) illustrated this by describing how Adam, a nine-year old Polish boy, developed symbolic knowledge and "multiple layers of his identity as a member of the Polish community and as a member of a faith community" through his participation in Easter celebrations at home under the purposeful guidance of family and friends (p. 52). Gregory, Lytra and Ilankuberan (2015) similarly showed how two siblings internalised knowledge of Hindu/Saiva rituals and symbols and transformed plastic building blocks and other everyday objects into important religious artefacts through play.

Both language socialization and sociocultural approaches to the study of religion as social and cultural practice can be seen as complementary. As Lytra, Volk, and Gregory (2016) have argued "the language and texts of an individual religious practice are actually inseparable from the practice itself and an in depth account of the

learning taking place by young people needs to account equally for both language and context" (p. 6). In their ethnographic accounts of children's language and literacy learning through religious practices, the authors sought to capture the emic perspectives of the religious community members themselves that is select, categorise, identify and represent some of the patterns of religious practices, beliefs and interpretations of cultural and contextual meaning that were salient to the participants. Getting at the perspectives of community members is a challenging task for ethnographers who at the same time infuse their ethnographic accounts with their own particular, etic, perspectives. These include orientating theories and analytic procedures as well as previous research in the area of study (Hammersley and Atkinson 1993).

#### *Researcher reflexivity and religious practice exclusivity*

The continual dialogue between *emic* and *etic* perspectives foregrounds the researchers' own subjectivities and the role they play in shaping the understandings and interpretations of the social and cultural practices they study. Ethnographers must then acknowledge the "joint responsibility for the knowledge construction process in which they participate when doing ethnography" (Patiño-Santos 2019, p. 213). The partiality and context-sensitivity of ethnographic understandings and interpretations and the dynamic process of knowledge gathering and sense making must also be acknowledged. Moreover, they must be constantly aware that ethnographic research is dynamic, subjective and context-sensitive and that the object of study is nested within specific micro level contexts and macro level structures and processes. Indeed, participants are often not actively aware of particular social and cultural practices and their own behaviours. Ethnographers uncover these implicit practices and behaviours through fieldwork that involves sustained participation and observation over long periods of time rather than solely asking participants' questions about their conduct and beliefs, for example, in the form of interviews.

In this respect, fieldwork is closely linked to the ethnographer's personal journey of knowledge generation as they reconstruct different participants' worldviews. Because



the ethnographer captures and represent the various voices of the participants, including their own accounts, ethnographic narratives are by nature dialogical and polyphonic (Heller 2009). Yet, processes of selection and representation of different perspectives in ethnographic accounts raise issues of whose voices get included and whose get silenced or ignored as well as the ethnographer's stance towards these voices. Therefore, developing researcher reflexivity that is carefully thinking about "the politics of identity and positioning in the field" (Patiño-Santos 2019: 217) throughout the different research stages is a crucial endeavour for the ethnographer and a precondition for building respectful and equitable relationships with research participants.

Engaging in researcher reflexivity is especially pertinent when investigating religious settings. Religion is often regarded as a very private and personal matter which inevitably raises issues of exclusiveness and exclusion of those who are not members of the religious community, thereby adding further layers of complexity when documenting religious practices and beliefs. Fader (2009) and Sarroub (2005) among others have critically discussed the challenges in researching religious settings where the ethnographer is not perceived as a member of the religious community. Although Jewish, Fader's Jewishness was monitored and scrutinised during and after the fieldwork as she was not an Orthodox Jew and was positioned as an "outsider" to the Hasidic Jewish community she studied. Additionally, this positioning had material consequences for the fieldwork too, as it confined her access to and engagement with women and girls' lived experiences only. In a similar vein, Sarroub carefully considered the interplay of ethnic, religious and gender identity aspects and how they prompted the Yemeni-American high school students in her study to position her in particular ways: "the underlying assumption among my informants was that I would not understand them if I was not really Muslim as they were. As an outsider I could never capture their reality" (p.: 17). Other ethnographers researching religious settings have argued that being a member of the religious community is crucial for acceptance by participants (Rumsey 2010, Rosowsky 2008).

Nevertheless, Gregory and Ruby (2010) in their work with children and families learning in homes and schools in cross-cultural contexts have questioned the binaries of "insider" and "outsider" roles. They have showed that such dichotomies may oversimplify the process of researching cultural practices and behaviours, as issues of

accountability and problems of translation may arise for both "insider" and "outsider" ethnographers. In fact, they highlighted how their own backgrounds (for one very similar to the children and the families they studied and for the other very different) afforded them with different degrees of insiderness and outsiderness and how they negotiated and transformed their personal and social identities throughout the research process. However, in most cases the ethnographer enters the field as an "outsider", with limited knowledge of the social environment, its cultural practices and social norms. They must gradually learn the tacit rules and conventions and move from peripheral participation to a more central position, adapting their conduct according to the group's expectations. Even when the ethnographer is a member of the group, they still need to call into question their prior assumptions and established cultural practices and norms as they inquire into their "own" cultural practices and beliefs in their researcher capacity.

The tension in negotiating researcher and religious identities in particular is encapsulated in the question raised by Arani Ilankuberan, my co-researcher in the BeLiFS project: "When I'm in the Temple, how can I manage to pray and do research at the same time" (Gregory and Lytra 2012, p. 197). Arani's questions reminds us that becoming a researcher in religious settings, especially in one's own place of worship, "may easily appear intrusive, insensitive, or even disrespectful" (: *ibid*). It can pose additional dilemmas: "if one is a known member of the congregation, how can one take on the role of researcher instead of worshipper? How does one balance the different roles?" (: *ibid*). Recognizing these challenges further alerts us to the importance of building relationships of collaboration and trust with participants in the field.

Although the ethnographer has traditionally been thought of as the lone researcher in the pursuit of knowledge, collaboration is in fact at the heart of ethnographic research. As Wasser and Bresler (1996) argue, "this image of the independent scholar, however, glosses over the very social nature of the research process, making invisible the researcher's connections to the participants of the study and those numerous others with whom the researcher worked during the course of a study and who made important contributions to his/her interpretation" (p.5) Collaboration also takes the form of ethnographers working together in interdisciplinary research teams and with

stakeholders from non-academic institutions and increasingly engaging in impact activities for a range of academic and non-academic audiences.

### **3 Case study**

From 2009 to 2013, the "Becoming Literate in Faith Settings: Language and Literacy Learning in the Life of New Londoners" BeLiFs project team of eleven researchers engaged in a multi-sited ethnography in places of worship, religious education classes and homes in London. We sought to investigate the following questions using a multi-method approach to data collection: (1) What is the scope and nature of literacy practices in each faith setting? (2) How do teaching and learning take place during faith literacy activities across different settings? (3) In what ways have faith literacy activities changed over time in the London setting and across generations? and (4) How does participation in faith literacies contribute to individual and collective identities? During the first year of the ethnography, the research team investigated the breadth of children's faith literacy learning and socialisation by collecting demographic and historical data about each faith and the area around each site of worship. We then drafted field narratives based on our participant observations in the places of worship, religious education classes and during other cultural activities as well as during our visits to each other's place of worship. In collaboration with faith leaders and faith teachers, we identified 16 families we would work with for the next two years.

In the second and third year of the project, each research pair worked closely with the four children and their families in each faith community. At the beginning of the second year, we gave all participant children an A4 size scrapbook with multicolored pages and asked them to write, draw and stick in it what they considered important about their faith and they wanted to share with the researchers. During home visits, researchers leafed through the scrapbooks, discussed their content and shared their responses with the children and the other family members who were present. The researchers then discussed the scrapbooks page by page with the children and with siblings who had co-authored them. In the Tamil Hindu/Saiva case study, these conversations were video-recorded and additionally, we gave each family a digital tape-recorder, a camera and a light-weight, easy-to-use video camera and asked the children and other family members to record daily faith rituals and special religious celebrations and take photographs of religious and other cultural artifacts at home and

in the places of worship. We also shadowed and recorded the children at their religious education classes. Finally, we interviewed the children, the 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 use and literacy practices associated with faith. In the project's third year, the children themselves became researchers and with help of the project team prepared questions to ask either a grandparent or an older member of the community about how the faith had changed across time, space and generations.

Throughout the research process we engaged in methodological reflexivity with the purpose of monitoring, clarifying and adjusting accordingly "the epistemological, methodological and analytical decisions taken" (Patiño-Snatos 2019: 214). Doing research with children required developing child-friendly methodologies that positioned children as knowledgeable and active meaning makers in their own right and captured and represented their perspectives and experiences. Moreover, previous research with children has documented the value of using visual and multimodal modes of representation, such as photography, drawing and scrapbooks (Kenner et al 2016, Lytra et al 2016, Pietikäinen 2012, Souza et al 2016). These methodologies have the potential to uncover children's creativity, intentionality and expertise because they exercise agency over how they share and co-construct knowledge with the researchers as well as with family members, religious leaders, teachers, and community members who support their learning and identity affirmation in and through religious practice and belief.

Ethical issues are equally very important and inevitably influenced the methodological decisions made before, during and after the fieldwork has been completed. Researchers have a duty of care towards all research participants, ensuring their safety and well-being. This is especially true when working with children. Project team members cultivated a good working relationship with the families, faith leaders, faith teachers and other community members who participated in the project. Although participants were briefed about the research project and gave their informed consent, at each stage of the project, they were consulted about their right to withdraw. In fact, our decision to select four families from each faith community was motivated by our concern that some families might withdraw from the project given

the complex and sensitive nature of researching faith settings and the project's long-term commitment, and neither the families, nor did any of the other participants withdraw. Permission for filming, photographing and audio and video-recording children was obtained from parents at the beginning and throughout the course of the longitudinal study. To address the sensitive nature of faith literacy practices, the participants were given recording equipment to document the faith practices they decided to share. At the end of the study, all participants signed letters of agreement, allowing project team members to use the data gathered for public dissemination, including uploading a selection of the data on the project website ([www.belifs.net](http://www.belifs.net)). We also asked all participants to decide on the use of pseudonyms and where requested we have used those pseudonyms.

For this case study, I will discuss specifically an annual special celebration, the celebration of the *Pongal* festival at the home of Thiani. The aim of the analysis is to illustrate what Thiani and her older brother Tianan might be learning by partaking in this special celebration and how their learning might be supported by their parents and maternal grandmother. The analysis draws upon insights to learning from sociocultural and language socialisation approaches and combines data from home video-recording and photography with children's scrapbooks.

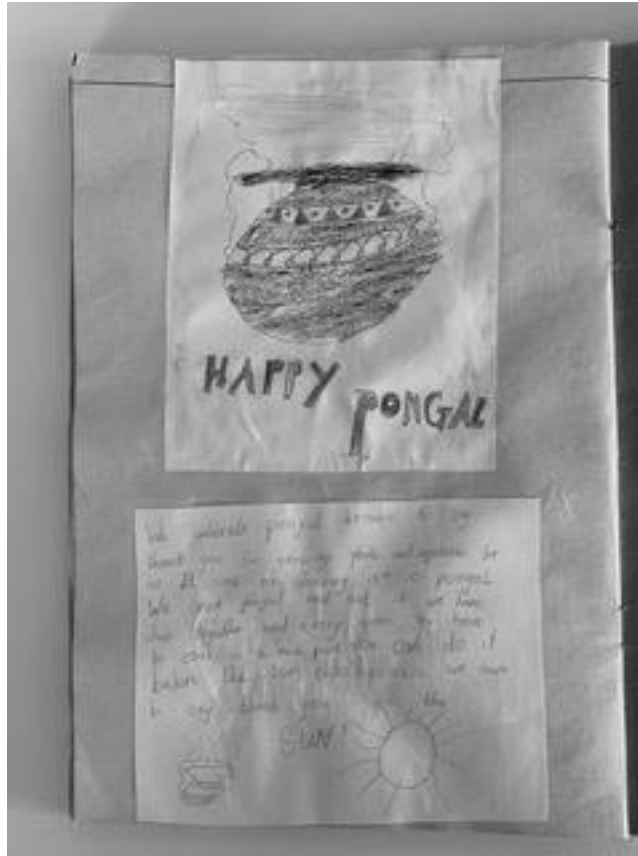
The analysis is multi-layered with separate focuses on the outer, middle, and inner layers. However, the layers are not separate or discrete entities, but rather interconnected, shaping one another. Starting with the outer layer, the analysis explores the broader historical and cultural contexts in which the festival is situated in the country of origin and in the diaspora. It then moves on to the middle layer and zooms in the celebration as it takes place at Thiani's home with the participation of her parents, older brother and maternal grandmother in the early morning before the children go to school. The analysis includes the activity, the mediational tools (including the languages being used during the celebration) and the mediators of learning and illustrates how the celebration supports the children's faith learning and is reinforced by a wider web of valued faith literacy practices. The examination of the middle layer also alerts us to how the family has adapted the festival to the London setting while keeping its core elements the same across continents. Finally, the analysis concentrates on the inner layer, the interaction patterns among family members, the language and literacy abilities developed and strategies employed.

*Outer layer: the broader historical and cultural contexts*

*Pongal* is an important festival for Tamils and is observed in Tamil communities in South India, Sri Lanka and in the diaspora worldwide. The purpose of the festival is to give thanks to the Sun God for a successful harvest and it is celebrated over four days during the Tamil month of Thai (January 15-18). The main event consists of observing the ritual boiling and spilling over of the milk, which symbolises abundance and prosperity for the household. Once the milk has boiled and spilt, brown rice, sugar, jaggery, cashew nuts, raisins and ghee are added to the milk to turn the mixture into pongal, a thick brown sweet dish that is then shared with family and friends. The word "pongal", therefore, refers to both the festival and the dish. The *Pongal* festival emerged as a recurring theme in the children's scrapbooks too. Children drew images of the pot with milk spilling over in abundance and wrote "Happy Pongal" messages. Hajipan (age 8, at the beginning of the fieldwork) crafted the following description of Pongal in the scrapbook he co-created with his younger sister, Tanja (age 6, at the beginning of the fieldwork):

We celebrate Pongal because to say thank you for growing plants and vegetables for us. It is on January 18th. We cook pongal and eat it. We have fun together and every year you have to cook in a new pot. You can do it before the Sun rises because you have to say thank you for the SUN.

The description was accompanied by a pencil line drawing of a traditional clay pot with milk spilling over and of the Sun. Above the text-making, Hajipan stuck a drawing of another bigger, more colourful clay pot with traditional patterns and with milk overflowing in large quantities, and wrote the message "Happy Pongal" in equally colourful block letters. The colourful drawing and message are reminiscent of the *Pongal* cards families routinely receive every year from friends and relatives in Sri Lanka and the children had shown to us. Both the images Hajipan drew and those of other children sought to capture the most auspicious moment of the event that is the overflow of the milk in abundance, indicating that they have come to recognise and have internalised its importance and symbolism.



"Happy Pongal"

In their text-making, the siblings demonstrate their developing cultural knowledge and religious understanding: the purpose of the celebration (to give thanks for the harvest), the date (January 18), the main artefact required (a new pot every year), the social and communal nature (having fun and consuming the dish together) and the religious dimension of the celebration which is linked to giving thanks to the Sun God for the successful harvest. Their text-making reveals how their faith literacy learning supports the development of their multimodal literacies drawing on a combination of written text, images, colour and spatial arrangements (Lytra, Gregory and Ilankuberan 2017). It illustrates how children capitalise on their "funds of knowledge" that is "the historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills" (Gonzalez, Moll and Amanti, 2005: 133) that can be found within families and communities and are very often made invisible in mainstream schools and classroom; religious practices, values and beliefs.

*Middle layer: activity, mediational tools and mediators of learning*

We asked each family to record important religious celebrations they participated in. Thiani's family chose to record the *Pongal* celebration in their home. The father,

mother and children took turns to film key moments of the celebration, which lasted over two and a half hours in total. Arani Ilankuberan then edited the clips to create an 8-minute film with the highlights of the celebration in chronological order and added English subtitles as most of the interaction in the film takes place in Tamil. Arani shared the edited film she created with the family for feedback and got their verbal consent to upload it on the project website alongside other videos documenting religious celebrations across the four faith communities in homes and places of worship taken by other participating families. Additionally, Thiani was tasked by the family with taking photographs of the most important rituals during the celebration.

In Sri Lanka, the *Pongal* celebration traditionally takes place at dawn at the threshold of the house. In London, Thiani and her family moved the celebration indoors and drew a *kolam* (a form of geometric line drawing typically created on the threshold of one's home) in the middle of the living room. The design of the *kolam* is a perfect square with openings in the middle of each side made of rice powder. On the top corner, the mother drew the image of the Sun. A portable cooker heating the pot with the milk and the other ingredients rests on a brick block in the middle of the square. Surrounding the image of the Sun, the family placed several religious artefacts to be used in the rituals: a silver decorative oil lamp, a coconut placed on leaves on a silver pot on a large green leaf, a bell, small containers with white and red holy ash, bananas, oranges and a bottle of oil for the oil lamp and a matchbox.





The overflowing of the milk, photo by Thiani

The edited film captures the main events of the activity: it opens with Thiani (age 7 at the beginning of the fieldwork) and her brother, Tianan, (age 10 at the beginning of the fieldwork) observing the milk boiling as their mother brings the container with the soaked brown rice to be added to the milk. The family carefully watch and comment on the milk boiling and overflowing, a mop in hand to deal with any spillage. The mother alerts the grandmother to the directionality of the overflow: "mother come and see it's boiling over on the eastside!" which is ostensibly an auspicious sign. Once the milk has overflowed, the father takes a hand full of brown rice and squats over the pot making sure he does not touch the pot with his knees. He moves his hands clockwise circling the pot three times before gently putting the rice in the pot. He repeats the action three times before inviting one by one the other family members to repeat the action. The other ingredients are added in the mixture and family members are invited to take turns stirring the mixture so that it doesn't stick to the bottom of the pot under the watchful eye of the father and the grandmother.

Once the pongal has been cooked, the mother takes a prayerful position. She brings her two palms together, closes her eyes, bows her head and starts singing a Thevaram (a Tamil hymn) to Lord Ganesh. She then starts singing the first verse of the next Thevaram to Lord Shiva and nods to Thiani to continue. Modelling her mother's actions, Thiani stands upright in a prayerful position and sings the hymn in a loud,

clear voice. The other family members stand by observing. After the singing of the hymns, the father takes the sacred oil lamp and asks each family member to touch and pray to the flame, as Thiani rings the bell with a big smile on her face. The father takes the sacred oil lamp upstairs to the family prayer shelf containing images of Gods and sacred objects and circles the sacred flame clockwise in front of the deities while Thiani continues ringing the bell. The mother invites family members to apply white holy ash across their forehead and to their neck. They make three horizontal lines with white holy ash across the forehead and a dot in the middle of the forehead using red holy ash.

*Inner layer: interaction patterns, skills and strategies*

The interaction patterns among the family members, the language and literacy abilities developed and strategies employed are the focus of the inner-layer analysis. Thiani takes responsibility to lead the collective prayer for the family by closely modelling her mother's prayerful position and attitude. As she sings the *Thevaram*, she engages in the use of sophisticated language forms in archaic Tamil, which differ from vernacular forms of Tamil she uses everyday with her family. At the same time, Thiani practices and performs the main act of praying for Saivites (Saivism is a devotional branch of Hinduism. Saivites believe that Lord Shiva is the ultimate deity). Her performance reveals the importance placed on correct enunciation and clear pronunciation in singing the devotional hymns and the deployment of a respectful embodied stance, what Ochs and Capps (2002) have referred to as "a prayerful attitude" (p. 40).

Throughout her religious socialisation, Thiani has had many opportunities to listen to, practice, perform and learn about *Thevarams*. At home, her mother regularly plays devotional hymns in the mornings, as the family members prepare themselves to go to school and work. Thiani has also sung *Thevarams*, individually and collectively at the Temple. In the religious education classes she attends on Sundays after Tamil school, at the beginner's class, Thiani learned to repeat, memorise and practice devotional hymns. In the intermediate class, she was introduced to the social, cultural and historical contexts in which the devotional hymns were created. Viewed within a sociocultural frame, by actively participating in the *Pongal* festival at home under the guidance of more knowledgeable family members, the children are socialised into developing membership and a sense of belonging to the Hindu/Saiva faith

community. Membership identity is not fixed but achieved interactionally through engaging in and sometimes leading as in the case of Thiani's prayer religious practice. Through "guided participation" (Rogoff 1990) in faith activities, children learn to take up roles and perform religious rituals that also help them build their self-esteem and self-confidence, important resources that can be transferred to learning in other contexts, including the mainstream school.

The multi-layered analysis demonstrates how children's participation in iterative religious celebrations allows them to co-construct culturally valued practices and routines mediated by symbols and sacred objects and forge enduring relationships with family members and the broader faith community. It also illustrates how faith learning provides a bridge between past, present and future of cultural practices. As cultural practices travel across continents and generations, they create a rich tapestry that weaves together different threads of religious experience, locally, nationally and transnationally, attesting to the enduring relationship between Tamil ethnicity, language and faith in a diasporic setting.

#### **4. Future directions**

The aim of our three-year multi-sited team ethnography was to document the significance of religious contexts in many children's lives, the breadth and scope of teaching and the range of skills learnt, including languages and literacies, and the development of identities, knowledge and abilities. Concurring with Susi Long (2016) it sprang from "a "sense of urgency", an acknowledgement that "schooling and the wider society can isolate, ignore, and create taboos that keep us from recognising the rich learning, teaching, heritage, histories and literacies, and a sense of community and belonging that define many faith contexts" (: 227). Previous ethnographic work by Heath (1983), Gonzalez, Moll and Amanti (2005) among others cited earlier in this chapter has demonstrated the importance of investigating teaching and learning in out-of-school contexts for the development children's abilities, potential and positive learner identities in mainstream schools and classrooms.

Educators and policy makers in particular would benefit from insights from teaching and learning in faith settings. Given the growing diversity of the student population in schools and classrooms around the world, further ethnographic studies need to explore to what extent and in what ways the wealth of knowledge, skills and expertise as well

as high standards and expectations nourished in faith setting can be utilised for thinking and learning and can contribute to children's academic success (this investigation was beyond the scope of the BeLiFs project). To date, very few studies have explored the possibilities and limitations of mobilising children's religious knowledge and understanding for literacy instruction (but see Damico and Hall 2014, Skerrett 2013, LeBlanc 2017 for notable exceptions). Yet, if as educators we wish to honour all children's languages, literacies, heritages and histories and we are committed to supporting and sustaining inclusive and pluralistic pedagogies then more attention needs to be given to children's religious practices and identities. To this end, ethnography can provide a powerful epistemological, ontological and methodological frame.

Another area of future ethnographic research involves the mediation of religious belief and practice via new and traditional media. A recent edited collection of studies by Andrey Rosowsky (2018) on *Faith and Language Practices in Digital Spaces* has aptly illustrated the increased significance of digital technologies in sustaining and transforming language use and in creating new religious practices and identity options. These studies have pointed to the development of more individualised forms of religious expression and the concomitant fragmentation of traditional religious authority and have raised question regarding what might count as authentic religious practice in the 21st century. The focus on more individualised forms of religious expression was explored in Ilankuberan's (forthcoming) longitudinal ethnography of three second generation British Sri Lankan Hindu Saiva Tamil teenagers engaging with the canon of 1960s Tamil Hindu mythological film. Participants engaged in film viewing with the researcher as an embodied and affective experience. They utilised films as a means to support and enhance their spiritual, theological and moral development and express their emergent faith identities in highly personalised and unique ways. The emphasis on more individualised forms of religious expression is in tune with what is sometimes referred to as the "biographical turn" in ethnography. This turn has also meant the recognition of the importance of biographical experiences in shaping participants' heteroglossic language practices and linguistic repertoires.

While ethnographic research in faith settings has demonstrated the strong link between language and ethno-religious identity (Souza 2016), at the same time, it has

alerted language researchers to the socially and culturally situated ways language resources circulate across time, space and generations. Rather than construing linguistic fixity and fluidity as dichotomous, it has pointed to the need to examine under what conditions and with what consequences participants orient to fixed and fluid language practices to construct their (religious) identities. The analytical focus on the interplay between linguistic fixity and fluidity has coincided with a conceptual shift within sociolinguistics and applied linguistics from a view of languages as discrete and autonomous entities to languages as social and ideological constructs and from a focus on code to a focus on language users, their multilingual repertoires and biographical trajectories (Heller 2007).

Indeed, there is growing consensus among language researchers of the analytical value of a view of language as resource, part and parcel of participants' full communicative repertoires, online and offline (Busch 2012). This rethinking of repertoire departs from Gumperz's (1964) original formulation of linguistic repertoire tied to membership in relatively stable speech communities. Instead, global conditions of migration and new communication technologies may allow (or constrain) participants in moving between various more or less short-term group formations across the lifespan. This conceptual shift has further alerted us to the unequal distribution of knowledge and access to linguistic and other communicative resources within and across multilingual settings, religious settings being one such case; to issues of power and control, competing language ideologies and language hierarchies, the privileging of particular linguistic resources and their speakers, as well as of particular roles and identity ascriptions over others. These topics can provide fruitful avenues for future ethnographic research at the intersection of language, literacy and religion too, as ethnographers seek to capture the complexity and unpredictability of contemporary everyday communication as well as new and more established (religious) identity options.

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