

SRI LANKA LECTURE SERIES

A House for Every Daughter: Tamil and Muslim Marriage in Sri Lanka Today



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Based upon fieldwork conducted in 2010-14, this presentation will explore contemporary marriage and dowry practices among Tamil Hindus and Tamil-speaking Muslims (Moors, *cōṅakar*) in the easternmost districts of Sri Lanka, a region deeply affected by the 2004 tsunami and the Eelam Wars. This part of the island is well-known for its system of matrilineal descent through women and its matrilocal residence pattern in which the husband joins his wife's family in a house provided to her as dowry (*cītaṅam*), or its functional equivalent, a prenuptial gift (*naṅkoṭai*). The matrilocal system has proven to be highly resilient: in the wake of the tsunami that destroyed countless homes owned by women, most newly-built NGO dwellings are clearly destined to become female-owned dowry houses in the next generation. Without a house, a daughter is nearly unmarriageable, so poor Tamil and Muslim women sometimes take jobs as housemaids in the Gulf in order to construct dowry houses for themselves. Women from wealthier families, however, benefit from their substantial dowry assets. In the domain of marriage choice, a majority of matches are still arranged, including a subset of Dravidian-type marriages between cross-cousins. However, love marriages are definitely increasing, even including some romances initiated between cross-cousins themselves. The effects of travel, education, and global media can be seen in the changing traditions of Hindu and Muslim wedding ceremonies. Tamil Hindu weddings have added Brahmanicized elements to older non-Brahmanical rituals, while Muslim weddings have reduced or eliminated traditional elements deemed non-Islamic today. Locally-produced wedding videos now provide useful ethnographic information on both Tamil and Muslim marriage practices. The next stage of this project will be to determine more precisely how these Sri Lankan marriage patterns compare with other parts of the Tamil-speaking world, including Muslim settlements along the south Indian coast.

Date: Friday, 07.11.2014

Venue: South Asia Institute, Room Z10

Time: 1.15 pm / 13.15 Uhr

All interested persons are cordially invited!