

CASTE AND NATION BUILDING

Constructing Vellalah Identity in Jaffna

This doctoral thesis explores the meanings and practices associated with Vellalah identity in the context of the Tamil nationalist project in Jaffna, Sri Lanka. Given that caste is a culturally sensitive identity and practice among Tamils, I investigate how the dominant caste identity was constructed, (re) negotiated and shifted. I do this via a case study on Vellalah identity by looking at the construction of Vellalah identity historically, as well as in contemporary Jaffna, with a main focus on the years 2004–2007. This study, in a sense, tries to unpack the Sri Lankan conflict with an inside account of the Vellalah Tamils who were one of the major protagonists of the ethno-national war which lasted more than three decades.

The Vellalah, being the hegemonic elite and intelligentsia of the region, monopolised the social, cultural, economic and political resources. An analysis of this study is imbedded in an interpretive constructive approach undertaken with narrative methodology. At a theoretical level, this study discusses the intersections of identity, caste and nationalism. It tries to account for how Vellalah identity is historically constituted, how major elements of caste relate to Vellalah identity, how the LTTE as an informal national elite both influenced caste and Vellalah identity, and finally how war impacted caste and Vellalah identity. This study attempts to shed light on how the Vellalah articulations and (re)negotiations of caste identity shifted the Vellalah to always sustain themselves through power and the societal elite. It also discovers that the internalised caste identity is dynamic and durable.

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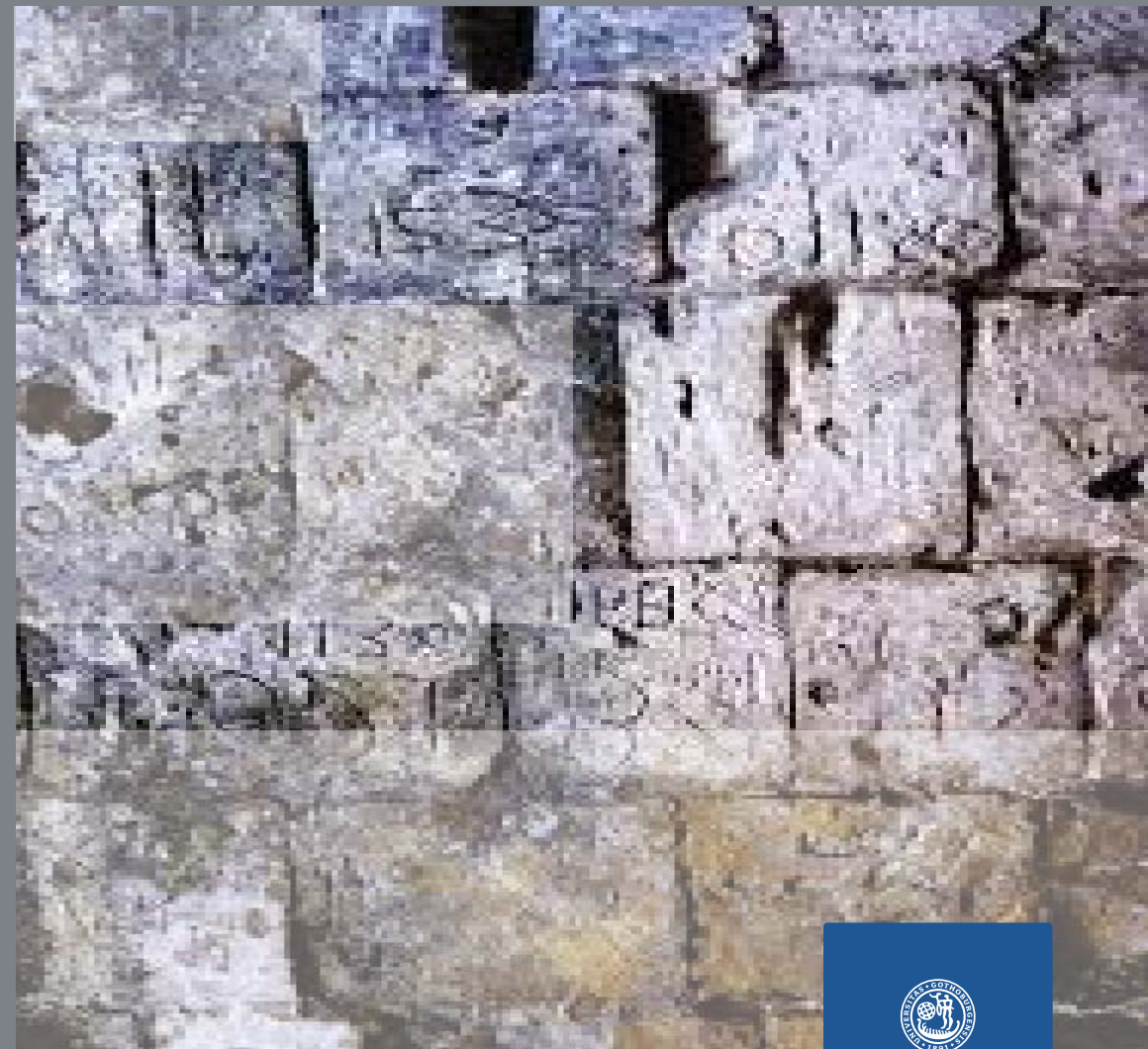
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