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Special Issue

Caste, Craft and Education in India and Sri Lanka

Guest Editors

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Mark E. Balmforth

ABSTRACT

Not unlike many parts of South Asia, foot-pedal-powered Singer sewing machines are ubiquitous in Sri Lanka’s Jaffna Peninsula, as much an inheritance of missionary and colonial domestic education as an implication of the island’s recent war. The social history of sewing and other needle arts extends deep into the Peninsula’s early modern history, at least as far back as the Portuguese period. At the centre of this article sit a circle of young Tamil embroidering women who, in the mid-1840s, helped transform what it meant to be a modern Jaffna Tamil woman. This article reads the samplers of this set, the Oodooville Group, as source material into the pedagogical and devotional worlds in which they lived. The article argues that the works, each characterised by a riot of colour, constitute an experiment in mission pedagogy revealing an encounter and momentary negotiation of both aesthetics and devotion between missionaries and the students they sought to convert.

Keywords: Christian mission; Tamil; Sri Lanka; women’s embroidery

1. INTRODUCTION

Seeing is not only a biological function in human beings, but also a learned and historically constructed behavior

(Morgan 2005: 191)

Like a handful of Sri Lankan communities, the Protestants of the...
Jaffna Peninsula nurture a long-standing needle art tradition.\(^1\) Despite nearly 30 years of war and international dispersal, the small community still fashions internally circulated clothing and decorative crochet work in the form of tablecloths, curtains, sheets, pillowcases and bookmarks. Margaret Kuṇапāckiam Aruḷāṉantam of Varaṇi, for instance, was known for the delicate crocheted birds she worked into the edges of her linens in the 1980s, while Ammā Rāṇi, now in her ninth decade and living in North America, made a point to teach her granddaughters the art of crochet. Of course, Jaffna’s Protestants are far from alone in maintaining a needle arts tradition; foot-pedal-powered Singer sewing machines remain ubiquitous in the Peninsula, as much an inheritance of missionary and colonial domestic education as an implication of the recent war (Wickramasinghe 2014). The social history of sewing and other needle arts extends deep into the Peninsula’s early modern history, at least as far back as the 16th century during the Portuguese period. This article considers part of that social history.

At the centre of my argument sit five embroiderers: V. Kaṟpakam, I. Pāṟupati, C. Kitevaṉ, C. Muttu and one yet to be named, all working on samplers that teem with colour, their Bible verses indexing the works as part of a Christian milieu, the Tamil alphabet ensuring they are not mistaken for European or American creations. In the mid-1840s, these five young Tamil women helped transform what it meant to be a modern South Asian person, and in particular, a modern Jaffna Tamil woman.\(^2\) This article reads the work of these five embroiderers — collectively named the Oodooville Group after the missionary boarding school in which they studied — as source material into the pedagogical and devotional worlds in which they lived, dominated by one of Ceylon’s most important 19th-century institutions: the American Ceylon Mission (ACM). Leading feminist scholarship has demonstrated that needlework constituted an important tool in the ACM’s efforts to convert and reproduce American gendered domesticity as ‘respectability’ among its female students (de Alwis 1997). This article argues that the needleworks of the five Tamil teenagers, each characterised by a riot of colour, constitute an experiment in mission pedagogy revealing an encounter and momentary negotiation of both aesthetics and devotion between the ACM missionaries and the students they sought to convert.

How did these five young Tamil women impact the world around them? They did so through their influence on the ACM. White, primarily male, Christian missionaries are generally credited with producing dramatic transformations in modern South Asian and Ceylonese ways of life, through the establishment of educational, healthcare and print infrastructure, all while
contributing to the distribution of various ‘Protestant’ ways of living in the world. This transformation of modern South Asian life was especially apparent in the Jaffna Peninsula, the principal field of the ACM’s work, where the combined efforts of American and British missionaries helped provoke the mid-19th-century indigenous Hindu revival that would touch Śaivism across the region (Young and Jebanesan 1995; Hudson 1998). The ACM is a dramatic example of how single missions could have a wide impact on a diverse population, without converting more than a small fragment of the population to Christianity. While the full story of how these five young Tamil women altered the ACM – and in the process, South Asian ways of being – will be explained as we move further, for now it is important to know that their impact resulted from an encounter over beauty, devotion and ideas about appropriate religious behaviour.

Scholarship on Christian mission is replete with considerations of global encounter. What happens when two vastly different people meet, exchange ideas and goods, and in the process, transform one another? There is reliable evidence that Christians have been living in South Asia since at least the third or fourth century CE, while narratives within the Thomas or Syrian Christian community of Kerala, which should not be easily dismissed, claim the year of arrival is closer to 55 CE (Frykenberg 2008: 91–115). But the particular linguistic, social and scientific encounters bound up with Christian mission played out in particularly dramatic and well-documented ways during the period of European imperial expansion – from the 16th to the 20th centuries – at times sparking debates and controversies, misunderstandings and mutual moral revulsion, and at other times (and often in concert), expanding intellectual, artistic, economic and social formations. In the first decades of the ACM’s career in Jaffna, in addition to debates over caste, education and natural science, the aesthetics of devotion became the subject of disagreement and conflict. Similar conflicts are known to have played out in nearby missions, where colour, decoration, the use of flowers in church and other modes of worship such as singing, were restricted due to their apparent similarity to Roman Catholic, Śaiva, and Vaiṣṇava practices. Nowhere in the ACM was this debate over beauty more critical than in the mission’s most regulated spaces: its female boarding schools, of which the Oodooville Girls Boarding School (founded in 1824, now Uduvil Girls’ College) was the longest running.

This article is made up of three parts. Before we can turn to the needlework samplers themselves and think through their meaning for the ACM in the 1840s, it is important to know how needlework has been historiographically interpreted. In order to get a sense of this, we begin by
discussing the place of needlework in the academic analysis of women’s lives, and some of the relative challenges associated with this work. Following this, we turn to sewing and needlework in the mission itself, based on both secondary literature and archival sources. The last section turns directly to the five samplers and the few details we can glean about the five women who made them.

2. NEEDLE ARTS AND THE COLONIAL PRODUCTION OF DOMESTICITY

In order to explore the meaning of sampler-making as a mission pedagogical practice and conceptualise the impact of the five Tamil sampler makers on the ACM, two questions of context should be addressed. First, how have needle arts been interpreted as a window into historical lives in social and devotional terms? Second, how have needle arts in colonial missionary spaces been discussed? This section will introduce the larger American and transnational context in which the five samplers are operating, before we turn to their specific pedagogical milieu in the ACM.

Needlework, like other labours, arts and activities explicitly gendered female, has long been an under-examined resource for the study of historical lives due to its association with so-called ‘women’s work’. Putting into print what so many women had known before her, Susan Burrows Swan explained in the late 1970s that the ‘appearance of subservience’ of needlework was in fact deceptive (Swan 1977: 14–15). Instead, the ‘feminine and delicate and ornamental’ concealed within it complex articulations of voice and action. This, Swan notes, brings to mind The Odyssey’s Penelope, weaving and unweaving her father Laertes’ burial shroud in an effort to thwart her suitors while Odysseus was away at war.

Following in Swan’s footsteps, Rozsika Parker’s The Subversive Stitch (1984) broke new ground by arguing that the association of embroidery with ‘women’s work’ was a constructed, gendered practice. Recent research, often carried out by scholars in English and rhetoric departments rather than in history, has drawn extensively on theoretical appraisals of material culture, and in the process demonstrated embroidery to be a meaningful conduit for the study of social processes, from education to social protest (Goggin and Tobin 2009). In the years following The Subversive Stitch, the academic consideration of needlework shifted, rereading as art – hence, ‘needle arts’ – what had previously been disregarded or discussed derisively as ‘needlecraft’ or ‘handicraft’. This larger reconsideration has unearthed
a wealth of detail in women’s history, offering new, first-person vantage points into women’s education, the production of domesticity, as well as middling and working-class women’s history. Maureen Daly Goggin’s essay, ‘Stitching a Life in “Pen of Steele and Silken Inke”: Elizabeth Parker’s circa 1830 Sampler’, is a skilled example of this new direction. The essay draws on a narrative sewn by Elizabeth Parker, a young, lower-class English woman employed in domestic service in the early 19th century, which charts her navigation of harrowing vicissitudes, from economic instability and mental health concerns, to employer violence. Goggin’s work clearly demonstrates how stitching can be read as an epistemic activity of great meaning, an alternative conversation for one denied access to ‘dominant ma(i)nstream discursive spaces’ (Goggin and Tobin 2009: 31). The work, which is indicative of the growing field, pushes the boundaries of access to an interiority which has been heavily debated in South Asian studies by the Subaltern Studies collective and its interlocutors. Though it has opened valuable vantage points into lives neglected due to class and gender, much of this new scholarship remains limited to the study of white, North American and European lives. Great potential still exists for detailing the ways in which textile arts have been intertwined with and transformed the lives of individuals and communities around the world, colonised and colonising, religious and otherwise.

What social role did needlework samplers play in New England? The earliest examples of American samplers were made shortly after the arrival of white settlers to New England in the middle part of the 17th century (Ring 1987: 1). As 17th-, 18th- and early-19th-century American women spent a considerable amount of their daily lives constructing, repairing and repurposing (not to mention cleaning) clothing for families, sewing was a critical skill for a mother to pass on to her daughters. Samplers archived and displayed various stitches learned, some simple and utilitarian, others complex and fantastical. Through the 18th century, American needlework samplers transitioned from tools that supported the practice and accumulation of learned skills to ‘accomplishments’, or emblems of distinction that constituted a recognised genre positioning its maker as having attained the refinement of character and graceful faculties required of a suitable wife and homemaker of appropriate class (Edmonds 1991: 22; Ring 1993: 16).

Needlework is a relentlessly intricate process requiring sustained dedication, complex hand-eye coordination, and careful planning; students required the ability to follow regular, detailed direction. Samplers provided something comparable to a diploma or a school-leaving certificate and were produced in hundreds of small schoolhouses up and down America’s
eastern seaboard, and across the expanding United States. Upon their completion, samplers became the property of the young woman’s parents, and were often framed and displayed prominently in the home. In addition to demonstrating stitching and embroidery skills, samplers often also tracked family, local and national history, in the process reflecting unique aspects of their creator’s communities. By the time the Oodooville Group had commenced work in 1845, samplers were also increasingly at odds with the current of women’s education in America, which sought to transform the content and methods of teaching from an emphasis on domestic skills of household maintenance to academic content modelled on liberal arts education already standard for upper-class men of the period.

One aspect of the creation of needlework that is important for our discussion of the Oodooville Group samplers relates to the relationship between schoolmistresses and female students. According to Betty Ring, schoolmistresses directed students in all aspects of the sampler creation, from the colour of the thread and types of stitches, to what verses and designs to sew and where they should be placed (Ring 1993). Because schoolmistresses guided their students, groups of samplers are often found that share similarities in design and materials, indicating that they were produced in the same school and under the guidance of the same teacher. In other words, samplers cannot be considered intellectual and artistic creations of a single person, but rather are didactic objects tied to the aesthetic vaṃśāvalīs of schoolmistresses. As we move on, we will see how this impacts our study of Jaffna Protestant samplers, but for now we can say that samplers were not only individual products of dedication and skill, but also clearly individual units in schools of artistic production.

One of the more interesting debates to come out of the study of needle arts relates to the ability of textiles – and samplers, in particular – to act as sources of information on the lives of their creators. Writing about a set of samplers created in a Church Missionary Society mission in Sierra Leone in the middle part of the 19th century, Silke Strickrodt has asked how much the samplers ‘express the perspectives of the African girls who made them, as distinct from the European missionaries who directed their work’ (2010: 190). While Strickrodt’s hesitation here raises a valuable question about agency, the question is also reminiscent of a methodological orthodoxy suspicious of archival resources beyond the letters, journals, and other written ephemera that constitute traditional historical source material. Critical scholarship has made abundantly clear that such an approach has systematically occluded non-white, female, colonised and otherwise oppressed voices from the historical narrative.
(Trouillot 1995; Carter 2006). In response to Strickrodt’s caution, I would argue that indeed agency cannot be easily assigned either to student or missionary, but that perhaps the interrogation of authority should only be a beginning. In the case of the Oodooville Group samplers, these works constitute the sole remaining evidence of the maker’s life produced from her own hand, and as such deserve patient and creative methods of reading and translation. Surely, we can use samplers like those of the Oodooville Group as important gateways into the larger archival spheres surrounding individuals who made the works, helping us understand and contextualise the kind of daily regimens, interests and anxieties that shaped the lives of their makers. This is not to say that needleworks produced in colonial and/or missionary environments necessarily provide a view into the interior lives of their makers, but they are at least a place from which to start asking questions about interiority. We now turn to the environment in which the five embroiderers of the Oodooville Group were raised.

3. NEEDLE ARTS AND OTHER EXPERIMENTAL PEDAGOGIES IN THE AMERICAN CEYLON MISSION

The first 40 years of the ACM (1816–56) were dominated by intense pedagogical experimentation, inspired by enlightenment ideas surrounding education’s promise for social renovation. For various foreigners in South Asia at the turn of the 19th century, India and Ceylon became testing grounds for the operation of teaching experiments seeking to transform education back in Europe (Tschurenev 2008). The educational activities of the ACM should be read as part of this process, being both distinct from and an adjunct to global scientific endeavours deeply embedded in the operation of imperialism and colonialism. In the ACM schools, methods of instruction were constantly tested, revised and rejected, just as the content was annually refined by imported English and newly created Tamil textbooks, all of which were designed to more effectively achieve civilisational and conversion goals through the distribution of ‘useful knowledge’. One of the critical questions that weighed on both the method and content of the ACM’s educational system was whether civilisation was necessary for conversion. Though this debate took many forms, the operative theory until the mid-1850s was that conversion naturally followed civilisation; if you educate and domesticate, and thereby nurture American ways of thinking and being, the result would be the Christian patterning of society and mass conversion. Boarding education was conceived as the most effective route to this end.
From the ACM’s arrival in Ceylon in 1816, female education was a key priority that expanded as the Mission matured into the 19th century. Not coincidentally, the early decades of the 19th century were also critical for the development of female education back in America, with the founding of key institutions such as Emma Willard’s Troy Female Seminary (1821), Catherine Beecher’s Hartford Female Seminary (1823) and Mary Lyon’s Mount Holyoke Female Seminary (1836). Back in Jaffna, the impetus for investing in female education was notably different from the gendered and political activism in America. In the early 1820s, the Mission watched in horror as male graduates of Batticotta Seminary, their preeminent collegiate institution and forerunner of today’s Jaffna College, accepted marriages with non-Christians whose families could offer significant dowries. Seeing these graduates as failures of the entire mission enterprise as well as a significant financial loss (donations often totalled more than $100 per student), a cohort of female graduates and future wives was seen as critical for the nascent community’s – and the Mission’s – future. This explanation is, however, only partial. It is clear from both missionary journals and reports of the female boarding schools that at least by 1844, the young female graduates of Oodooville were seen as some of the most valuable assets for the development of the community and as critical transmitters of both Christian and domestic knowledge within families.

As the objects and goals of female education changed over the course of the decades preceding the creation of the Oodooville Group samplers, a range of experimental education and pedagogical activities were conducted at Oodooville. In the early years of the school, a large portion of each student’s time – often more than half of the day – was spent cooking, cleaning and sewing. Various levels of sewing were taught in stages by age, with younger students learning basic and elementary practices while older students learned more complicated construction techniques. The remainder of the time was spent split between prayer and learning to read and write sections of Christian scriptures and Mission-published moral tracts. By the early 1840s, this emphasis on domestic skills was adjusted as the Mission came to regard its female students as a cohort of teachers for the community’s youngest members, and an expanded set of subjects including mathematics, Tamil literature and geography was introduced to the curriculum.

Expanding the curriculum was only one way in which teaching choices transformed and tested ways of reproducing American conceptions of domesticity. The design of spaces and control of consumption practices were similarly employed to cultivate specific conduct. We know the design
for Oodooville’s teaching spaces served distinct pedagogical purposes. In 1845, missionary Eliza Agnew suggested that wooden storage be built along one wall of the room where the students slept. Divided into small, vertical compartments, each student could then place her sleeping mat into an allotted slot during the day. Agnew’s suggestion was an effort to construct a living space conducive to regulated, prudent and structured thinking. She summarised this request by citing Charles A. Goodrich’s puritan and simplicity-inspired domestic ideal: ‘a place for everything and everything in its place’ (EAP835/C1/F5: 33).

Consumption was also a field in which the missionaries at Oodooville sought to teach specific Christian ways of being. By the mid-1840s, the chewing of tobacco, pākku (areca nut) and veṟṟilai (betel leaf) was a common occurrence among the students, much to the chagrin of the Mission which believed this activity unbecoming a young lady of the community. In response, on 21 April 1845, the Mission banned the use of narcotics ‘under pains & penalties’, though the disciplinary measures were left unspecified (EAP835/C1/F5: 26). After four months, it was clear the prohibition had little to no effect, having ‘been broken by many of all classes’ (EAP835/C1/F5: 31). In response, the Mission instituted a policy where each violation of its narcotics prohibition would receive a one Rix dollar fine to be levied upon graduation from the dowry each student received (EAP835/C1/F5: 31). One Rix dollar was, at the time, the equivalent of one shilling and sixpence, or the same amount as a fine wedding jacket. In the years subsequent to the fine system, there are no more references to the use of narcotics among the students, and it is unclear whether the rule was continued or necessary after the abandonment of dowry giving.

How did cloth and clothing circulate in South Asian colonial society, and what would it have meant for the students at Oodooville to be working with cloth as part of their study? Like much of South Asia, cloth in Ceylon at the turn of the 19th century was considerably more expensive then it is today, and the amount of cloth one wore (and was socially or politically sanctioned to wear) was directly related to caste position and income status (Wickramasinghe 2003). In addition to being an object of value in and of itself, cloth played key roles in a number of life-rituals, from childbirth to marriage and death, and was frequently deployed to venerate deities and individuals alike. In a ritualised process at least dating to the monarchical period between the 13th and 17th centuries, Jaffna’s Vaṇṇār, or washing caste, was responsible for providing the bleached white cloths placed over the seating areas reserved for guests of honour at a range of celebrations and visitations. When, in 1821, Harriet Winslow placed
cloth, needle and thread into the hands of Sathoopully and Ciṉṉāci, two six-year-old children who wandered into the Oodooville mission house out of curiosity, the cloth would have been instantly recognisable as an object of value, even to a child.¹²

Well into the 19th century, sewing constituted a key aspect of the daily activity of ACM female boarding schools, from the day the students arrived to the day they left. Up until broad reductions in Mission expenditures as a result of reduced donations following the American financial crisis of 1857, a sewing kit – comprised of needles, thread, cloth and a thimble – constituted a key part of the dowry mentioned above (Fernando 1951: 194). Much of this sewing time was spent in the construction of jackets, the wearing of which was intended to cultivate a sense of Christian propriety utterly opposed to the public display of women’s breasts. The simple jackets that the Mission required its female boarding school students to wear can be read as metonymic of the moral disciplining that sewing provided in this environment that controlled the student’s movement, schedule, diet, conduct and dress (de Alwis 1997: 114). In part because by 1830, ACM students were almost exclusively from the dominant Veḻḷāḷar caste,¹³ students and the surrounding Veḻḷāḷar community appear to have interpreted the jackets in quite a different way than the reactions caused when the London Missionary Society introduced a similar ‘Christian jacket’ in Travancore. There, we learn from Dick Kooiman and Eliza Kent, the jacket sparked controversies over sartorial privileges when oppressed caste members began to cover their torsos, a marked rejection of the so-called upper caste demand that they alone be allowed to wear clothing above the waist (Kooiman 1989: 148–154; Kent 2005).

As noted above, in the Mission’s early years, more time was scheduled for sewing than literacy, although the relationship between the two was more interrelated than one might think. While the balance of emphasis in favour of sewing might be explained by the Mission’s interest in cultivating utility while integrating their students into the daily practices of ‘civilised’ missionary families, from the 1820s, we also find a distinct resistance to learning to read and write exhibited by both the young female students and their parents.¹⁴ It is possible this resistance was tied to local gendered associations of literacy with the few literate Tamil women that would have been known, that is, marginalised communities of courtesans, devadāsīs, or what Europeans of the time called ‘nautch’, or South Indian salon dancers (Soneji 2012: 75). The ACM consistently responded to this challenge by using gifts of cloth and lessons in sewing as an incentive to encourage students to attend to their academic lessons. This negotiation
can be seen throughout the Mission’s first four decades. One of the first examples is noted in passing above, when Harriet Winslow used the promise of a jacket ‘when they should be able to make one’ to encourage six-year-old Sathoopully and her young sister to visit the house, despite their parents’ unwillingness to allow them to be educated by the Winslows. The explanations given by Harriet Winslow were that, though the parents found it unacceptable for their children to ‘lose caste’ by eating with the missionaries, and argued ‘there was no custom for girls to be instructed’, the opportunity to receive clothing was sufficient to bring the girls back to the house to learn to sew (Winslow 1835: 254). During a review of Oodooville in September 1844, we can see another example of the strategic use of sewing to promote literacy, when a restructuring of Oodooville’s class schedule was made to allow more time for academic subjects. As the missionaries providing recommendations to Oodooville stated, rescheduling was carefully planned so as to be done ‘without detriment to the sewing establishment’ (EAP835/C1/F5: 18). We also see the Mission’s utilisation of the value placed by students on sewing in 1849, when it considered whether to provide dowries to girls studying in fee-levying village schools it administered. The Mission eventually determined that dowries were not necessary, as the weekly clean clothes and an amount paid to the elder students for their sewing was sufficient to keep their attendance regular (EAP835/C1/F5: 58).

The shift in this resistance to female literacy appears to have occurred in stages and can be seen in the movement in the overall percentage of female students in ACM schools. From its establishment in 1816 to 1823, only two years of student data is divided by gender, 1819 and 1821. These years show that 1.5 and 2.7 per cent, respectively, of those educated in ACM schools were female. In 1824, the first year Oodooville was in operation, the total percentage of female students in the Mission rose to 10 per cent, where it stayed through 1826. Between 1827 and 1840, the total percentage of female students in ACM schools fluctuated roughly between 10 and 20 per cent, with a height in 1828 of 21.9 per cent. A significant expansion in the percentage of female students in ACM schools came in 1841, when the total rose to 29.8 per cent. In the subsequent decade, between 1841 and 1851, the percentage alternated between 25 and 30 per cent, with a peak in 1843 of 36.8 per cent. With the combined effect of ongoing cholera and smallpox outbreaks and pressure by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) in Boston to reduce educational expenditures, the percentage dropped slightly between 1851 and 1855, though never fell below 25 per cent. Remarking in 1850
on the palpable change that had occurred in the mission, J.C. Smith noted that by that point ‘many of the higher classes [i.e., Veḷḷāḷars] are feeling that it is a disgrace that their girls do not learn’ (ABCFM 1851: 116).

Despite the expansive role sewing played in the Mission through 1855, decorative needle arts in the form of samplers appear to have been exceedingly rare, with so-called fancy work even a regulated activity: ‘They spend the afternoon principally in plain sewing,’ read an 1843 report on Oodooville, ‘though fancy needle-work, of which they are very fond, is encouraged to a moderate extent’ (ACM 1843b: 5). Only six such examples are known to exist, and the five that constitute the Oodooville Group were created between 1845 and 1848. This raises an important question: if needlework samplers conveyed just the sort of gendered, domesticating virtues the American missionaries sought to impart on their young female students, why did they ‘moderate’ their encouragement? Why not simply encourage the practice? An answer can be found to these questions when we ask a related one: for the American missionaries, what was Christian about the Oodooville Group samplers? Though we will go into more detail on each sampler below, in general, each work exhibits a set of skills – literary, mathematical and mechanical – that combine to draw the viewer’s attention in multiple directions. First, one’s eye might be drawn toward an array of colours delicately arranged into alluring and vibrant depictions of the natural and domestic world, with arrangements of multicoloured flowers, birds in vivid reds against green foliage, and an idyllic mountain chalet, all depicted in the intricate petite-point stitch indicative of Berlinwork patterns. Berlinwork, which takes its name from mid-to-late 19th-century German design studios that popularised the method, were just becoming available when the Jaffna samplers were made, and became something of a Victorian craze in both Europe and America (Ring 1987: 57). The designs, which were printed and widely distributed in the most popular American women’s journals of the time, including Godey’s Lady’s Book, were comprised of large lithographed and hand-painted grids in which each coloured square represented a single stitch. After the Berlinwork design, one’s attention might then be drawn to the Tamil and English Bible verses, which are followed by short English poetic compositions elaborating on the verse stitched above it. The English verses draw on the King James Bible translation and relate themes of rebirth and trust in God. Though the stitched Bible verses of the five Oodooville Group samplers clearly place them in a devotional context, the overt display of colour and decoration was far from an obvious choice for students of ACM schools.

The aesthetic world from which a majority of the first three decades
of American missionaries came was dominated by an interest in simplicity and industriousness. Many of the missionaries came from New England Congregationalist communities that had directly inherited a systematic and socialised rejection of image and decoration from their Puritan forebears. This iconophobia was rooted in a theological position established in the early years of the Protestant Reformation that associated image with idolatry (Michalski 1993: 46). The issue of representation was no small matter, as it risked breaking the second of the Ten Commandments: ‘Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth’ (King James Version, Exodus 20:4). Based on the doctrine of *sola scriptura* (by scripture alone), one of the central principals of the Reformation, scripture is the only divine, infallible authority, making images a threatening diversion from and challenge to devotion toward God. Thus, an outpouring of colour, sound, or decoration – even if it emanated from ostensibly Christian sources – was decadence and a distraction from God.

Austerity took many forms for the Americans most directly guided by strict Congregationalist interpretation of the Second Commandment. Harriet Winslow, for instance, described the Jaffna home she shared with husband Miron as a whitewashed bungalow, devoid of decoration outside and in, and filled with simple, sturdy and unadorned furniture (Winslow 1835: 304). In the 1835 ACM-published Tamil tract ‘vikkiraka nikkirakam’, or ‘Idol Destruction’, Levi Spaulding laid out nine biblical prohibitions on the creation and veneration of *vikkirakam*, or idols, and *curūpam*, images or form. Among the scriptural admonishments for the use of images that Spaulding cited, he also provided several that specifically condemn the depiction of animals, such as Romans 1, verses 22–23: ‘puttiyillāta avarkaḷuṭṭaiya irutayam iruḷaṭaintu avar kaḷ taṅkaḷai ṇāṅikaḷeṇṭu collip paiṭtīyaṅkāṟarāki aḷiṉilla maṇiṭtar pāṟavaikaḷ ūṟvaṇaṆeṇṛu ivaiṅkaḷuṭṭaiya curūpaṁkā mārīṅkaḷ.’ [Despite claiming gold-like wisdom, at their core (irutayam) they were fools who replaced the immortal with images (curūpam) of human beings, birds, and reptiles.] (Spaulding 1835: 4-5, author’s translation).

The colourful and elaborate devotional practices of the various Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava, goddess-centric and Roman Catholic communities that the early American missionaries were surrounded by were impossible to ignore. Jaffna’s normative aesthetic world in the first half of the 19th century was dominated by these layers of religiosity, each with unique and florescent ways of honouring and showing piety to, among others, Śiva, Murukan, Viśnu, Māriyammaṅ, Jesus, Mary and Joseph. In addition
to ritually significant sounds (oral recitation, bells, stringed and woodwind instruments, drums) and tastes (fruit and sweets given as piracātam, or gifts to a deity), colours in the form of flowers would have been a key aspect of this devotion, symbolic gifts linking devotee to deity and vice versa (Huyler 2006: 38–39). Beyond the colourful arrangements surrounding religious festivals and daily devotion, depictions of flora, fauna and landscape likely would have also elicited a further, older, Tamil interpretive layer. A.K. Ramanujan wrote extensively about tinai, the poetic and landscape typography of the caṅkam period described in the Tamil grammar and poetic manual Tolkāppiyam. At once a division of space and emotion, ‘inner’ (akam) from ‘outer’ (puṟam), plant from animal and season from season, tinai invests layers of meaning upon the natural and geographic world (Ramanujan 1999: 199–204). Thus, birds like the peacock and seagull elicit distinct associations with the mountainous kuṟiñci and seashore neyṭal landscapes, respectively. Each landscape type is associated with corresponding identifiers, including mood (e.g. for the two above examples, lover’s union and separation), water (waterfall, sea) and people (hill tribes, fisherfolk) (Ramanujan 1999: 205). Only 17 years before the Mission’s establishment in 1816, British Ceylon Governor Frederick North had proclaimed freedom of conscience and worship, formally repealing Dutch prohibitions on non-Protestant religious activity, and thus allowing many of Jaffna’s communities the ability to publicly celebrate festivals and holidays with a new level of confidence (Ceylon 1853: 9). The riot of devotional colour in which the American missionaries found themselves surrounded was shocking to them and likely reiterated the need to maintain a strict line between their own devotional practices and their ‘heathen’ environment. This is what made the needlework produced by the five embroiderers subversive: the creation of the vibrant depictions of landscape and the natural world marked a distinct departure from the appropriate and sanctioned pedagogical, aesthetic and devotional behaviour of ACM mission students, epitomised by the sewing of plain white jackets.

If we can be confident that the samplers were not deemed appropriate for extensive participation by mission students, how can we explain the creation of the five in existence? As noted above, Betty Ring has demonstrated that sampler production and thematic arrangement were largely directed by schoolmistresses, and samplers cannot simply be indexed as the intellectual and aesthetic productions of the girls and young women who made them. So, who might that schoolmistress have been? Excepting the one anonymous sampler, four of the five record the names of their creators, as well as the dates and locations of creation: all were made
between 1845 and 1848 in Oodooville. Over the course of the 1840s, in addition to the five ‘native helpers’, Tamil ‘Native Preacher’ Nathanial Niles (Katiṛecaṉ), and a revolving set of male missionaries, four American women taught at Oodooville: Mary Ann Capell (later, Muzzy), Anna Mills Whittlesey (1820–1889?), Mary Christie Spaulding (1795–1875) and Eliza Agnew (1807–1883). Whereas the other three spent brief periods of the 1840s at Oodooville, Eliza Agnew spent the entire decade (as well as the subsequent 30 years) teaching at the boarding school, making her a strong candidate for the schoolmistress responsible for overseeing the Oodooville Group samplers.

Born in New York City in 1807, Eliza Agnew arrived in Jaffna in 1840 and immediately took up residence at Oodooville the same year. Unlike the preceding generation of American missionaries, Agnew was in her early thirties when she decided to become a missionary, and, in a departure from the norm, lived as a single female missionary her whole life. Agnew was also different in another way important for our story, as she was not raised among the Puritan-influenced social and religious strictures of the New England spaces from which the missionary movement issued. Instead, Agnew likely developed a devotional aesthetic sense from her family and the New York City church they attended: the Canal Street Presbyterian Church during the pastorate of Rev. Dr. Robert McCartee (Vinton n.d.: 159). Between 1840 and her death in 1883, Agnew became a key figure at Oodooville, first as a teacher and eventually as a long-standing principal.¹⁸ Over her forty years in Jaffna – during which she famously declined opportunities to return to America – Agnew gained almost mythic status among Jaffna’s Protestants, who honoured her with the title ‘the mother of a thousand daughters’ (Leitch and Leitch 1890: 118; Lockwood n.d.: 4).

The distinction between Congregationalist approaches to imagery and Agnew’s Presbyterian background may also help explain her participation: Presbyterians and their Congregationalist cousins have historically differed in their approaches to image and interpretation of the second of the Ten Commandments. Writing in the late 20th century, John M. Mulder has traced the use of symbolism and the growing willingness to embrace imagery in the American Presbyterian church from the 19th to the 20th century (Mulder 1985). And while no decorative needlework is known to have been produced by the other American Presbyterians who made their way to Jaffna as missionaries, Patricia V. Veasey has tracked the movement of Presbyterian needlework from Scotland and Ireland to America in the 18th century, suggesting the importance of embroidery in American Presbyterian
communities of the early 19th century as both a devotional and pedagogical activity (Veasey 2006). This is all to say that religious samplers likely had a variety of meaning within the ACM in the 1840s, and the samplers could have split opinions along denominational lines. Whereas Congregationalists were more apt to interpret colour, decoration and imagery as distraction from God (leaving little room for ‘Congregationalist art’), a Presbyterian like Agnew might well have considered the artistic and educative activity an appropriate form of Christian devotion.

4. FIVE SAMPLERS, FIVE STORIES

One of the great challenges of studying textiles in South Asia is their ephemeral quality. Textiles that have survived into the present are more often than not preserved in foreign museums and private collections, as both social and environmental reasons cause materials in South Asia to quickly deteriorate and/or be repurposed. More often than not, this means clothing beyond repair is transformed into something of utility, such as rags for cleaning, although the repurposing of Tamil textiles in Sri Lanka has a more tragic recent trajectory: from saris into sandbags (Shanaathanan 2011: 67).

The Oodooville Group samplers were never intended to serve an obvious utilitarian purpose, but were rather pedagogical instruments designed to demonstrate a cultural and social transformation, that is, a conversion. This helps explain the two paths by which they were preserved: three were transported to America, and two were kept as the property of Oodooville Girls Boarding School up to the present day. Silke Strickrodt has described the function of mission samplers from Sierra Leone travelling to the walls of British and Continental European mission funders, as souvenirs of their generosity and a record of civilisational and educational progress (Strickrodt 2010: 203–08). Three of the five samplers under discussion (by I. Pāṟupati, C. Muttu and the anonymous sampler) were transported to America, although the purpose of their movement is only known for one: according to previous owners of C. Muttu’s sampler, an old note on its back states it was presented to Margaret S. Perviance of Baltimore, Maryland, the surviving sister of Jane S. Perviance, in whose memory Muttu was named. How might the other two samplers have arrived? Were they sent as part of a fundraising process, or also as souvenirs to the students' sponsors? Could Anna Mills Whittlesey have taken one (or more?) with her back to the United States in 1848 as a souvenir of her time in Jaffna? These are all possible
explanations. The remaining two works, by C. Kitevan and V. Karpakam, never left Jaffna. They are currently held by Uduvil Girls’ College, where they hang above the college’s trophy cabinet in the office of Principal Patricia Suneetha Jebaratnam, having been given pride of place by former Principal Shiranee Mills.

Below is a description of the five Oodooville Group samplers, added to which is the extent of the biographical data available for each of the sampler makers.

**Sampler 1: Irāmu Pāṟupati (Eleanor Cuyler) (1827–1845)**
American Ceylon Mission, Oodooville Girls Boarding School, Jaffna, Ceylon, 1845

Wool floss on linen; Petit-point, cross, and running stitches; Schoolmistress: missionary Eliza Agnew

Irāmu Pāṟupati was born in or near the Jaffna village of Tellippalai in 1827. In 1835, the Second Presbyterian Church of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, dedicated $20 for a child named Eleanor Cuyler, a name which was assigned to Pāṟupati upon her arrival at Oodooville Girls Boarding School the same year. Subsequently, Pāṟupati was also financially supported by Miss A.L. Davis of Detroit, Michigan. Pāṟupati died of cholera in 1845, in one of many cyclical epidemics that struck Jaffna during the 19th century.

Pāṟupati’s sampler was created in 1845 when she was 18 years old. The sampler’s main subject is a Berlinwork floral arrangement of a pink rose with green leaves and pink rose buds to the right and left. The work is surrounded by a red, black, light blue and yellow spiral border. At the top of the sampler is a marking alphabet in Latin script in three lines,
with the letters alternating between purple, light blue, orange, pink, red, yellow, and both dark and olive green. The final four marking letters are surrounded by the English maxim: ‘Time is short/Eternity is long.’ Under the marking alphabet is a Tamil Bible verse from Psalms, chapter 37, verse 3: ‘parāparaṅai nambi naṉmai cey. ciṇ. 楮. 楮.’ Following the Tamil verse is an English translation: ‘Trust in the Lord and do good. Psalm 37. 3.’ The Bible verse is then followed by a verse in rhyme: ‘Let gratitude in acts of goodness flow/Our love to God, in love to man below.’ The sampler is worked in wool floss on linen, and is comprised of petit-point, running and cross stitches. Due to the date and location in which the work was created, we can infer missionary Eliza Agnew was the schoolmistress under whose guidance Pāṟupati created her sampler.

**Sampler 2: Ciṇṇattampi Kitevaṉ (Betsy Pratt) (1826–1845)**
American Ceylon Mission, Oodooville Girls Boarding School, Jaffna, Ceylon, 1845

Wool floss on linen; Petit-point, cross, and running stitches;  
Schoolmistress: missionary Eliza Agnew  

Ciṇṇattampi Kitevaṉ was born in or near the Jaffna village of Tellippalai in 1826. In 1837, $20 was donated by an individual or institution only known by the initials ‘W.C.R.’ of New York City, for a child named Betsy Pratt, a name which was assigned to Kitevaṉ upon her arrival at Oodooville Girls Boarding School the same year. Like I. Pāṟupati, C. Kitevaṉ also died of cholera in 1845.

C. Kitevaṉ’s sampler was created in 1845 when she was 19 years old. The sampler’s main subject is a doubled Berlinwork floral arrangement of a pink rose and a white lily surrounded by green leaves and pink rosebuds. The work is surrounded by a red, pink and white geometric border. At the
top of the sampler is a Tamil Bible verse from Proverbs, chapter 3, verse 5: ‘uṇputtiyūn mel nī cārāmar karttaraiye uṇmuḻu irutattālum nampu. cā ṃ. ṃ.’ Following the Tamil verse is an English translation: ‘Trust in the Lord with all thine heart, and lean not until thine/own understanding.’ The Bible verse is then followed by an English verse in rhyme: ‘The wicked turn aside/And walk in sinful ways;/But those who make the Lord their guide/Shall never go astray.’ Beneath the Berlinwork floral image is the following signature and date: ‘Betsey Pratt. Oodooville. Jaffna. Ceylon. Oct. A.D. 1845.’ The sampler is worked in wool floss on linen, and is comprised of petit-point, running and cross stitches. Due to the date and location in which the work was created, we can infer missionary Eliza Agnew was the schoolmistress under whose guidance C. Kitevaṉ created her sampler.

**Sampler 3: Viṉācittampi Kaṟpakam (Frances A. Hall) (b. 1828)**
American Ceylon Mission, Oodooville Girls Boarding School, Jaffna, Ceylon, 1846

Viṉācittampi Kaṟpakam was born in or near the village of Māṉippāy in 1828. In 1836, the American missionary Reverend Alanson C. Hall dedicated $20 for a child to be named in honour of his deceased wife, Frances A. Hall, and the name was assigned to Kaṟpakam upon her arrival at Oodooville Girls Boarding School the same year. On the 12th of March 1843, 15-year-old Kaṟpakam (then known as Frances), formally joined the ACM.
V. Karpakam’s sampler was created in 1846 when she was 18 years old. The sampler’s main subject is a Berlinwork design of a riverside mountain chalet surrounded by trees and mountains. The work is surrounded by a red, yellow and white geometric border. The primary verse is a Tamil Bible verse from the Book of Lamentations: ‘ karttareṉ paṅkāyirukkirāren meṉ gāthu mācol lum. ākaiyāl, avarukkuk kāttiruppeṉ.’ Following the Tamil verse is an English translation: ‘The Lord is my portion saith my soul, therefore will/I hope in him. Lam[entations]. iii. 24.’ The Bible verse is then followed in English by an expanded version of the verse in rhyme: ‘The Lord my portion is/In him will I confide/Since he is mine, and I am his,/What can I want beside.’ The rhyming verse is followed by a signature and date: ‘Frances A. Hall/Oodooville/Ceylon/1846.’ The sampler is worked in wool floss on linen, and is comprised of petit-point, running and cross stitches. Due to the date and location in which the work was created, we can infer missionary Eliza Agnew was the schoolmistress under whose guidance V. Karpakam created her sampler.

**Sampler 4: Cuppar Muttu (Jane S. Purviance) (b. 1830)**
American Ceylon Mission, Oodooville Girls Boarding School, Jaffna, Ceylon, 1848

Wool floss on linen; Petit-point, cross, and running stitches;
Schoolmistress: missionary Eliza Agnew
Private Collection. Image courtesy of Bill and Joyce Subjack, Neverbird Antiques.

Cuppar Muttu was born in or near Tellippaḻai in 1830. In 1835, the Female Mite Society of Baltimore, Maryland dedicated $20 for a child named Jane S. Purviance, a name which was assigned to C. Muttu upon her arrival at Oodooville Girls Boarding School the same year. On the
12th of March 1843, 13-year-old Muttu (then known as Jane), formally joined the ACM.

C. Muttu’s sampler was created in 1848 when she was 18 years old. The sampler’s main subject is a Berlinwork floral arrangement of red, pink, purple and white roses, poppies, daisies. The work is surrounded by a red, yellow, white and blue geometric border. The primary verse is a Tamil Bible verse from the Gospel of John, chapter 3, verse 3: ‘oruvaṉ maṟupatiyum pîrvāvittāṟ parâparaṅu/ṭaiya irācciyattaip pārkamāṭṭāṉ.’ Following the Tamil verse is an English translation: ‘Except a man be born again; he cannot/see the kingdom of God. John. 3. 3.’ The Bible verse is then followed in English with an expanded version of the verse in rhyme: ‘We must be born again/The Lord must change our hearts./Or we shall sink in endless pain./Where sinners have their part.’ The rhyming verse is followed by a signature and date: ‘Jane S. Perviance/Oodooville/Ceylon./1848.’ The sampler is worked in wool floss on linen, and is comprised of petit-point, running and cross stitches. Due to the date and location in which the work was created, we can infer missionary Eliza Agnew was the schoolmistress under whose guidance C. Muttu created her sampler.

Sampler 5: Anonymous sampler
Attributed to the American Ceylon Mission, Oodooville Girls College, Jaffna, Ceylon, c. 1848

Wool floss on linen; Petit-point, cross, and running stitches;
Schoolmistress: missionary Eliza Agnew
Private Collection. Image courtesy of Bill and Joyce Subjack, Neverbird Antiques.

Because this anonymous sampler was not signed or dated, personal details about its maker cannot be ascribed. The sampler’s main subject is
a Berlinwork depiction of two pheasants in red, pink, yellow and ochre, one standing, the other crouching. Dark, light and olive green flora are found at the base and to the rear of the two birds. The work is surrounded by a red, yellow, white and blue geometric border. The primary verse is a Tamil Bible verse from the Gospel of John, chapter 3, verse 3: ‘oruvaṉ maṟupaṭiyum pîrvāvittāṟ parāparaṇuṭaiya irāccīyattai pārkkamāṭṭāṉ.’ Following the Tamil verse is an English translation: ‘Except a man be born again; he cannot/see the kingdom of God.’ The Bible verse is then followed in English with an expanded version of the verse in rhyme: ‘We must be born again/The Lord must change our hearts,/Or we shall sink in endless pain,/Where sinners have their part.’ The two verses, the geometric border and the type of main subject match the verses and border found in above sampler number 4. The sampler is worked in wool floss on linen, and is comprised of petit-point, running and cross stitches. Based on its layout, Berlinwork central design, geometric border, as well as its matching Bible verse and rhyme with Cuppar Muttu’s 1848 sampler, we can infer the work was created circa 1848, by a student of Oodooville Girls Boarding School, under the guidance of missionary Eliza Agnew.

During the period of their construction (1845–48), the five Oodooville Group samplers were interpreted in at least three distinct ways depending on the viewer’s devotional aesthetic viewpoint. First, Eliza Agnew would likely have considered their production as a pedagogical exercise combining a mother-tongue commitment to Christianity and the domestic charms, or ‘accomplishments’, illustrative of a marriageable young women well-equipped for an American(-style) Christian domestic life. This acceptance of art as an appropriate venue for the articulation of devotion and domesticity was rooted in an alternative Presbyterian theological interpretation of image, a distinct turn from conservative post-Reformation Protestant iconophobism. This suspicion of image as a distraction from God was, however, the likely operating feature of the more strict Congregationalist interpretations of the needlework. No matter how valuable the marking alphabets and commitment to careful, detail-oriented hard work was for the production of a specific American Christian domesticity, and regardless of the importance of mother-tongue Christian devotion, the floral arrangements and depictions of landscape and the natural world were likely too close to the ‘corrupting’ influences outside the mission to abide. The work required to produce Viṉācittampi Kaṟpakam’s sampler of the mountain chalet or the anonymous sampler’s pair of pheasants each would have likely taken dozens of hours to complete. Such a significant amount of time spent on an object threatening to break one of the Ten Commandments was likely
something the more conservative Congregationalist missionaries could not have encouraged.

How might V. Karpakam, I. Pāṟupati, C. Kitevaṉ, C. Muttu and the unnamed embroiderer have read their needlework samplers? This question directly bears on the meaning of conversion and the limits of textiles to provide insights into the interiority of historical subjects, but it also provides a response to the larger question of agency: while the primary designs of the needleworks are largely the same, and we can therefore point to Eliza Agnew as the likely designer of the structures of the works, we may never know who made which choices about colour, verse and image. What we can say is that those choices were interpreted in specific artistic contexts, and that no matter how hermetically sealed the Mission attempted to keep Oodooville students from the influences of broader society and their families, this was an incomplete project. Oodooville’s history is filled with the Mission’s ongoing attempt to stamp out corrupting, ‘heathen’ activity; the use of tobacco and pākku is just one example. There is the distinct possibility that the natural world images the young women so carefully embroidered into their samplers had meanings that connected to older Tamil and local religious articulations of devotion. Selva J. Raj, among others, has written compellingly of what he calls the ‘enduring dialogical relationship of mutual interaction and transformation’ that ritual undergoes in the context of a South Asian confluence of Christian, Hindu and tribal religion (Raj 2002: 39-60). Is it possible that by creating images of flowers, I. Pāṟupati, C. Kitevaṉ and C. Muttu believed they were engaging in reciprocal gift giving with Jesus, just as Roman Catholics across South Asia do when draping statues with mālai, or flower garlands (Mosse 2012: 135)? Might V. Karpakam have been thinking of the tiṇai implications of depicting a mountain image, associative of the kuṟiṇci landscape type, and indicative of a mood of lover’s union (even, with Jesus)? Could the anonymous sampler maker have seen the pair of pheasants, thought they looked like jungle fowl, and decided their tiṇai association with domesticity seemed wholly appropriate (Ramanujan 1999: 205)? For all the remarkable proto-anthropological insights missionaries have made about South Asia, mission history is also brimming with examples of missionary miscomprehension. Is it possible that the samplers were performing the intended Christianising and domesticating work after all, albeit in an unrecognisable form? Even if Eliza Agnew was completely responsible for choosing every stitch, color and image, the resulting works had meaning to their makers that the Mission had limited ability to control.
5. CONCLUSION

Needlework samplers created across New England in the early decades of the 19th century were the standard by which thousands of young women’s domestic graces were judged. These pedagogical tools publicly demonstrated moral countenance, mathematical skills, industry and aesthetic sophistication. Despite mission reluctance towards ‘fancy’ needlework, evidenced in letters sent back to New England, it is likely that missionary Eliza Agnew oversaw the completion of at least five needlework samplers by her Tamil students between 1845 and 1848. While we have examples of needlework being employed in Christian mission stations around the world, evidence from Jaffna indicates that the creation of needlework samplers can be attributed both to Eliza Agnew’s efforts as well as the excitement and desire of the young Tamil mission students with which she worked. Based on the limited number of examples, the creation of samplers in Jaffna was likely not deemed a productive mission activity, i.e., one leading to the cultivation of the correct domestic traits in facilitation of conversion. That is to say, the samplers constitute stunningly beautiful outcomes of an interrupted mission pedagogy that provide insight into the limits of teaching practice as it was imported to and negotiated in South Asia.

By expressing the desire and engaging in the great time commitment necessary to produce these needlework samplers, the five Tamil women participated in the shaping of an interwoven aesthetic and pedagogical milieu. The Oodooville Group momentarily transformed the domesticating and industrious needle arts that the aesthetically staid Protestant missionaries deemed appropriate (recall the simple, white jackets) into decorative forms of elaborate and vivid – even, riotous – beauty, alternative methods of devotion likely deemed excessive, distracting and ultimately, ‘heathen.’ This is how V. Karpakam, I. Pārupati, C. Kitevaṇ, C. Muttu and one unnamed embroiderer, changed the world around them: their desire to be creating colourful works of beauty, works that engaged Tamil aesthetic patterns rooted in the natural world and images common to Śaiva and Vaishnava religiosities, shifted the devotional possibilities of the mission that would transform South Asian ways of being. These five young women initiated a dialogical process within the ACM that has been maintained over 170 years by women like Ammā Rani in North America and Margaret Kuṇapāckiam Arulānantam of Varaṇi, crafting artistic and devotional lives according to a broader set of parameters than the early missionaries likely could have conceived.
That being said, the aesthetic negotiation through needlework samplers that this essay has considered appears to have been halted soon after the last samplers were created in 1848. It is possible that the impact of the Oodooville Group was less through direct inspiration to others, and more the result of the mission’s increased oversight of the community’s devotional practices. Twentieth-century Jaffna Protestant needle arts are distinctly more austere than their 19th-century antecedents, often taking the form of crochet work in white yarn. More research is needed, however, before conclusions can be drawn about long-term aesthetic trajectories within the community. Nevertheless, the case of the Oodooville Group sampler makers demonstrates how, above and beyond the ideas and texts embedded in mission education, the very methods of missionary teaching were socially productive.

NOTES

1 From the home production of clothing for family use to the expansive industrial production of Southern Sri Lanka’s free-trade zones, needle and thread have been wound around Sri Lankan lives for generations. On the intersection of clothing and colonialism, see Wickramasinghe 2003. On the social worlds surrounding industrial textile manufacturing on the island, see Hewamanne 2008.

2 Throughout this essay, I refer to these four by their Tamil names, rather than the mission scholarship names they received upon entrance to Oodooville Girls Boarding School, which are listed on their needlework samplers: Frances A. Hall, Eleanor Cuyler, Betsey Pratt and Jane S. Perviance. This is as imperfect an approach as calling them solely by their American mission names and risking an erasure of their Tamil identities. In lieu of more evidence on what the five thought and felt about their mission names, I have settled on using the names by which their family networks knew them and that unmistakably mark them as Tamil.

3 A sustained consideration of this phenomenon, which Richard Fox Young and Subramaniam Jebanesan refer to as acculturation, following Kenneth Jones, can be found in Young and Jebanesan 1995: 35ff.

4 Of course, South Asia’s history of evangelism and religious encounter is far from solely a Christian activity; expansion, growth and movement are consistent aspects of all of South Asia’s religious traditions. Buddhist missionaries, for instance, arrived in Sri Lanka and the Jaffna Peninsula by the third century BCE (de Silva 1981: 9–12).

5 For an example from Tanjore (Tañcavûr), at the turn of the 19th century, see Hudson 2000: 148–153.
Hereafter, ‘Oodooville’ will refer to Oodooville Girls Boarding School.

This debate reached a head with the 1855 Anderson Deputation and its resulting closure of the ACM’s flagship educational institution, Batticotta Seminary. See Harris 2000.

According to Linda K. Kerber, women’s education in America expanded so significantly between 1790 and 1830 that the gap in literacy between American men and women was closed. See Kerber 1980: 193.

See, for instance, EAP835/C1/F5: 16.

Literacy was, especially for Protestant communities as they expanded in South Asia, an important aspect of identity extending back to the Reformation and the separation of ‘protesting’ communities from the Roman Catholic Church. An important part of this split was over the desire of these breakaway communities to read and interpret scripture in a vernacular mother tongue. This remained a strong motivating force among Protestant missionaries in South Asia in the 18th and 19th centuries and helps explain why so much energy was put into South Asian vernacular translation efforts. In other words, these Protestant missionaries believed that the people they sought to convert in South Asia should have access to divinity through their own mother tongue, not through an esoteric sacred language, and certainly not through one interpreted by a clerical class. For more on this, see Frykenberg 2008: 149–50.

Not coincidentally, a donation from the Ladies Association of Worcester, Massachusetts was given in 1816 to the parent organisation of the American Ceylon Mission, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, in the name of Reverend Charles Augustus Goodrich. This donation was turned into an ACM scholarship in 1823, and a young Tamil student at Batticotta Seminary – Oodooville Girls Boarding School’s brother school – was given the scholarship name (ABCFM 1838: 5). Reverend C.A. Goodrich, aside from being a well-known preacher and author, was also the brother of Samuel Griswold Goodrich, the well-known early childhood author of, among other works, Peter Parley’s Method of Telling About Geography to Children (1830), a geography textbook in use at Oodooville Girls Boarding School in the 1840s.

Harriet Winslow’s Memoir (1835) notes the story of two young children, one named Sathoopully, the other likely being her sister, Cînṉāci. Later, in the First Report of the Female Boarding School at Varany, Jaffña (1843: 5), Cînṉāci (identified by her scholarship name, Betsey Pomeroy) is referred to as one of these two, having been among the first Tamils to accept food on the Oodooville mission premises.

For a genealogy of this affiliation and the strategy of a mission-Veḷḷāḷar alliance, see Nāki’s death: Breaking caste and negotiating accommodation in the American Ceylon Mission, Chapter 3 of my forthcoming doctoral dissertation, Balmforth 2019.
14 This resistance was not limited to Jaffna. A similar preference for sewing and needlework skills over literacy was exhibited by parents of female students boarding with missionaries in the London Missionary Society mission at Nagercoil in the 1820s. See Kooiman 1989: 90.

15 There is not the space needed to adequately discuss the final needlework, which was produced in 1855 and exhibits a dramatically restrained simplicity, without any of the decorative flourishes indicative of the five samplers considered here. It is clear this work was the product of an alternative missionary-student collaboration, with a different aesthetic sensibility.

16 For an analysis of the development of Protestant theology as it relates to images and iconoclasm, see Dyrness 2004.

17 This was followed in 1806 by Thomas Maitland’s removal of restrictions on Roman Catholicism. de Silva 1981: 250.

18 Her position as teacher was not without controversy. In 1848, following a suggestion she be put in charge of Oodooville, the school’s oversight committee (Henry R. Hoisington and J.C. Smith) recommended against the proposal. They justified this recommendation by noting that she was not married and did not have a command of Tamil.

19 Art historians have explored the boundaries of this category and found that rare examples do exist of art that fits into a clear Congregationalist theology of image. One of the most thorough examples can be found in Congregationalist tombstone decoration. See Ludwig 1999. It is worth noting, however, that the tombs of the first generations of American missionaries to die in Jaffna do not fit into an ornate decorative aesthetic lineage such as Ludwig describes, but rather take their inspiration from the austere, whitewashed, geometric patterns of Congregationalist churches and New England meeting houses.

20 Thanks to Bill and Joyce Subjack of Neverbird Antiques for this and other details relating to the significance of samplers in America’s – and Ceylon’s – past.

REFERENCES

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