



## Keerimalai, Unwalled: Poetic Ethnography and Sacred Geography in Northern Sri Lanka

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### Abstract

This paper presents “Keerimalai, Unwalled” as a poetic ethnography that documents the layered cultural, mythological, and ritual significance of Keerimalai, a sacred site in northern Sri Lanka. Composed in strict iambic pentameter and heroic couplets, the poem blends personal testimony, fieldwork observation, and Saivite cosmology to explore themes of healing, caste rupture, and gendered myth. Drawing on Tamil oral tradition and canonical texts such as the Suta Samhita and Dhakshina Kailaya Puranam, the poem functions as epistemological evidence—where verse becomes a vessel for cultural memory and ritual cadence. The study contributes to postwar and postcolonial ethnography by reclaiming Tamil ritual spaces and voices marginalized by conflict, caste, and institutional neglect. It affirms that poetry, when grounded in lived experience and formal discipline, can serve as a legitimate scholarly method bridging art and analysis.

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### 1. Introduction

Poetic ethnography, as articulated by scholars such as Dwight Conquergood and Renato Rosaldo, foregrounds the expressive, affective, and performative dimensions of cultural knowledge. Conquergood emphasized the importance of embodied and dialogic research, arguing that “critical ethnography must be grounded in the moral and aesthetic dimensions of human experience.” Rosaldo, in *Culture and Truth*, advocated for emotionally resonant forms of ethnographic writing, asserting that poetry can convey the “deep subjectivity” often lost in academic prose. Building on these foundations, this study treats “Keerimalai, Unwalled” as poetic ethnography—where verse functions not as embellishment but as epistemological evidence. What is unique in this approach is the integration of formal metrical discipline with mythic geography and ritual testimony. Unlike broader poetic ethnographies that rely on free verse or prose-poetry to evoke affect, this work employs strict iambic pentameter and heroic couplets to mirror the cadence of chant and the structure of sacred vow. The poem is not only emotionally resonant—it is ritually precise. Furthermore, it engages directly with Tamil Saivite cosmology, invoking canonical texts (Suta Samhita, Dhakshina Kailaya Puranam) and gendered myth (Maruthapuraveehavalli) to document a specific pilgrimage site. This fusion of scriptural invocation, caste critique, and post-war ritual transformation within a tightly structured poetic form distinguishes this work from prior studies and positions it as both creative corpus and scholarly method.

This poem emerges from sustained fieldwork in northern Sri Lanka, where direct engagement with local pilgrims, temple caretakers, and oral historians at Keerimalai shaped its imagery and emotional texture. Observations of ritual bathing and chantings, and seasonal offerings—especially during post-war festivals—provided ethnographic grounding for the poem’s sensory details, such as mango blossoms, temple bells, and coastal breeze. The testimony of women who invoked Maruthapuraveehavalli’s legend in healing rites deepened the gendered lens of the poem, while conversations with Saivite elders illuminated the site’s scriptural lineage. These lived encounters inform the poem’s layered voice, allowing verse to carry both personal witness and communal memory.

Keerimalai, located on the northern coast of Sri Lanka near Kankesanthurai, is a site of profound spiritual, historical, and cultural resonance. Revered for its mineral-rich springs and proximity to the ancient Naguleswaram temple—one of the island's five Iswarams dedicated to Lord Shiva—Keerimalai has long served as a center of Saivite pilgrimage. Its name, derived from the Tamil words Keeri (mongoose) and Malai (hill), is linked to the legend of sage Nagula Muni, who is said to have been cured of his disfigurement by bathing in its sacred waters. This mythic association with healing and transformation has made Keerimalai a liminal space where ritual, ecology, and memory converge.

Historically, Keerimalai is referenced in both the Suta Samhita (a section of the Skanda Purana) and the Dhakshina Kailaya Puranam, affirming its status as a southern counterpart to Mount Kailash and a vital node in the Saivite cosmological map. These texts position Keerimalai not only as a site of physical purification but as a spiritual threshold—where caste, gender, and temporal boundaries dissolve in the act of pilgrimage. The springs have been frequented by sages, royals, and commoners alike, including the Pandyan princess Maruthapuraveehavalli, whose legend of shame and redemption through Keerimalai's waters continues to echo in local oral traditions.

In post-war Sri Lanka, Keerimalai has re-emerged as a symbol of reconciliation and ritual openness. Once veiled in caste-based restrictions and elite rites, the site now invites a broader spectrum of pilgrims, including diasporic Tamils and marginalized communities seeking healing and ancestral connection. This transformation—from exclusivity to accessibility—is central to the poem “Keerimalai, Unwalled”, which documents the site's layered significance through strict iambic pentameter and heroic couplets.

Unlike previous works that explore botanical symbolism and diasporic longing <sup>[2]</sup>, allegorical verse as a method of poetic ethnography <sup>[3]</sup>, or caste memory through floral metaphors and fieldwork among Rodiya communities <sup>[4]</sup>, this paper foregrounds sacred geography and mythic healing as its central axis.

Research <sup>[2]</sup> focused on diasporic memory and botanical personification, using flora as metaphors for displacement and resilience. Research <sup>[3]</sup> developed a methodological framework for poetic ethnography through allegorical layering, emphasizing petals and chantings as epistemic tools. Research <sup>[4]</sup> documented caste marginalization through fieldwork and poetic memory, particularly among Rodiya lives and ritual landscapes.

In contrast, “Keerimalai, Unwalled” centers on a specific pilgrimage site and its transformation across myth, caste, and time. It offers a gendered lens through the legend of Maruthapuraveehavalli, invokes canonical Saivite texts, and uses formal meter to elevate ritual testimony. Rather than treating the poem as literary ornament, this paper positions it as poetic ethnography—a creative corpus that functions as epistemological evidence. Through lyrical form, the poem captures the emotional, mythic, and ritual dimensions of Keerimalai, offering a scholarly method that bridges art and analysis. It affirms that poetry, when grounded in fieldwork and cultural memory, can serve as a legitimate mode of inquiry into sacred geography, social transformation, and historical testimony.

## 2. Methodology and Textual Analysis: Poetic Corpus as Ethnographic Evidence

Departing from conventional literary analysis, this study treats “Keerimalai, Unwalled” as a primary ethnographic artifact. The poem is composed in strict iambic pentameter and heroic couplets, positioning it within a formal literary tradition that mirrors ritual cadence and sacred vow. This metrical discipline is not ornamental—it is epistemological. The poem's structure echoes the rhythm of chant, the discipline of pilgrimage, and the architecture of sacred space. Thematically, the poem engages with fieldwork, folklore, and ritual practice, rendering cultural memory and mythic geography through verse. It does not comment on culture from a distance—it is culture, embodied and transmitted through poetic form. This approach affirms that poetry, when grounded in lived experience and oral tradition, can serve as a legitimate scholarly method.

Unlike prior works that explore botanical symbolism and diasporic longing <sup>[2]</sup>, allegorical layering as a methodological tool <sup>[3]</sup>, or caste memory through floral metaphors and fieldwork among Rodiya communities <sup>[4]</sup>, this study centers on sacred geography and ritual transformation.

Research <sup>[2]</sup> focused on diasporic memory and ecological metaphor, using flora to evoke displacement and resilience, but did not engage with pilgrimage or scriptural geography.

Research <sup>[3]</sup> articulated poetic ethnography through allegorical layering—petals, promises, and chantings—as epistemic tools, but did not anchor its corpus in a historically sacred site. Research <sup>[4]</sup> documented caste marginalization through fieldwork and poetic memory, particularly among Rodiya lives, emphasizing terrestrial ethnography over mythic invocation.

In contrast, “Keerimalai, Unwalled” is rooted in a specific pilgrimage site—Keerimalai—and engages directly with Saivite scripture (Suta Samhita, Dhakshina Kailaya Puranam), gendered myth (Maruthapuraveehavalli), and post-war ritual openness. It offers a layered critique of caste and institutional exclusion while affirming healing and grace through poetic testimony.

## 3. Textual Analysis

### 3.1. Ritual and Openness

The following is the poem “Keerimalai, Unwalled” in figure 1

#### Poem:

Once veiled in rites, now open to the day,  
Its stone and sea invite all paths to stay.  
No border holds the grace that softly flows—  
Keerimalai walks where pilgrim longing goes.

Though shame once veiled Maruthapuravee's face,  
The springs of Keerimalai restored her grace.  
From Suta's scrolls to Dhakshina's deep lore,  
Keerimalai stood where Saivites once swore.

The sages bathed where healing springs arise,  
And time still sleeps beneath the coastal skies.  
The breeze recalls what ancient voices sang,  
As temple bells through mango branches rang.

Where moonlight kissed the springs with silver flame,  
And Shiva's breath once stirred the coastal frame.  
From Pandyan courts to Jaffna's storied line,  
The path to Keerimalai marked the spine.

Fig 1. Poem ‘Keerimalai, Unwalled’ cited in <sup>[1]</sup>

These opening lines mark a transition from exclusivity to accessibility, reflecting post-war shifts in caste and pilgrimage dynamics. The metaphor of “unwalled” sanctity critiques institutional gatekeeping and affirms grace as unbounded.

### 3.2. Gendered Healing and Mythic Memory

This couplet references the Pandyan princess Maruthapuraveehavalli, whose transformation through Keerimalai’s waters symbolizes feminine agency and caste transcendence. Her legend becomes a case study in embodied myth and ritual reclamation. For our enthusiastic readers, we include Keerimalai’s sacred pond as it appeared during the time of this research in Figure 2, its still waters reflecting both ritual memory and the quiet resilience of the northern coast.

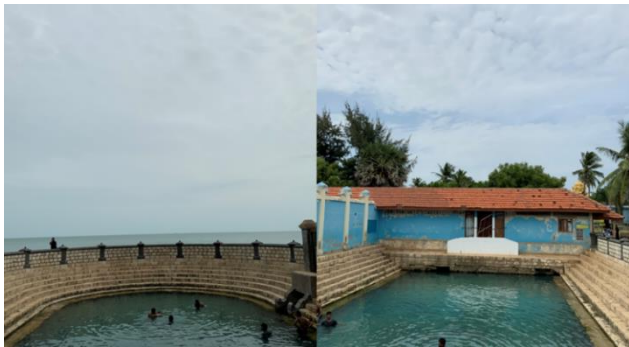


Fig 2: Keerimalai’s pond

### 3.3. Scriptural Anchoring

*From Suta’s scrolls to Dhakshina’s deep lore,  
Keerimalai stood where Saivites once swore.*

By invoking canonical texts, the poem situates Keerimalai within a broader Saivite cosmology, affirming its status as a sacred geography with historical continuity.

*Temporal Suspension and Ecological Memory  
The sages bathed where healing springs arise,  
And time still sleeps beneath the coastal skies.  
The breeze recalls what ancient voices sang,  
As temple bells through mango branches rang.*

These lines evoke Keerimalai as a liminal space where time, ritual, and nature converge. The imagery of mango blossoms and temple bells blends ecological detail with spiritual resonance, offering a sensory archive of ancestral devotion

### 4. Discussion: Sacred Geography, Saivite Cosmology, and Poetic Ethnography

“Keerimalai, Unwalled” occupies a unique position within the evolving landscape of poetic ethnography. It documents not only a sacred site but a cosmological worldview—one in which healing, myth, and memory converge through ritual and verse. The poem’s invocation of Suta Samhita and Dhakshina Kailaya Puranam situates Keerimalai within the Tamil Saivite tradition, affirming its status as a southern axis of sacred geography. In Saivite cosmology, pilgrimage is not merely movement through space—it is a metaphysical journey through layers of karma, caste, and cosmic order. By rendering this journey in heroic couplets, the poem mirrors the structure of vow and chant, aligning poetic form with ritual cadence.

The reference to Maruthapuraveehavalli’s legend deepens this cosmological frame. Her transformation through Keerimalai’s springs is not only a tale of personal redemption but a symbolic rupture in caste and gender hierarchies. In Tamil Saivism, water is both purifier and revealer—a medium through which hidden truths emerge and social boundaries dissolve. The poem’s line “The springs of Keerimalai restored her grace” becomes a metrical enactment of this theological principle, where grace flows beyond institutional constraint.

This work also expands your broader poetic ethnographic framework by shifting focus from botanical allegory and diasporic longing<sup>[2]</sup> to mythic geography and ritual reclamation. While “Rooted Voices” explored flora as metaphors for displacement, and “Petals, Promises, and Chantings”<sup>[3]</sup> articulated allegorical layering as a method, “Keerimalai, Unwalled” grounds its testimony in a historically sacred site. It moves from metaphor to myth, from ecological symbol to scriptural invocation.

Moreover, unlike “Where the Crossandra Blooms”<sup>[4]</sup>, which documented caste memory through terrestrial fieldwork among Rodiya communities, this poem engages with cosmic fieldwork—a mapping of spiritual terrain through verse. It does not merely observe ritual; it performs it. The poem becomes a pilgrimage in itself, walking through Keerimalai’s springs, stones, and skies with metrical precision and emotional depth.

The final stanza’s invocation of moonlight, Shiva’s breath, and dynastic lineage (“From Pandyan courts to Jaffna’s storied line”) affirms the site’s historical continuity and mythic scale. It links personal healing to ancestral vow, positioning Keerimalai as both a physical location and a metaphysical threshold.

In this way, “Keerimalai, Unwalled” exemplifies how poetic ethnography can document sacred geography, critique social exclusion, and transmit cultural memory. It affirms that verse—when shaped by fieldwork, folklore, and formal discipline—can serve as a legitimate scholarly method. The poem is not a reflection of ritual; it is ritual, rendered in meter and myth.

This work contributes to postwar ethnography by reclaiming Tamil ritual spaces and voices that have been historically marginalized by war, caste hierarchies, and institutional neglect. In the aftermath of Sri Lanka’s civil conflict, sites like Keerimalai have undergone symbolic and social transformation—from restricted sanctuaries to open spaces of healing and reconciliation. By documenting this shift through poetic form, the study offers a counter-narrative to dominant postwar discourses that often overlook vernacular spirituality and gendered myth. The poem foregrounds voices—especially women’s ritual memory and Saivite oral tradition—that are rarely centered in formal ethnographic accounts, affirming that verse can serve as a restorative archive for communities fractured by violence and exclusion. This study also contributes to postcolonial ethnography by engaging with the politics of ritual, memory, and marginality in a Tamil Saivite context. Talal Asad’s critique of secular assumptions in anthropological writing underscores the need to treat ritual not as symbolic residue but as a living epistemology. Veena Das, in her work on violence and everyday life, emphasizes how suffering and recovery are inscribed in intimate acts and local idioms. “Keerimalai, Unwalled” responds to these calls by rendering ritual healing, caste rupture, and gendered myth through poetic form—

where verse becomes a site of embodied memory and cultural reclamation. By documenting Keerimalai's transformation in the wake of war and exclusion, the poem affirms that sacred geography and vernacular spirituality are central to understanding postcolonial resilience.

## 5. Conclusion

"Keerimalai, Unwalled" stands as a testament to the power of poetic ethnography to document sacred geography, ritual transformation, and cultural memory. Through strict iambic pentameter and heroic couplets, the poem enacts a rhythmic pilgrimage across myth, caste, and time—invoking Saivite cosmology while critiquing institutional exclusion. It does not merely describe Keerimalai; it performs it, rendering the site's healing springs, ancestral vows, and ecological textures into metrical testimony.

This work expands the boundaries of your poetic ethnographic framework by shifting from botanical allegory<sup>[2]</sup> and layered symbolism<sup>[3]</sup> to a focused engagement with mythic geography and scriptural invocation. Unlike caste-centered terrestrial fieldwork in "Where the Crossandra Blooms"<sup>[4]</sup>, this poem maps a cosmological terrain, where ritual and verse converge to reclaim dignity and grace.

By treating the poem as a primary ethnographic artifact, this study affirms that creative corpus can serve as epistemological evidence. It challenges the binary between art and analysis, proposing that poetry—when grounded in fieldwork, folklore, and formal discipline—offers a legitimate scholarly method. "Keerimalai, Unwalled" is not commentary on culture; it is culture, rendered in verse. It is both lament and celebration, both archive and invocation—a lyrical offering to the springs that continue to heal, remember, and resist.

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