

Sri Lanka: Gnanamuttu Kusumawathi: Leader of the Panama Pattuwa Land Struggle

Wednesday 4 January 2023, by [GUNAWARDANA Samanthi J.](#), [PADMASIRI Buddhima](#) (Date first published: 30 December 2022).

Gnanamuttu Kusumawathi, known as Kusuma akka, passed away five years ago. We remember her rebellious spirit and strength with admiration and gratitude. Kusuma akka was a leader in the Panama Pattuwa (Pattuwa refers to an identified area of land in Sinhala) land struggle from August 2010 until the day she died of a heart attack on December 23, 2017. We reflect on her contribution and leadership in the land struggle and on where it is at present, especially in light of the [vibrant social movements that emerged in 2022](#). Her contribution marks a long unrecognized tradition of leadership among rural women in Sri Lanka.

Kusuma akka, like her parents, husband and children, was born in Panama in 1973, a coastal town in Eastern Sri Lanka. Before the emergence of the prominent land struggle [the area was understood through the lens of an era-defining separatist war](#) between the LTTE and the armed forces. Panama was an [intermediate area](#) in the landscape of contested territory where [Tamil and Sinhala communities had a long history of intermarriage, kinship](#) and ritual. Caste was the major source of social division rather than ethnicity. Panama had religious and spiritual significance. The two ethnic communities were connected through cross religious ritual and worship involving the god Murugan (Tamil Hindu) known as Kataragama deiyo (Sinhalese) and [Hindu goddess Pattini \(Kannagi in Tamil\) and god Kōvalan](#). Pattini in particular is worshiped in Panama across all social categories and is seen as protecting the villages and giving its people strength.

We first visited Panama in January 2015. We were conducting fieldwork to understand [women's participation in agriculture](#). Following a town hall style meeting and general discussion with the women in the community, we invited participants to write their contact details on a piece of paper if they consented to participate in an individual interview. There was hesitation among the group and no one made a move. Then a woman who had been standing outside the building walked in and wordlessly wrote her name and address and left. After that, the hesitation in the bigger group disappeared and others started to sign up. The woman who came in from outside was Kusuma akka. Thus, it was as a leader that we first got to know her.

As our interviews progressed that month, we got to know the significance of land to the women in Panama. Like others, for Kusuma akka and her family, access to land gave her economic security. Before the war, the family had cultivated rice as day laborers. The war interrupted this cultivation as the LTTE occupied parts of the area. Noting that in their community, land was given to daughters not sons (an anomaly in most parts of Sri Lanka), she received residential land from her parents. They cultivated in the uninhabited land near the beach where she planted chili, peanuts, black eyed peas and green gram; this activity provided a sustainable income. With time some received deeds and permits to these lands while others had cultivated for generations.

However, post war, like many others in that area, Kusuma akka [lost her land in 2010](#) due to state

intervention and acquisition for the development of the tourism industry. From that day, villagers mobilized and initiated a wide ranging struggle fighting to have their land returned. Kusuma akka and others said that they were descendants of the rebels of the [Uva Wellasa rebellion against the British in 1817-1818](#) who fled Uva Wellasa following their defeat. They evoked this spirit when portraying their resilience in their land struggle against the far reaching power of the state.

From the beginning, [women in Panama stepped into leadership roles in the land rights movement as they were directly affected](#), either because the dispossessed land was inherited by them from their family, and/or it was their cultivation land which women used mainly for subsistence agriculture. The land had more than utilitarian value. Their connection included a sense of [pride attached to cultivation](#) as farmers and they had respect for the land as a source of sustenance and income.

In the village, Kusuma akka was the last person we visited and interviewed in her home in 2015. Unexpectedly but fortunately, her cousin joined her. They recalled their childhood, how they played and helped their parents with their cultivation; of the land dispossession and details of their activism, how they never gave into the intimidation by the state, how the war changed their lives and livelihoods and how they lived through the war. She highlighted the importance of this land to her. It was not just for cultivation; it's also the sense of belonging, the memories they shared and their connection to the land. She had campaigned for political change in the local council election as a means to find a solution to their land issue. Her engagement with larger women's rights activism connected through grassroots level organizations.

As we began to wrap up the interview, Kusuma and her cousin proposed that we visited the land that they had lost. We asked how we could do that since the land was cordoned off and guarded by the military. "There is a way we can go in through the other side. It's our land! We can go whenever we want. We are not scared," they said. We tried to access the land, with one of us explaining we were tourists looking for a beautiful view but the military guard waved us away. We were struck by Kusuma's unwavering conviction about her entitlement.

We met her a few times afterwards during visits and we kept in touch via phone calls. Our discussions helped us to better understand the village's kinship structures and connections and how their activism was also connected to these ties. Kusuma akka, with her seniority in the village and kinship ties, was one crucial person connecting several activists engaged in the struggle.

There have been government promises to return access to the land as well as instances where the government and authorities went back on their pledges. Kusuma akka was one of the first to raise her voice and join the protest with members of the [Organization for the Protection of Panama Pattuwa](#) (OPPP), the central organization mobilizing the community to reclaim for their land. She went to the [Venice International Tribunal Against Eviction in 2017](#) along with P. Somasiri, the leader of the OPPP, where they presented their submission to the Tribunal on the land dispossession case, one of the five cases presented at the tribunal.

When we visited Panama in December 2017, Kusuma akka and others had accessed [their land in Ragamwela in 2016](#) and many had started to cultivate it. She was caring for her vegetables, which she had started growing again. She had a big smile as she spoke with us one last time, rejoicing that she was back on her land. This was the last time we saw her.

The struggle is ongoing, as identified by the members of the OPPP working to [reclaim the land in Sasthrawela](#) and Ulpassa. The 2019 Easter attacks, the Covid-19 pandemic and the recent economic crisis have adversely impacted the lives and the livelihoods of the Panama villagers. The changes in the government in 2015, 2020 and 2022 and policy implementation and positions on granting land to the people have also played a role in the fluctuating levels of activism.

When more significant issues are at play they overshadow the struggles led by socially subordinate groups such as the peasantry and women as is the case with the Panama land issue, the movements have to re-strategize to brave the circumstances and face new challenges as they arise. In the current scenario, the absence of Kusuma akka is very much felt. To paraphrase her own words, whether it was night or day, she was available to do what was needed to win back their land.

BUDDHIMA PADMASIRI
SAMANTHI J. GUNAWARDANA

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