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Preface

As we take the journal each year to its new heights, this year we have been fortunate to have Prof William Harman who became its guest editor and introduced a theme that remains very popular among South Asian scholars as well as general readers. The theme: 'Fierce Goddesses of South Asia' is looked at from historical, sociological, psychological, feminist and ritual perspectives by very enthusiastic and well qualified scholars in the field. As the editor-in-chief I thank all of them for their valuable perspectives on the theme. I wish to particularly thank Prof Harman for his hard work and for critically editing of the papers presented here. All the papers have been externally peer reviewed by specialists in the field and I thank them all for their critical and helpful comments that enabled authors to improve their work. I hope that this volume offers both scholars and students of South Asia with new insights into the phenomenon of Goddess worship. All views expressed in these papers belong entirely to their authors and the editorial team is not responsible for them. Finally, this year we have been joined by two new scholars to expand the local editorial board. They are—Prof. Anand Singh (Anthropology) and Prof. Goolam Vahed (History), both from the University of KwaZulu Natal, South Africa. I thank them for joining us and look forward to their contributions in future.

Editor-in-Chief

Prof. P. Pratap Kumar
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Nidān: International Journal for the Study of Hinduism, Vol. 24, December 2012, pp. i-iii.

Introduction

Fierce Goddesses of South Asia

William Harman

The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

Rudolf Otto's classic study, *The Idea of the Holy*,[1] was one of the earliest modern attempts to discuss western notions of the divine in the context of experiences that involve fearful, frightening, and dangerous supernatural encounters. Alas, his insights have remained – in both the best and the worst sense of the term – academic. Western theology's preoccupation with a consistent monotheism has generally preferred not to engage the problem of theodicy by talking about frightening or frightful deities. In the West, a deity may occasionally come across as fierce, but cannot be fierce essentially. If the divine is singular, the divine must be good. Evil, then, comes not from any divine source. It emerges from human waywardness and disobedience.

Not so in the polytheistic context of South Asia. Deities can take a variety of forms, and they do: male and female, fierce and sublime, even jealous and irrelevant. Why so many female deities have been associated with the horrifying and the fierce is not an issue that will be quickly or easily dispensed here. In planning this series of essays, we did not suggest that anyone ask the "Why-would-females-be fierce?" question. But the question seems worth posing as we read these essays.

Two articles, both fascinating and masterfully done, provide clues as to why we have the fierce and the female so closely associated, those by Barbara Schuler and by Vivienne Knodos. Schuler suggests that the ominously and sensuously violent rituals associated with Icakkiyamman plunge participants into a dangerous world where domestic chaos lurks but where eventually order, particularly domestic order over which the female takes classic responsibility, emerges. Such a world, and such concerns, are basically feminine, concerned as they are with fertility, marital relationships and responsibilities

Kondos' description of the *puja* exercises associated with Guhyeswari, a form of Kali, show how devotees must sometimes live and celebrate their lives in light of everyday messiness and its slimy, unpredictable chaos, realities associated with *prakriti,* the feminine, matter, that which is created and all-too-real. In Samkhya philosophy *prakriti*

[1] Trans. By John W. Harvey, New York: Oxford University Press, 1923.

is contrasted with purusha, which literally means "male." *Purusha* is the un-entangled, pure, unconditioned and unstructured consciousness, without any other messy attributes found in matter. To ask a man if he has a "samsara" is to ask if he has an emotional entanglement in this rebirth that ties and binds him to life's messiness: does he have a woman, usually a spouse, who gives this round of constant rebirth weight, texture, and contour, a distinctive identity?

Two of our articles feature the widespread Tamil goddess Mariyamman. Though history shows that the goddess has assumed many distinctive changes in identity and form, the earlier forms we can isolate recapitulate basic gender issues in Indian society: the extraordinary dependence women experience in relation to men, to the demands of marriage, and to social roles. Mythic cycles recounting Mariyamman's origins dwell on such conundrums for women. Solutions available to the goddess, and to those women for whom she is a crucial role model, include declaring a fierce gendered independence through religious ritual, even when it means posing a threat to male order. About this strategy Perundevi Srinivasan writes persuasively. Or the goddess can relocate, appearing in middle-class places like Singapore or Detroit, finding herself in a context where the limits and desperations of rural village life no longer define her limits. She can appear even in the form of a kind and generous man whose role is to eliminate the suffering of the less fortunate. Such a strategy is described in my article.

Diane Mines and Elaine Craddock treat two separate goddesses with decidedly ferocious reputations. Malaiyammal, a goddess whose history commemorates violent death and loss, is nurtured and celebrated by the Valaiyar community, but she is attached to a particular locale, the dry-forest region which is always wilderness, uncontrolled, and a place of death. That goddesses tend to define place, to represent it, is nothing new. "Mother earth," reverberates with the emotional refrain of the feminine marker of space. That a goddess embodies violence and death is not new. That her history of violence brings into question how such a goddess literally acts as an historical figure to mediate past and present – that is the bigger problem this essay chooses to disassemble. In the end, here is a goddess who mediates past and present, order and violence, wilderness and habitable lands. And mediation must be the work of goddesses, as it is for Indian women. The woman, when she marries, becomes the horizontal link between two vertically parallel male lineages. Craddock's Ankalaparamecuvari has her own history of past violence and ferocity. But the goddess also serves to link and to integrate the trans-gendered *tirunangais* into community devotional patterns that incorporate healing. Gods tend to draw lines, mark off barriers, confirm hierarchies, and to legitimate traditional control of social and religious space.

Their ritual work often involves exclusion. Goddesses, on the other hand, fierce or not, step across social and psychic barriers, meeting their devotees where they are, and often empowering them by bestowing powers earned ritually and charismatically, rather than through concerns for lineage and formal training. And so it is for women: religious authority, when they have it, comes by virtue of spontaneous acclaim and transforming experiences translated into powerful relationships forged with transcendent figures.

Finally, Xenia Zeiler shows us that a variety of fierce goddesses has long been acknowledged in South Asian history, indeed since the Rig Veda. Her detailed essay offers careful observations about how to recognize these goddesses iconographically, and in particular those associated with culturally designated evil and auspiciousness. The symbols of the crow and the winnowing fan reappear consistently to mark what Zeiler almost suggests is a traditional consortium, if you will, of evil and inauspicious goddesses. Her essay provides valuable perspective: fierce goddesses we have always had in South Asian traditions. They are not likely to go away.

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Loss and Recognition: the Historical Force of a Goddess[1]

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Abstract

This paper theorizes the historical force of the goddess Malaiayammal who resides in a common roadside shrine several kilometers north of Madurai city in Tamilnadu, India. Malaiyammal is a fierce emanation of past events. She is a material presence that shocks or surprises as this past breaks into the present. Each recognition of her power is a recognition of the violence of the past, and each deadly road accident attributed to her power is a reminder of that violence's persistence over time. In other words this fierce goddess, as I reckon others do too, carries a particular historical force.

Keywords: Malaiyammal, Valaiyar, Alagar, indexicality, indexical dynamism

Introduction

There is nothing new in this: a roadside shrine in south India. And there is nothing very new in the shrine's history: young men were killed and their chaste wives jumped onto the funeral pyre and burned. Nor is it surprising that these deaths resulted in a dangerous apotheosis: a fierce goddess, Malaiyammal, who to this day causes all sorts of trouble to passersby, most notably deadly wrecks on the road she gazes across. Commonly, it is precisely violent death and the loss of person and place that become condensed in the goddesses we call fierce goddesses.[2] The power or force of deities now, in other words, arises out of the energy of loss and suffering. Shulman writes that such deities that emerge from violence may have counter-structural, transformative qualities (1989:47-48, 60-61; see also Trawick 1991). In previous writing (Mines 2005) I have made use of that observation and argued that worshippers may use their relation to fierce deities to create dignity while subverting dominant social orders. Here I look at another disruptive power of fierce deities: they sometimes violate linear understandings of temporal relations and so challenge acceptable boundaries of historical reasoning. In particular, this paper theorizes Malaiyammal as an historical force.

Theorizing about the historical force of presumably mythological beings such as fierce goddesses can present something of a conundrum, as Dipesh Charkabarty has observed

[1] Research for this paper was supported by an NEH-funded Senior Fellowship from the American Institute of Indian Studies.

[2] The emergence of fierce gods from violent deaths has been reported for South India by numerous scholars including Mines 2005: 133, 175-189, Reynolds 1980, Blackburn 1988, Shulman 1989, Trawick 1991.

in his analysis of subaltern histories in which people claim historical agency for their deities (2000: 103-106). Because deities cannot be real nor accorded empirical status in historical analysis, historians convert deities from historical forces to beliefs, topics best left for anthropology and folklore. Chakrabarthy argues that historians can at best regard a subaltern's belief in the historical reality of deities as a trope that points to the limits of empirical history, its inability to fully encompass the phenomenological realities of humans, its inability to comprehend all modes of world-making.[3] Yet by displacing the problem of deities as historical forces onto the limits of rational historiography, the deity's relation to historical thinking is left untheorized.

By shifting ground a bit, and asking, *Could* a god have historical force?, I am not asking here how a goddess's *past actions* produced history. I am asking how her very *presence* produces a relation to the past by carrying the past forward in the form of a remnant, now available for the production of historical narrative. To put it more dramatically, the fierce goddess I discuss here produces a temporal rupture of the sort that burial sites and bogmen (McLean 2004: 41-46) may also produce: elements of the past that exist now and haunt the living with the presence of the past. As McLean writes, in his study of the Irish Famine and modernity, "burial sites associated with those who have died violent or anomalous deaths are thus places where the past appears to press upon the present in a manner defying 'symbolic containment'"(2004: 108). For a community of Valaiyars among whom I have conducted fieldwork since 2009, fierce goddesses in this way may also "defy symbolic containment," haunt the living and also be regarded as active historical forces of a very particular sort: in short, I argue the force (sakti) of fierce goddesses—as present emanations of past losses, suffering, and death--is a dynamic force of historical recognition that takes the form of a question: "what happened here?"

Valaiyars and the Forest

The goddess Malaiyammal until recently gazed across a road that runs through the dry forested region north of the Tamilnadu city of Madurai. Because a recent real estate deal resulted in her relocation to the other side of the road, she now gazes into the side of a small, forested mountain. The people who care for her identify as Valaiyar or, now more commonly, Muttiraiyar.[4] Ethnographic work on Valaiyars is limited. Most depictions tend to be brief, dislocated, and often reproduce images found in colonial ethnographies.[5] For example, Deliege writes that

[3] Bhrigupati Singh in a recent paper (2012) also takes issue with Chakrabarthy by theorizing further on the phenomenological place of Thakur, a guardian deity common across northern India.

[4] Valaiyar is a somewhat older and stigmatized name, and Muttiraiyar a newer politicized caste identity marker. In this paper I use the name Valaiyar because I am talking about aspects of community life that point back to their older and more stigmatized existence as socially marginal forest dwellers.

[5] But there are exceptions: One lengthy ethnographic study details facts about marriage systems, economic pursuits, and social structure (Setty 1988). Samual Sudanandha's dissertation (1996) focuses on Valaiyar constructions of identity, particularly their recent politicized caste identity as Muttiraiyars.

> Valaiyars are hunters; they mainly hunt small game and their name derives from a small net (valai), which they use to catch their prey. They are said to hunt and eat all types of inferior food such as rats or frogs. In other words, if we accept a definition of untouchability in purely ritual terms, the Valaiyars are by no means superior to the Pallars. Their caste name is derogatory and today they prefer to be called Muthuraja, Muppannar or even Ambalakarar [Deliege 2002, 3].

This description echoes earlier colonial accounts that stressed Valaiyar hunting practices, their relationship with rats and other taboo foods, their "debased" status, and their various confusing names. In the Madura District Manual from 1868, they are listed among "rural castes and tribes" not fully integrated into agricultural centers (Nelson, 1868, II,60) and described as "a low and debased tribe. . . constantly employed in netting game in the jungles (Nelson, The Madura Country: A Manual, 1868, Part II, 63). Thurston quotes numerous district manuals and census reports from the late 18th and early 19th centuries that describe Valaiyans [sic] similarly, as hunters, as eaters of rats, cats, frogs, and squirrels, as low and polluting, and even as "addicted to crime. . ." (1909, VII, 275). Acquaintances of mine in town repeat these sorts of references; they eat rats, snails, and termites; they are low. One woman recalled how Valaiyars living at the mountainous edge of her home town have only recently learned to walk upright!

Brief accounts of Valaiyars who lived in the little kingdom of Pudukkottai (17th century – 1947), not far from Madurai district, flesh out these sparse colonial and sensational popular depictions. Joanne Waghorne (1994, 166-70) refers to Valaiyars as "forest people," and writes that they were closely associated with the forested areas of the kingdom, where they lived and worked, serving the king by beating the jungle for game during the king's hunts, and supplying meat for the king's table and medicinal herbs for his health. They collected honey for the princes and even once captured a spotted deer for the king's zoo. By providing resources and qualities of the forest to the king, they helped renew the king's body and hence the kingdom itself.

Nicholas Dirks, in his ethnohistory of Pudukkottai kingdom, offers further interpretation of Valaiyars' ambiguous connections to the state. Like Waghorne, he notes Valaiyar identification with the forest and their subordination to agrarian groups such as Maravars and Kallars who were expanding their territories. He argues that, despite the sort of service that Waghorne describes, Valaiyars in Pudukkottai never became fully incorporated into the structure of "privilege through gift relations with the king" (127). Remaining oriented to the forest, they lived in independent villages at the margins of the kingdom and at the edge of the forest, able to maintain significant autonomy through their forest subsistence. Dirks argues that because they were never fully incorporated as clients to dominant political structures, and because their control over territory and power was limited to control over the forest beings, they were only *"passive recipients of incorporation, unable to initiate or alter these processes*" (273). In

other words, they had little agency in creating their own history in relation to dominant agrarian polities.

Dirks admits that "Ethnohistorical fieldwork among the Valaiyar was difficult. Memories of the past were dim and constructions of present day social organization vague" (1987, 271). In my own experience, while memories may be "dim," what is remembered—or, as one elder corrected me, not remembered but "told"—hinges often on acts, not "passive" at all, of fleeing from and also demanding and receiving place, a place to belong. Valaiyar histories are significantly marked by the presence of deities who serve as historical forces.

Valaiyar Narratives of Valaiyar Pasts

The Valaiyar communities I've worked with live in small villages pocketed among the dry hill forests north of Madurai city. The dry landscape is thick with low forest punctuated by villages, mango groves, and gardens. Since the late 19th century these forests have been under the control of the Indian Forest Department, designated as "reserved forests." The villages nestled at the foot of these hills are mostly, some entirely, inhabited by Valaiyars/Muttiraiyars who associate their own lives, both past and present, with the forest.

Today, the people in these villages do all sorts of work. For the most part local residents do seasonal wage labor, gather and sell forest products of various kinds (plants for medicinal use, firewood to sell at small town food stalls further south), herd goats and a few cattle, grow dry-land crops (a challenge due to night raids by "forest bison," wild gaur), and in recent years, due to government develop schemes, tend mango groves, which proves quite lucrative for some. A few have small stands of coconut trees or teak. Some have small rice fields south of the irrigation canal. A few have tea stalls on the roadside. Women carry head loads of firewood, long limbs they've gleaned from presumably dead trees in the forest to sell in a nearby town. When Valaiyar elders talk of their past livelihoods, they stress their relation to the forest and describe how they used to hunt small animals in the forest, how even now they gather tubers in the cool season, how they used to raise great herds of cattle, and how they once farmed with success small plots of healthy millets and vegetables. They've shown me tools they used: a brass flute that once called cattle back from the forest, boomerangs to hunt rabbits, rabbit snares, slingshots, and long iron digging sticks.

Valaiyars narrate a community history of migration and movement, of being pushed from rich agricultural areas (central places in written history, the *natu*, the place of what Anand Pandian, 2009, calls Tamil civility) to the dry forest margins (places of loss and death, the wilder places, the *katu*). They tell of themselves as a people over and again pushed to flee and resettle, flee and resettle until, as one man, Vanni, put it "we ended here miserably as devotees of the mountain." C. Alagar noted, after telling me

several stories of migration, "Whenever one tree falls, we will go find another and sit under its shade. This is how it goes, changing place again and again."[6]

I have followed Valaiyar migration narratives from place to place, from south to north, backwards along the migration paths the stories tell, from the villages near Madurai, to others near Alagar temple, to Melur, to Ponnamaravti, to Trichy. The stories all exhibit a similar structure. They begin with events that lead the people to leave one place and end with a goddess-enabled settlement in another.

The stories begin with scenes like these (these are my retellings of recorded stories):

- On the banks of the Kaveri River, a Kallar ruler demanded a Valaiyar girl. Her family refused. Her very own kin buried that girl in the granary pit and left her for dead. They tied dogs in the house for the Kallar to marry instead, and ran for their lives heading south.

Or this one:

- In Velliccanattam, a Valaiyar boy fell in love with a Nayakkar girl. They swore they were only talking, but the girl's brothers murdered the boy anyway. And when they burned his body she jumped on the pyre with him…as they burned, one fragment from the end of her sari rose up in the searing heat then floated to the ground. The boy's family grabbed it and fled that place.

When Valaiyars flee, they grab what they can and run. They lose their loved ones, they lose place, and they are forced to take a journey through the dangerous wastelands or forest, through the *katu*, that landscape that evokes for Tamils the painful separation from people and places of belonging.[7]

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[6] Data for this paper were gathered in 2009 with a Senior Fellowship from the American Institute of American Studies, funded by the National Endowment for the Humanties, and in a subsequent short trip in 2010.

[7] While the katu is an actual *place*—one that needs to be crossed for work, school, marriage—where fearful encounters with the presence of death are expected, the katu has also long served in Tamil literature as a *trope* for the anxiety a person feels when confronted with death, either literally or existentially. Take Sangam poetry, the oldest extant Tamil literature (ca. 2000 years ago), which explicitly exteriorizes emotional experience onto a set of five landscapes. As Paula Richman (1985: 58-73) has argued, one of these landscapes, *palai*, closely resembles what in modern Tamil is called katu. Commonly translated as "wasteland, desert, badlands, arid tract" (63), *palai* is less a particular place, bounded and distinct from others, than a potential phase of any place that has dried up in the heat of the sun. It is desolate and full of confusing forking paths so one cannot easily find one's way. It represents the separation of a person from the security of their home (Ramanujan 1985: 264) and their "proper social self" (Shulman 1985: 279, see also Nabokov 1997: 299-302). And while passing through it into the "wider world", a journey a hero must take to serve the order of the settled social life, one feels "the constant threat of death" (Richman, 1985: 64). Ethnographically, too, the katu has been shown to be a source of a life-shattering fear (*payam*) that can lead to possessions by the ghouls and demons—the fierce

Each story then ends with a settling, with the finding of a new place. But such settlings are not accomplished with ease. In most stories, the Valaiyars enter into the territory of others and must then demand a rightful place. This they accomplish only with the help of their goddesses, as in these examples:

- In Ponnamaravati, where the Valaiyar rest after their journey fleeing the Kallars, two goddesses in the form of starving Valaiyar children eat raw millet from a Chettiyar's field and receive a brutal beating from the plowmen, who the goddesses immediately strike blind. The landowner recognizes the goddess's power and grants the Valaiyars the land they need to settle there.
- In Melur, where they flee after things sour in Ponnamaravati, seven goddesses disable seven oil presses and only restore these economic resources when the local king, infuriated by this divine extortion, reluctantly grants Valaiyars not only a place to live but even the title of "Ambalam," arbiter of justice.

Even in stories that don't involve entering the inhabited territories of others, but that end instead in the uninhabited forest, goddesses guide the way. So,

- In Vembarali, the Valaiyars who fled from those murderous Nayakkar brothers arrive in uninhabited forest lands with the sari fragment they took from the cremation. In a dream the immolated woman tells them to stay there, and worship her there as a protecting goddess, and so they do.

At the very least it is clear that the transformation from death-in-servitude to rightful settlement is mediated by a goddess. Like other fierce gods in Tamilnadu, it makes some sense to consider these goddesses as forces that emerge from violence and death, from the suffering and loss that inaugurate each story. A girl is killed in one place, and a goddess appears to help her people settle in another. A man is murdered and his lover jumps on the pyre, her sari fragment fluttering into the hands that will later build her temple. Granted, in some stories, this emergence is a indirect, requiring a bit of structuralist analysis. But in others, the goddess emerges directly out of loss. This is true in the next story, too, the story of Malaiyammal, which I tell now and then use as a vehicle to return to the analytic center of this essay where I argue that fierce deities are the dead exerting an historical force that emerges out of loss of life and place.

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deities—who haunt there (Nabakov 1997: 300-301), and this theme of the terrors and suffering qualities of katu arise in contemporary literature, as well (*cite a couple). Part of my wider project asks how and if Valaiyars, as residents of this uninhabitable place of separation and loss, may embody katu-like qualities, or see themselves as embodying qualities of separation.

The Goddess Malaiyammal

Like many roadside shrines, Malaiyammal's is small and plain. Once I noticed it, I stopped with my assistant Rajasekaran at the nearby tea stall where we asked for her story. I've been told this story several times now. Here I translate a version told by C. Alagar, an eighty year old man who at the proper times dons a sari and becomes possessed by this goddess. He says the events happened in the time of his grandfather's great-grandfather. The characters include four people of his Valaiyar *jati*, a tiger, an ox, two famous deities, and a Nayakkar[8] ruler named Lingamanayakkar, whose family, it is said, once inhabited the area now owned by an eye doctor from Madurai (whose purchase of a weekend forest vacation property resulted in the goddess's move across the street).

> It happened a long time ago, when Lingamanayakkar was living over here. In those days, our people were just wandering around the countryside. We came here and asked: "Can we live here alongside you?" They said, "Fine, stay." And so we did. We lived together, yet separately. Our people separate; their people separate. Their place was where the Doctor's house is now. We were their serfs.
>
> One day, two of our men went to graze cattle…their cattle and ours, 500 head together. They drove the cattle onto the mountain to graze. When they were on the mountain, a tiger attacked and killed an ox. They only noticed it was missing after they returned and the Nayakkar counted the cattle. One was missing. It was a Nayakkar ox. It was wearing a bell. So, the two men, one who was our kinsman, and one our affine, went to look for it. They went onto the mountain, and there they saw that a tiger had killed the ox.
>
> "Okay," they figured, "some tiger killed it, then ran off." They reasoned that at night the tiger would return to eat again, and then drink water at the irrigation well at the foot of the mountain, by the Naykkar settlement. The two men cut some vines and set a trap to catch it.
>
> When the tiger came to that place for water, it did get trapped but it pulled and pulled until it got loose and then it lay there, waiting.
>
> Early in the morning, let's say it was 2 a.m., one of the men came to check. The tiger was lying in wait. It followed him, staring intensely in the dark. Staring, it pounced. It pounced, caught the man, and killed him.

[8] Nayakkars ruled the area around Madurai for about 300 years until deposed by the British, who nonetheless kept in place some Nayakkar chiefs to administer affairs in the countryside, one of whom still sends a representative and several cattle to the Malaiyammal temple during her yearly festival.

When he didn't return, the second man went looking for him. He saw what had happened. His in-law was dead. And now, he too was caught and killed by the tiger. Right there at the watering hole, the two men lost their lives. The tiger escaped.

In the morning, one of our kinswoman and one of theirs—well, they were married to the men; you see, the two men had traded sisters in marriage.... The women went to look for them, wondering where they could be. And then they found them dead. "Yes, we can see that a tiger has snapped a trap and bitten up the two men, and escaped. Both are dead."

They were lying on the raised ground near the pond.

After the women found them, they prayed "Let no flies or ants bother the bodies until we can return with fire to burn them." Then they took off quickly for Alagar Temple where they could get some fire. They went into the temple and Alagar said, "I cannot give you fire. I only give to men. I can't give to women. Go ask Meenaksi. She will give it to you."

And so they left Alagar and went to Madurai to see Meenaksi and asked her. They told Meenaksi the whole story and said, "We need to set the fire. We've already stacked the wood. We need to set the fire, so please give us fire." Meenaksi asked, "But how will you carry it?" (for they had nothing with them).

"We are innocent, chaste women. Scoop it into our lap-fold. We'll carry it there," and so saying they spread out the end of their saris. And it's said that after they spread their saris, Meenaksi scooped and gave them a handful of embers each. They bundled them up and tied them into their waist-fold, and returned to the bodies. They just carried the embers like that, in the folds of their sari.

As soon as they returned here, they lit the pyre to burn their husbands. The two women jumped onto it, too. They jumped on, and all four people burned up (utan kattai eeru).

All four people burned on the pyre.

Afterwords, the ruling chief Lingamanayakkar worked long with his own two hands to make a statue, which he put in place and established as a deity. "You people worship this," he said to us, and then he and his people left this place.

> *Then C. Alagar explains to us*: "You see, for them, that was the end of an era. Their rule was finished. As they left, they said: 'So many years…we can't even count them. All these years were ours. We ruled this Madurai District. Now we'll step aside. The whole place that belonged to our people, we place with you. You keep it for your children, whose time will come.' They said that, and then they left for good."

Every single Valaiyar narrative I've analyzed so far ends like this one does, with the generation of some object, some fragment or artifact materially connected to the events in the story. Copper plates, titles, charred sari pieces, temples, shrines. The goddess Malaiyammal is herself such a fragment, carved into a slab of granite. As a fragment purported to have been crafted in the time and place of the event, she is a material manifestation of the event. She is an index, a sign pointing to something that happened. Her presence signifies not only a particular set of deaths, but also a past of labor and servitude. Her presence signifies the death of a political era, of a Ruler saying 'Our Time is Done', of a moment when everything changed. Her presence signifies the historical moment that Nayakkars lost their kingdom and Valaiyars achieved autonomy.

Malaiyammal's presence signifies not passively. It also exerts a kind of force. Tamils call it sakti. I argue that Malaiyammal's force, her sakti, is not merely a matter of "belief" or "folklore." It is an actual force of a particular kind, an example of what Charles Peirce called "indexical dynamism."

Indexicality

It is well-known that metonymy is a favored trope in Tamil literature (Ramanujan 1973). The metonym, where the part stands for a whole, or where parts of contexts become signs of one another, relies for the possibility of its signification on indexicality, on a relation of contiguity between a sign and its object (the thing it signifies). While the metonyms of, say, Sangam poetry rely on the *mental* association of contextual elements that *would be* contiguous in the material world, the "fragments" I speak of here are purported to be *actually* contiguous with the time and place the story narrates. It is this *actual* contiguity of time mediated by elements of place that makes it possible for such material fragments to carry forward with them the reality of the past events, events to which they serve as witness.

The specific indexical signs, or fragments, that carry into the present the events of Malaiyammal's past include these:

- A granite slab into which are carved in relief images of the two couples, one tall and one short, and which indexes also the Nayakkar whose labor is said to have made it;
- A watering trough for cattle, made from a single piece of granite. This sits now next to the temple. People pointed it out to me again and again as an

old object that was at one time fed from the spring where the tiger came to drink, escape its trap, and kill;

- The story itself is an index for even words are, as Marx and Engels pointed out, material realities, taking the form of "agitated layers of air," sound waves (1970: 51), produced and received physically and converted through neurological processes into thoughts, actions, sensations; and so a story as material passes down the generations to be produced again and again, its utterance indexing all prior utterances.
- The mountain/forest (*malai/katu*) where the ill-fated ox met its fate, persists, though now a "reserved forest" where cattle still graze, but not legally, likely on plants descended from seeds of prior generations.
- The tiger escaped entirely and indexes best by its conspicuous absence, as extinct as Nayakkar rule.
- The place itself, though again, it can only be pointed to and not entered, for it has been fenced in and its pond covered up by the eye doctor.
- Real living Nayakkars who claim descent from the Nayakkars of the story, and who claim Malaiyammal as a Nayakkar deity. They now live about 10 km away in another village at the foot of another mountain, and have their own stories of tigers and cattle and death. They are related to the current Zamindar of Valaiyapatti, whose powers are limited now to ritual ones in 48 villages.

And what about the goddess herself? She is the material manifestation of the whole event. In her divinity is condensed the story's significance and around her collocate the indexes I've listed. Her divinity resides in the granite slab into which is carved four figures, two couples. The granite water trough sits outside the temple. Her gaze moves in the direction of the mountain on which the tiger resided and the cattle grazed. And her community of worshipers are connected by a collaterality of ancestry, and when possessed become themselves indexes as they speak her power into the present.

The goddess, then, is a collocation of indexes. She and the things with her are said to originate at the time of the deaths of the four young people. As present actualities, they point back to earlier events and to the context of those events, the condition of servitude and labor. They also index a moment when everything changed, when the ruler said "Our time is done." The goddess, in short, indexes multiple transformations and through the goddess, the past extrudes into the now.

Indexical Dynamism

Indexes, writes Peirce, "focus the attention" (1955: 108). Indexes, in other words, are dynamic. They exert force. An index "refers to its object…because it is in dynamical (including spatial) connection both with the individual object, on the one hand, and with the senses or memory of the person for whom it serves as a sign, on the other hand" (1955: 107). The person for whom an index serves as a sign, furthermore, is "forced by a law of mind to think [about the connection]" (1955: 109).

In other words, indexes possess a dynamic quality that forces us to attend to the relation between the sign and its object. Indexes "call upon the hearer to use his powers of observation, and so establish a real connection between his mind and the object" (*Ibid*.). An index "acts as a force carrying the attention…" (*Ibid*.).

It is this force that I wish now to briefly discuss, as it relates to the condensed index otherwise known as Malaiyammal. I argue that the goddess, as a condensation of the event and as collocation of multiple indexes of the event, is necessarily also a condensation of indexical dynamism. As a dynamic index, Malaiyammal acts as a force carrying the attention and a force that creates this "real connection" between a thinking person and a past event: passersby notice, turn their heads and ask: who is that, what happened here? She carries the attention to a place, and to what may have happened there in the past. In this way the goddess forces a kind of historical recognition. The attention she demands manifests itself most dramatically in the many car wrecks and accidents that her devotees and neighbors attribute to her power. As one elderly woman described it to me, you don't just walk past her temple "swinging your arms" casually like you have no care in the world. It's those who don't attend to her presence who may find their attention directed in a brutal fashion, a brutality that carries into the present the brutality—as also the contingent nature—of her own origins. One wreckage (a Valaiyar past of servitude, death, and suicide; and let us add a Nayakkar past, too, an era of rule coming to an end through violent colonial acts) lending force to another (car wrecks, trucks turning over) and obliquely therefore bringing that past to bear on the present as a living force. The goddess is really of the past, a fragment that vibrates, comes alive, seizes the day (the road, lives of those who don't care, those whom she possesses, etc.). The goddess is the past pointing to us in the now. As a force in the now, she allows a past event to continue to assert itself and direct our attention.

The problem with "belief"

At this point, readers might raise an objection. Surely we are not expected to *believe* that she actually causes traffic accidents. We want to say that the *Valaiyar* believe this. But Valaiyar do not say that they "believe" she causes wrecks. They say that she causes them. So we are left with what appears to be an unbridgeable analytic gap, that same gap Chakrabarthy raised as pointing to the limits of rational historiography. Without displacing Malaiyammal's historical force on mentalism (belief) or simply sidestepping the question of deities as agents, can we bridge the analytic gap and theorize about what kind of historical force a goddess might be? Here I've suggested that the concept of indexical force helps close the gap somewhat by opening up that the goddess "acts" in the manner of all signs-in-action (semeiosis), and that her indexical (as opposed to symbolic) aspect carries a force that demands recognition and so brings humans into meaningful relation with a goddess-inhabited world of action.[9]

[9] There are other theoretical discussions we can turn to for clues about how objects come to be inhabited by a sort of dynamism. It is not really an unfamiliar sort of claim. Look at Marcel Mauss's concept of the "hau" or "spirit" of the gift, which is exactly such a dynamic force, and also indexical in the same way I'm discussing here. Basso's use of Sartre is another case in point. Satre writes that objects appear to have a

Peirce notes that "indexes assert nothing" (1955: 111). They do not, that is, make an argument articulated as a general statement of how the world works, or worked in the past, and so they do not articulate a history that would be recognized as such. All they do is function. They point. They function to force the attention of people towards recognizing something so they may realize that there is something with which to put one's mind in relation, to begin to think and inquire. This pointing function cannot be subsumed within or contained by general historical arguments, for it exceeds such narrative forms. As long as the index functions, it continues to erupt as a dynamic presence, slipping through any closure that general history, in its dominant narrative form, might like to make on the past. A fierce deity is such a force: she turns the head and begs the question with her forceful presence that demands recognition.

Walter Benjamin writes that there is no event that lacks historical significance. And so he would say about a tiger killing a man, a woman burning herself. While Benjamin's writings on history are difficult, I find him speaking in other terms perhaps to the significance for history of what I'm calling the indexical function of an event's material remains, such as Malaiyammal. Benjamin calls for a "material history" in which the past remains alive in the present and can warn us, if we attend, of the dangers of power, of oppression. Material history recognizes the past as a living element of the present, as something that "flashes" and "seizes hold" of a person's thoughts and memories, much as Peirce describes indexical dynamism. To quote Benjamin:

> To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was.' It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at the moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers (1969: 255).

The past has a power to take hold of its "receivers" in the present, and the past as it remains present effects both our understandings now and our "traditions," that is our renderings of the past. The ability be bring the past to bear on the present makes it into material for criticism. Benjamin contrasts this view of the material past (which remains present in fragments) with what he calls "historicism," the kind of historical discourse that looks back on "the way things were," on the past as a knowable object, but in so doing relegates the past to a kind of death, separate from the present, and so

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life of their own because of the use, knowledge and feeling humans direct towards objects. The object then has its own depth, its own energy or "light" to return (Satre quoted in Basso 1996: 108). Certainly in Marx we find another kind of dynamism in commodity objects that condense capitalist modes of production. Places too, as objects, have been amply shown to carry with them dynamic energies of events (e.g., Casey, 1997), and so on. Lately some works have been published that seriously take on the idea that non-human animals (e.g., Ogden's alligators, 2011), as well material objects such as broken dolls lying in a gutter (Bennet 2011) have a sort of "agency."

no longer able to bring its force to bear on the contemporary matters (1969: 255-257). This is the proverbial history of the victors, who relegate the losers to material treasures (e.g., folklore) that signify only the dead (see also Volosinov 1986: 23-24).[10] This point is similar to those raised by both Chakrabarty and McLean (*op. cit.*) when they critique the discipline of history as a form of modernity that casts the "folk" and their enchanted "beliefs" to be outside the purview of history proper.

The ferocity of fierce goddesses

I am suggesting here that in some cases, fierce deities may be a past event asserting its significance in the present. Furthermore, it may be that it is only from the margins, from outside historical reason, that the past can in this manner assert itself. The goddess's ferocity was kindled by a shattering loss and a set of deaths brought on by labor and serfdom. Among Valaiyars, migration narratives describe many such losses of persons and places due to oppressive conditions. Their goddesses reassert this past indexically, and Valaiyars reassert it narratively, allowing for a continuity of the past speaking to the present. Car wrecks and injury happen to those who don't attend or recognize that something happened, and so might need reminding that the violence that happened is happening still.

Conclusion

This paper is one piece of a larger project, in which I argue that the Tamil landscape of *katu* (variously translatable as wasteland or dried forest) is, culturally, the place from which a recognition of material history presents itself most powerfully. The katu is the place where the past and present remain alive to one another. When the dead serve as indexes, they usually do so from the katu, the place of death, of cremation, of burial, of the fear of death, of the death that is loss; loss of life, of loved ones, loss of place. These separations, losses, and deaths are not relegated to the Dead (the past properly buried, shut tight, locked out) but rather remain--real ghosts--as dynamic forces that point not only to a past but also to a mode of historical recognition (often reduced to folklore or mere oral history) that is also a mode of life, of action, existence, self. Experiences of loss direct our experience of time, even as they become elided from our historical narratives. In other words, the katu, which collocates losses (death, separation, moral detritus) and so may be said to be a landscape of loss, points to a mode of temporal reckoning that breaks "historicism's" boundary between the past and the present.

It is interesting that in classical Tamil literature, among five landscapes that organize various poetic expressions, it is the katu-like *palai*, the desert, the dry forest, that is considered the "common landscape," the place that underlies all places, and to which all places revert when dried by the heat of the sun. As David Shulman writes, "...the wilderness, with its terrors, its separations, its chaotic potential, its comedies of the borders*, inheres in every ordered thing*" (1985: 292, his emphasis). Fierce goddesses

[10] For Volosinov a dead sign is one that no longer matters in contemporary struggles.

are a manifestation of this loss that resides in the common landscape and that is inherent in this world.

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Malaiyammal’s Shrine near Madurai (Photo by author)

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The Dynamics of Emotions in the Ritual of a Hot Goddess

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Abstract

This paper begins with the observation that rituals are emotionally laden activities, and that the rituals of local Hindu traditions in Tamil Nadu (South India) are no exception. Surveying the ritual devoted to a violent goddess of this tradition, the author addresses the semantics of the emotions that are shaped and aroused during it, and asks how they are managed. It appears that both negative and positive emotions are of decisive importance for the ritual's success. The essay closes with the thesis that in rituals for violent goddesses emotional rules are meant to be violated.

Keywords: emotions, emotional group, emotion management, emotional style, transformation of emotions

Introduction

This essay takes emotions seriously,[1] not first and foremost because of the recent multidisciplinary revival of interest in emotions and the discovery of the wider significance of emotions by the neurosciences, but because the study of emotions is a straightforward way to map the cosmos of a violent goddess and delve into what this particular kind of goddess is all about.[2]

[1] There is a wide range of theory in Indian religious and philosophical thought on the nature of emotions, including the aestheticized emotions, called *rasa*s, by the aesthetic school (the best known branch being that of Abhinavagupta); for the latest treatment of the intellectual history of *rasa*, see Pollock 2012. This paper, however, is exclusively concerned with raw emotion, as represented in oral narrative texts and ritual practice. – Kleinginna and Kleinginna (1981: 355) propose as a working model the following definition of emotions in general: "Emotion is a complex set of interactions among subjective and objective factors, mediated by neural/hormonal systems, which can (a) give rise to affective experiences such as feelings of arousal, pleasure/displeasure; (b) generate cognitive processes such as emotionally relevant perceptual effects, appraisals, labeling processes; (c) activate widespread physiological adjustments to the arousing conditions; and (d) lead to behavior that is often, but not always, expressive, goal-directed, and adaptive."

[2] As Heelas (1986: 257) aptly writes: "[...] emotions coming from a god will be associated, *in meaning*, with the attributes of that god [...]." – Indian religion is grounded in the Upaniṣadic and Yogic traditions well known for advocating renouncing and suppressing emotions. However, it is

Once a year a *koṭai*[3] ritual is performed at different times and places in honor of the local Tamil goddess Icakkiyamman̲[4] who, as her legend relates, is capable of killing, and indeed does so.[5] By looking at this goddess and a particular *koṭai* ritual of the landowning Vēḷāḷas,[6] who have traditionally been the dominant upholders of the ritual tradition of Icakki, we learn the way in which this social group imparts a dynamic force to their ritual, and recognizes the emotions that are generated from it. Such a view is worthwhile both for those interested in the dynamics of emotion in ritual *per se* and those who want to obtain a better understanding of concepts of emotions, emotion management, and emotional style on the basis of rituals.

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important to note that there are other traditions that favor emotions – most prominently, the devotional tradition. On emotion in the Bengali devotional traditions, see McDaniel 1997.

[3] *Koṭai*, the Tamil word for 'gift,' is generally used when referring to the annual festival held in honor of a local deity. The *koṭai* ritual requires not only that the goddess be brought various gifts (hence the name *koṭai*), but also that her legends be sung. It is only by doing so that she is made to come into being.

[4] For a thorough study of the goddess Icakkiyamman̲, who in the texts relating to her goes also by the name Nīli, see Schuler 2009. See Figure 1.



Figure 1: Terra-cotta figures of Icakki at Kiṭaṅkaṭi Naṭukāṭṭu Icakkiyamman̲ shrine, Pa̲la̲vūr (Photo by author)

[5] On violent goddesses as "a common south Indian prototype" and as a "translation of wronged woman into violent goddess," see Rao, Shulman and Subrahmanyam 1998: 78; see also Brubaker 1978: 122.

[6] Vēḷāḷas (or Veḷḷāḷas) are also known as Piḷḷaimārs. – For the history of the non-laboring landed peasant elite of Vēḷāḷas, see Ludden 1989, particularly pp. 67, 85ff., elaborating on the "Vellala-Brahman alliance," through which these "highcaste landowners brought under their control land, labor, and water; established their status in the agrarian system as a whole" (85). On this highly influential social group of Vēḷāḷas in the Tamil region, see, more generally, ibid.: 94.

The present paper follows two lines of inquiry, both of which will be addressed under the semantics of emotions. The first line examines emic definitions of emotions that are expressed and constituted by ritual and by oral text.[7] Here I consider questions such as: What are the exact emotions involved? What are their associated physical expressions and emotive interjections?

The second line seeks to explore how the ritual answers the questions that we today pose when we do emotion research. How can rituals and oral texts best be engaged as useful sources for such research? Do they, when investigated in relation and comparatively, contain data useful for the construction of something like an emic popular record of emotions? This line of inquiry raises a number of questions: How are negative and positive emotions shaped and aroused through ritual?[8] How are they managed? How are the emotions either transformed or learnt in the first place through ritual?[9] What emotions contribute to ritual depth? Does the investigation reveal insights into the emotional style of the social group to which the ritual specialist belongs?

In this paper, which is both philologically and empirically oriented and substantially based on my doctoral research project (Schuler 2009), I shall first of all briefly introduce the translocal and local legend[10] of the goddess. Basing myself on my field notes and film material, I shall then present a description of the ritual's program. I shall at the same time discuss the exact emotions involved by elaborating on their semantics. This will include an explanation of how ritual modules and their semiotics allow us to study how rage, joy, and other emotions are ritually shaped and evoked. I shall then set forth how the dangerous emotional tensions are transformed into more socially accepted emotions, thus reflecting the dynamics and strategies inherent in the ritual's management of emotion. In the final section, I shall attempt, on the basis of the presented material, to draw a complete emotional picture of the goddess and frame some final conclusions on emotion that perhaps can contribute to a semantic atlas of concepts of emotion.[11]

[7] I am not aware of studies that shed light on this issue in South Indian local traditions.

[8] Solomon (1993: 225) refuses to make a general distinction between positive and negative emotions, given the complexity of emotions (e.g. questions of status, intersubjectivity, and strategy). As he subtly argues: "Many emotions, for example, value one's Self positively and the other negatively (as in contempt) or vice versa (as in worship) or judge an object over-all positively but in some detail negatively (as in anger or betrayal) […]."

[9] We may agree that, for example, eroticized joy/ecstatic joy is socio-culturally shaped and that one must learn how to attain it; see the *Kāmasūtra*. On arguments for sexual pleasures that need to be learnt, see Collins 2004: 226. On the learning of emotions more generally, see also Frijda 1986: 303-7.

[10] We have to distinguish between the goddess's translocal story, which is part of every *koṭai* festival held in honor of this goddess, and the local stories about her.

[11] I may add that I consider concepts of emotions changeable across times and social groups. Thus words signifying specific emotions may reside in different semantic fields, and nonverbal

The Text[12]

I shall begin with a synopsis of the translocal epic-length text[13] *(katai)* that forms, together with the local text, our primary textual source material, embedded as it is in the *koṭai* ritual. The story (sung by a bow-song group) starts off with a sequence of events that reaffirms a gender stereotype: males kill, females bear babies. But with the tragic murder of a childless woman, the story pattern is inverted. The female who is killed becomes an avenging goddess. She not only kills her own murderer, who formerly was her lover, but also avenges her brother's death, causing thus the extinction of an entire social community. What follows is a more detailed account:

The story begins with the birth stories of the main characters and moves on to the Brahmin priest, who has squandered the entire temple treasury on his lover, a *devadāsī* (temple dancer). When he runs out of money, he is thrown out by the woman's mother. But his lover runs after and catches up with him. He kills her and steals her ornaments. Only a *kaḷḷi* plant (Latin *Euphorbia tirucalli*) is witness to this. The brother of the murdered woman finds her and commits suicide. The murderer dies too, bitten by a snake. This first part of the narrative, in which the violation occurs, is only a small fraction of the whole. The major part of the story takes place in the second portion, in which the murdered *devadāsī* becomes an avenging goddess. In this portion, the three persons are reborn: the Brahmin as a merchant's son, with a margosa leaf to protect him from evil, and the murdered lover and her brother as twins of the Cōḻaṉ king. However, the twins turn out to be *pēy*s (hungry spirits) and are abandoned in the forest under a margosa tree (Tamil *vēmpu,* Hindi *nīm*). There the twin brother is murdered by landowning Vēḷāḷas, who cut down the tree in which he has been living as a hungry spirit. The woman swears an oath to take revenge on both the merchant and the Vēḷāḷa landowners. After a long search, she finds the merchant and chases him through the forest to a nearby village, where the seventy Vēḷāḷas live. There the merchant pleads with the Vēḷāḷas to protect him. Then the avenging woman appears before the assembly of the Vēḷāḷas, disguised and with a branch of the *kaḷḷi* plant in the guise of a baby in her arms. She pretends to be the legitimate wife of the merchant and lays claim to him as her husband. Since no decision has been made by sun set, the two are locked in a room overnight, in the belief that they are a couple. The merchant, knowing the woman to be a

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expressions may differ as well. For valuable discussions of the history of emotions, see Frevert 2000, 2011; Rosenwein 2010.

[12] For the advantages of a narrative approach to emotion research, see Wood (1986: 202), who argues that "[…] the narrative approach for viewing emotion, […] can incorporate and integrate all of the elements that may be involved, including any physiological aspects […]."

[13] The core of this narrative goes back at least to the seventh century C.E. since it was recognizably alluded to in the *bhakti Śaiva* work *Tēvāram* (1.45.1), of probably that date. (For the dating of the *Tēvāram*, see Zvelebil 1995: 682). The story is recounted throughout Tamil literature; see Caṇmukacuntaram 1978; Zvelebil 1989: 297–301; Schuler 2009, Chapter 3. – A translation of one of the longest versions of this bow-song text is offered in Schuler 2009: 145-217.

demoness, is afraid, but the seventy Vēḷāḷas promise their own lives as security for his. In the intimate setting of the room, the woman kills the merchant and escapes by way of the roof. The avenging goddess, in a second move, takes revenge on the Vēḷāḷas by assuming the shape of an old woman who claims to be the merchant's mother. When the Vēḷāḷas find the man covered in blood and the *kaḷḷi* plant on his chest, they are forced to be true to their word and commit suicide. Then the goddess kills their wives and children with poisoned milk, thus extinguishing all trace of the community. Afterwards she is reunited with her brother. (Synopsis on the basis of Blackburn 1980: 206-8).

The translocal story of Icakki is followed by a local story. If we ignore these local stories, our understanding of the goddess would be incomplete, for they have shaped parts of the history of the spread of Icakki worship throughout the southernmost districts of Tamil Nadu.

The local story of Icakki is clearly concerned with problems of birth and infant mortality – in earlier days, very common ones in rural areas. It is about a woman who dies a premature death during pregnancy. But it is also about a fragmented and violent goddess, about a sorcerer *(mantiravāti)*, and last but not least, about murders of revenge.

Icakki is sitting under a banyan tree, when the sorcerer (*mantiravāti*) and Brahmin priest of the Śiva temple of Paḻavūr comes along on his way to conduct anniversary death rites. He is attracted by the young woman's beauty and decides to employ her as a maidservant. Being a sorcerer, he penetrates her mask and sees that she is [the hungry spirit] Icakki. He wants to control her. He draws a *cakra* (Ta. *takaṭu*, lit. 'metal plate') in order to immobilize her, and drives a peg of strychnine wood (*kāñciram muḷai*), into the top of her head in an attempt to bring her under his control and render her docile.[14] Then he takes her home to his eight-month-pregnant wife. His wife is suspicious but accepts her, for the young woman is amazingly skilled in housework. One day, when the time of delivery is nearing, Icakki asks the lady of the house, who discovers the impress of the peg while delousing her, to pull it out. When she innocently does so, Icakki explodes and emerges in her active, raged form and kills the pregnant woman.[15] She plucks out the baby, and crunches it in her teeth. She garlands

[14] See also other stories (Schuler 2009: 256-8) where Icakki or other deified humans are locked up in bottles or captured in pots by a male, but ultimately flee – for instance, in the *sthalapurāṇam* of Kuttuppiṟai Icakki of Naṉkuṉēri. – Cross-culturally, we find similar motifs in Malay village beliefs. (Note that Malaysia formerly underwent Hinduisation.) Laderman (1987: 126f.) draws attention to the Malay idea that a "clever man" can turn a *langsuir* (the spirit of a woman who has died in childbirth) "into a human woman if he places a nail or other long, hard, pointed piece of iron or steel into the hole [in her head]." Laderman (ibid.: 127) regards the object inserted into the hole as a „phallic object."

[15] Note the striking similarity of narrative pattern in a folk tale (from Muruganandan, *Nāṭṭuppuṟa Makkaḷ Collum Kataikaḷ,* Madras: Tenmaḻai Pathippagam, 1991, 128) retold in Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 2002: 70.

herself with the intestines of the woman and makes the *kuravai* sound (a cultural specific expression made by flapping the tongue against the palate).[16] When the sorcerer returns home, she kills him, too. (A synopsis related by Uṭaiyār Piḷḷai, Paḷavūr, in one of our conversations).

I hasten to add that the epic-length bow-song text – its title is *Icakkiyammaṉ Katai (IK)* – and the local Icakki story cannot fully be understood separately from its performance in the *koṭai* ritual. Ultimately it is the interpretative potential of the ritual – the goddess's blockage of fertility and human continuity – that illuminates and communicates the essential message of the texts.

Turning now to the initial questions, we shall consider what the ritual does with the undesirable emotions of the text.

The Ritual

Generally we approach a ritual by establishing first its socio-cultural context. However, in the present paper I shall primarily focus on what is emotionally practiced within the ritual.

I shall begin with a brief sketch of the two days and one night of the *koṭai* ritual, which is (as is perfectly in keeping with a 'hot' goddess) held in the hottest month of the year.[17] The ritual starts off with the goddess's fatally tragic legends and proceeds with a sequence of ritual segments that strives to bring about change and restore harmony. The emotional pattern of the narratives is inverted: The female deity who blocks fertility and avenges becomes a potentially creative goddess. She not only procreates herself, but also transfers her creative potential to couples with a history of reproductive failure and long-term infertility.

Viewed emically, the goddess is a split goddess.[18] It is the task of the ritual to heal this split.[19] In this attempt a flowerbed *(pūppaṭukkai/pūppaṭaippu)* [20]

[16] The *kuravai* sound is also used at the time of the birth of a child.

[17] The goddess's dominant emotion is traditionally linked with heat. For a similar link between fire and emotion, one may compare the figure of Kaṇṇaki in the *Cilappatikāram*.

[18] Split, namely, into a younger and an elder sister. This fragmentation represents two psychological configurations: a wrathful, anti-maternal one reflected in the younger sister, and a harmonized, fertile one reflected in the elder sister. The term "split goddess" is used by Blackburn 1980: 205-23.

[19] When speaking of healing, I consider, as Csordas (2002: 3) suggests, that "the object of healing [...] is not elimination of a thing ([...] a problem [...] a disorder), but transformation of a person, a self [...]"; see also Krippner (1994: 183); on the connection between healing and self-transformation, see Shulman and Stroumsa 2002: 12.

[20] That the flowerbed is a metaphor for love-making is supported by *Cilappatikāram* [ed. U.V.C. 1978], 4.27-8; 4.65-71; 14.85. For further examples (including citations and translations) in classical Tamil literature, and in Sanskrit literature as well, see Schuler 2009: 295, n. 82. – See Figure 2.

commands center stage, since it possesses a high degree of internal dynamic and clearly encapsulates the central idea of the *koṭai* ritual. Its botanical markers, in particular, delineate the transitions which the ritual seeks to produce. From a psychological point of view, the flowerbed in the ritual system under discussion actualizes a therapeutic concept.

The flowerbed segment is embedded in the sequencing of the ritual at three points: in the first ritual cycle at noon (12 P.M.), in the second ritual cycle at 1 o'clock the next morning, and in the third ritual cycle around midday the same day. Each cycle has its own peak moments: in the first cycle it is the flowerbed segment, in the second cycle it is the drinking of a kid goat's blood and the divinatory spinning of a coconut,[21] and in the third cycle it is the goddess's



Figure 2: Flowerbed at the *koṭai* festival, Paḷavūr (Photo by author)

[21] See Figure 3

bathing in water mixed with turmeric (*mañcaḷ nīrāṭṭu*). The three cycles together have a climax of their own, which occurs in the second cycle. The second cycle is at the same time an intensification of the first, since it multiplies the signs and draws the goddess deeper into the ritual. In terms of activity and mood, there is an increase of heat and a ritual arousal of eroticism. As regards the individual segments, each one must take place in the specified sequential order. The goddess cannot emerge before she is recognized and made aware of herself in the *alaṅkāra tīpārātaṉai* (ornamentation and the worship with a light). She must not come out of her shrine before the flowerbed is prepared. Her becoming overheated and eroticized should occur in the middle of the night rather than at noon. The goddess's drinking of the *tuvaḷai* kid goat's blood, and equally important, the divinatory spinning of the coconut for the benefit of childless couples, cannot occur until the goddess has been re-composed and made aware of her fertile self. Thus the single modules cannot be rearranged without doing harm to the efficacy of the emotional result.

The Semantics of Emotion

It can be assumed that our texts – memory material, so to speak – and the ritual are not of a modern type. They belong to the archaic structures of society. Given that the way emotions are defined differs significantly from period to period and from one cultural context to another, it is important to exercise caution when formulating appropriate definitions of the emotions in question.[22]

Emotions and Their Semantics in the Story



Figure 3: *Māppiḷḷai mañcappiḷḷai* ritual with divination at the *koṭai* festival, Paḷavūr

[22] For the problem of appropriate definitions and the danger of adopting concepts rooted in a post-modern view, see Kleinginna and Kleinginna 1981; Eifring 2004.

An examination of the *Icakkiyammaṉ Katai* (edition and transl. Schuler 2009) shows that it contains a considerable number of emotion terms, though only certain emotions tend to be foregrounded. The most frequent ones in the narrative are anger (*ceṟal, kōpam, ciṉam*) and vengefulness (revenge, *paḻi*), socially undesirable emotions associated with physical reactions and emotive interjections. These emotions predominate, though other emotions, such as joy (*makiḻcci*, *pūrittal*, *cantōcam*), fear (*añcu*), sorrow (*tukkam*), and honor (*paricu, kaṉam, caṅkai*), are featured as well.

A few examples may serve to show the range of connotations of these words and their high level of ambiguity. The lexicographic term for anger[23] (which triggers in the target person the emotion of fear[24] rather than anger in turn) is paired with the metaphor of a burning stomach (1417), and with an emotional burst of laughter (1327).[25] The emotion is an unmistakable statement that a transgression has occurred. The compulsive clinging to the emotion is striking.[26]

Thoughts of revenge,[27] on the other hand, are accompanied by gloating (1102-03), dancing (1106), and calling upon the approval of gods as guarantors of the moral order (1111). The peak moment of revenge, however, is expressed by the *kuravai* sound (2099, 2475):[28]

> "This is fine! This is good! No matter where the blameworthy man goes, I shall not leave him. I shall take **revenge** on him," she [Icakki] said **happily**. (N1.1102-03)
>
> She **danced**, repeating again and again, "Look over there; the Ceṭṭi is coming to let the whole world know about his wealth of gold!" (N1.1104-06)
>
> "I have your support, [Śiva] Mahādeva. <I am not> a wicked woman, (though) I now take **revenge**," she said. (N1.1111-14)

[23] In this article I take anger and rage interchangeably as one emotion; in emotion research literature, of course, the two terms are treated as qualitatively different, see Wierzbicka 1999: 87, 92.

[24] In the Hindu tradition, anger and rage are regarded with the greatest fear, as in the wrathful potency of Śiva's other form, Bhairava, or in the terror of the blood-thirsty Kālī.

[25] On "typical" Tamil emotional expressions for anger, see also Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 2003-2004. That emotional behavior is manifold in nature is stressed by Solomon (1993: 105), who provides evidence that "'patterns of characteristic [emotional] behavior' […] are potentially infinite in number."

[26] Compare Minoru Hara's (2001) study on anger in classical Sanskrit literature. For the single English word, two emotion terms, *manyu* and *krodha*, are used. While these are often treated as synonyms, originally they represented different aspects of anger. *Krodha* "is characterized by outward signs such as red eyes" and "becomes extinct once it bursts out," while *manyu* "is an internal state of mental agitation" and "is noxious for its persistent nature, often in the form of a grudge" (Hara 2001: 441).

[27] The retaliatory action is in each case proportionate to the offense.

[28] In the *IK* the *kuravai* sound is produced following either the birth of a child or a revenge murder.

Her anklets tinkling, she **gently looked** into the Ceṭṭi's face, repeating again and again, "I shall take revenge, I shall take **revenge**." (N1.1115)

She [Icakki] who was **angry** at (him) came **laughing**. (N1.1327)

"I swear an oath to you: my **revenge** is certain. It is certain," Icakki said. (N1.1359-60)

"If I leave you in the middle of the path and go away (alone), the **womenfolk will scold me**." (N1.1342-3)

"Will the crime of killing me (ever) leave you, wherever you go? So why are you now running away, **you idiot** of a Ceṭṭiyār? **Hey!**" (N1.1378-9)

"You tremble. Where are you going all alone? I have come as Nīli to take **revenge** on you. Would a cat with a **hot, burning stomach** feel understanding for the fear and the (squeaky) cry of a mouse?" (N1.1415-18)

"Because of the love-potion of that Mūtēvi, that misfortune-bringing (other) woman – only because of that did (my) previous **fury** not disappear."[29] (N1.2021-22)

"I take my **revenge**. You are all eyewitnesses!" she said. She uttered a loud ***kuravai* sound**. (N1.2097-99)

Weeping endlessly, that old woman said that she would **avenge** her son [the dead Ceṭṭi]. "I'll destroy without fail this fine village of Paḷakai – all of it!" (N1.2237-40)

When they all are dead [she performs the ***kuravai* sound**]. (N1.2475)

If, on the other hand, we examine the emotion of joy, it is primarily the phenomenon of fecundity that is associated with this emotion. The following semantic fields can be identified: joy of giving birth, joy of motherhood (joy as fulfillment), and sexual enjoyment.

[...] there was no **child** to **enjoy** all this wealth. (N1.153)

[29] The theme of polygyny and the problems it generates for the multiple wives is taken up in various genres, among them in *kāppiyam* literature (see the *Cilappatikāram* and *Cīvakacintāmaṇi*), and also in *pirapantam* literature, e.g. in the *Kurukūrppaḷḷu* (alias *Parāṅkucappaḷḷu*) of Caṭakōpappulavar (dating from ca. 1700; see Zvelebil 1995: 385), a work belonging to the *paḷḷu* sub-genre, in which the senior *paḷḷi* accuses "her co-wife of having administered a potion prepared according to the rules of black magic to keep the *paḷḷaṉ* under her thumb" (A.V. Subramanian 1993: 284). For an example of how polygyny is treated in Newar rice plantation songs in Nepal, see Lienhard's (1984: 56f. No. 59) collection of such songs.

"In this land [why] shouldn't we have the **joy of giving birth** to a nice baby boy and giving a feast for everybody? (N1.472-73)
[Why] shouldn't I have the **joy** [of seeing] him happily worshiping his **mother**, [each time] he eagerly completes [life's] many rites?" (N1.484-85)

"After you give (me some lime), let's sit down in the shadow (of a tree) [and **you can enjoy me**, O great man of the Ceṭṭi community!]" (N1.1138)

The semantic connotations of the complex, nonbasic, self-conscious emotion honor[30] are, in turn, the rightful status and recognition as a mother and wife.[31] The consequence of denying a wife her legitimate claim to fertility is rage.

"I have suffered a lot. You robbed me of all sense of **honor**. You don't seem to know the good life we had together." (N1.1814-5)

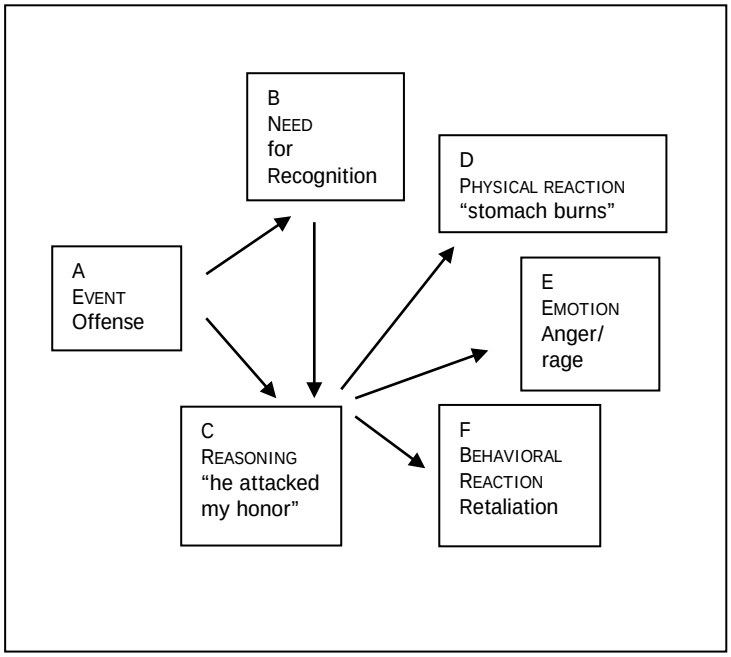
"If you go away without living with me, (**enjoying me**) – (if you) leave me behind like a **crop sown on wasteland** – won't [some] powerful, ancient fate catch up with you, O Ceṭṭiyār?" (N1.1153-7)

"Instead of experiencing a place for enjoyment[32] I become the object of **public ridicule**." (N1.2033-4)
"If he who married me by tying the *tāli* ruins [our] married state, who else will give me that **status**?" (N1.2037-8)

"When you see (me) – don't you **recognize** this woman?" (N1.1128-9)

The narrative's model of the processes involved in the emotion of anger:[33]

[30] As Engelen (2009: 41) states: "[…] complex emotions are shaped to a far greater extent by culture than basic ones." – For a mainly lexical approach to various kinds of honor (among others, "reflexive honor" and "medieval honor") viewed cross-culturally (Western Europe, Bedouins), see Stewart 1994. On honor from a historical perspective, see Frevert 2011: 37-45.
[31] For a detailed analysis of female honor in the *IK*, see Schuler 2009: 222-4.
[32] The underlying meaning: the woman has been disempowered by the loss of both sexuality and status.
[33] Compare the chart in Franklin 2010: 87 (Aristotle's theory of anger), from which I have profited greatly.



Emotions and Their Semantics in the Ritual[34]

Emotions are not only an important component in the construction of reality within narratives, but an elementary part of ritual practice as well,[35] though there they are consciously aroused emotions. They may range from the joy felt in the presence of the goddess, to the goddess's pride at being seen and worshiped, to devotees' hopes of receiving help. Rituals are bound up with the body and use it to express emotion.[36] Like narrative structures, rituals shape underlying emotional material so as to give heightened form and expression to emotions.

The most frequent emotion produced by the ritual we are discussing here is eroticized joy, a socially desirable emotion. This emotion predominates, even though other emotions, such as fear of ritual failure, unexpected possession by the deity, or other feelings on the part of devotees are featured as well. Five emotions and their semantics play a crucial role in our ritual: recognition, eroticized ecstatic joy, rage, satisfaction, and fulfillment.[37] They are produced

[34] It must be noted that the emotions consciously aroused in the ritual are generally not identified as such terminologically, but can only be ascertained through psychological and anthropological analysis, on the basis of bodily expression, interviews with the ritual agents, film documentation, and one's own perceptive acumen as a participating observer.

[35] On various aspects of the relation between emotion and ritual, see Scheff 1977; Kapferer 1979; McCauley 2001; Collins 2004; Chaniotis 2010; Michaels and Wulf 2012 (still inaccessible when this paper was submitted).

[36] On the body and emotion, see Gerhards 1988: 99ff; Casimir and Schnegg 2002: 280ff.

[37] All five emotions are aroused in the figure Icakki, who in the ritual is perceived as having been apotheosized into a goddess. – In my case study, satisfaction and fulfillment both have the status

within particular ritual modules, and correlate with different outward effects and individual physical expressions. Though we seem to be speaking here of normal emotions, in our context they can equally be regarded as religious emotions.[38]

Consciously aroused emotions	*Associated physical expression*	*Ritual module*	*Effect*
Recognition	*The appearance of the goddess's statue in a state of gorgeous flowering (symbolic of sexual maturation)*	*Alaṅkāra tīpārātaṉai (alaṅkāram means 'embellishment'; 'beautification')*	*The goddess emerges physically; honor restored*
Eroticized ecstatic joy	*The goddess rolling on the flowerbed; throwing flowers in the air; seeming ecstasy that, in tandem with the flowerbed's response, suggests an orgasmic act; joyous playfulness (viḷaiyāṭutal);[39] charming smile; erotic look; body smear with red mañcaṇai paste; kuravai sound from the ritual assistants*	*Flowerbed (pūp-paṭukkai); finding the Pandanus odoratissimus flower*	*The power of the goddess is felt: self-procreation of the goddess*
Eroticized ecstatic joy	*Dance; the goddess swinging the fiery torch and proudly stroking her chest; face brightens; smiles charmingly*	*Fiery torch (tīpantam) possession dance*	*The presence of the goddess in an environment of heat is felt to be potentially dangerous but also potentially fertilizing.*
Rage	*Deadly tension; a howl*	*The fusion of story (villuppāṭṭu)*	*Ritual depth (explosion of emotion);*

of an emotional experience. I assume that here both phenomena rightly count as emotions. However, they are seldom included by theorists in lists of emotions (two exceptions are Arieti 1970 and Solomon 1993). Indeed, one may ask what exactly accounts for their neglect in the topical literature, which recognizes other complex emotions, for instance, trust and compassion (see Engelen 2009: 40)? My account of satisfaction and fulfillment are, of course, only descriptive, and need much further research.

[38] According to Riis and Woodhead 2010: 54 "*[a]ny* emotion can be religious," not only hope, faith, and feelings related to death, but anger, ecstasy and others as well. "What makes an emotion religious, is [...] the fact that it occurs within a religious context [...]" (ibid.: 54).

[39] The Tamil word for 'play, amusement' (*viḷaiyāṭal*), unlike in English, can also convey the meaning 'love-play' (*kātal viḷaiyāṭal*).

		and ritual (ritual enters into the old reality of the story in order to build a new reality)	*reorientation*
Satisfaction	*The goddess drinks blood; a deep howl; she lolls out her tongue; she sets the kid goat on her lap, as if a newborn baby were being laid down gently by its mother*	*Food offering (poṅkal paṟippu paṭaippu), the tuvaḷai kid goat sacrifice, and the drinking of the kid's blood (providing new life)*	*Reintegration (through the food offering); the creative power of the goddess is aroused (from her having drunk blood)*
Fulfillment	*Intimate togetherness; oboe-like nātasvaram plays mildly*	*Māppiḷḷai mañcappiḷḷai ritual with divination (creating babies for childless couples*	*Socially positive behavior; aruḷ, a "presence that is […] full."*[40]

We start with the first emotion in the chart: recognition. This complex emotion presupposes a self-image.[41] Shaped to a great extent by culture, it gives rise to less physical arousal than a basic emotion. Externally triggered, it seems to be closely linked to an honor code with whose underlying emotional fundament it forms a unit.[42]

The second ritually aroused emotion is eroticized ecstatic joy.[43] Facial expressions and gestures are the reflex of this emotion that can be most directly grasped.[44] They express sensual surrender to gratifying bodily stimuli. A maximum intensity of passion and susceptibility to a sudden release of tension are characteristic indicators. The experiencing of the highest degree of vitality is

[40] The translation is Shulman's (in Shulman and Stroumsa 2002: 146). Literally *aruḷ* means 'grace.'

[41] On complex emotions that are intimately bound up with one's self-image, see Engelen 2009: 40; Heelas 1986: 236.

[42] Particularly in the context of honor, questions of one's construal of one's own self must be considered; see Markus and Kitayama 1991, 1994; Mesquita and Karasawa 2004. Markus and Kitayama 1991 provide a specific model that characterizes the self in Western cultures as "independent" and Asian cultures – most particularly – as "interdependent," the latter marked by a shared identity with other people. Their model has become an important basis for investigations into self-conscious emotions (see Mesquita and Karasawa 2004).

[43] This is confirmed by remarks of the main pūjārī: "After the pūjās with the *mēḷam* [music] she is filled with an excess of joy. In the afternoon, in the evening, and at midnight *(camakoṭai)*, these three times" (interview with Veyilukanta Perumāḷ Piḷḷai on 19 January 2003).

[44] On ecstasy as "the intense expression of happiness," see Rouner 1997: 95. Cf. Solomon 1993: 275.

associated with this emotion. From the Hindu religious point of view, it opens itself up to the transcendent.

The danger of rage, defined as "anger out of control" (a phrase adopted from Lewis 1992: 153), makes relations among the living and between the living and the dead an important theme. It is stored up, and its explosion is to be feared. This emotion is accompanied by extreme tension and a high potential to be expressed as violence. It is regarded as a form of demonic possession and thus represents a state of emergency. The female rage in the present context,[45] which needs to be taken account of in any gender-specific model of wronged women, is associated with the divine and the transcendent.[46]

If rage has defensive value, satisfaction is an emotional state resulting from the gratification of needs and relief from conflicting emotions.[47] It is an emotion of fulfilled expectancy and an attained goal, fostering a tendency to feel at ease and to move towards (rather than of tension and movement away from or against). This emotion expresses itself in a howl.

Fulfillment is another of the emotions that have heightened meaning in the ritual. This emotion is not visible for others, since it is not accompanied by specific forms of expression. The ritual closely links it to 'being what one can be'; that is, it is the fulfillment of one's inherent potential. The ritual's notion of fulfillment goes hand in hand with a sense of happiness (cf. Franklin 2010: 9f., 13f.) and with a commitment to be social. In the case of the goddess it culminates in *aruḷ.*[48]

The Transformation of Emotion: The Ritual Segments of Flowerbed and Divination

It is assumed that the transformation of emotions is a constituent part of the ritual under discussion. The rolling on the flowerbed and the divinatory spinning of the coconut are indices of such transformative processes.

The Emotional Transformation of the Goddess

The ritual segment most relevant to the transformative process of the goddess is the flowerbed. Her rolling on the flowerbed is the very transformative process itself. There is good reason to assume that the flowerbed is, moreover, the goddess; more precisely, another version of herself, namely, the one which is

[45] Female rage in our context is a cry for social change.

[46] The sacredness of rage is an important tenet of Hinduism (a similar attitude finds expression in Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* in the *Oresteia* trilogy).

[47] Satisfaction has received little consideration in the literature on emotion. One of the exceptions is Arieti 1970: 136f, who has defined it, thereby including it in the list of basic emotions. I have greatly profited from his definition.

[48] Compare Solomon's (1993: 235f.) definition of "contentment," which seemingly combines the meanings of both satisfaction and fulfillment.

fertile. It may be proposed that the act of her rolling is a sensuous and playful[49] three-dimensional movement towards the heart of her cosmos, which is seen to be erotic and harmonious. In concrete terms, it is a movement into and through the three layers of the flowerbed towards the center, the location of the *Pandanus odoratissimus* and the areca flower, flowers which signify sexuality.[50] Finding these flowers is, in our terms, finding and merging with the fertile version of herself. Thus the rolling on the flowerbed is a visible manifestation of an inward transformative process that leads to a change in the goddess's cosmos, which now reveals itself to be profoundly social.

Divination

The ritual segment most relevant to the transformative process of the childless couples is the spinning of the coconut. Here the goddess shows her true creative potential.

The spinning of the coconut can be viewed as spinning the wife back into the space of the couple – or to put it differently, as spinning the couple into and through each other, and through the goddess's fertile cosmos as well. The decisive moment of the divinatory spinning is meant to unblock the forces of fertility that have been dysfunctional in the couple. The spinning has a transformative dynamic that is directed by the goddess. It is she who spins or rolls the coconut. Waiting for the coconut to stop rolling and 'speak the sign' (*kuṟi col*) is a highly suspenseful and spiritually heightened moment.[51]

To sum up the transformative program of the ritual, it manages to do what the split goddess and the childless women – I believe we can view them as analogous – could not have done by themselves.

Emotion and Ritual Depth

Ritual depth is closely interlinked with an intermediate phase between no longer and not yet (Victor Turner [1969: 95] speaks of "betwixt and between"). It is a sacred time on an "unspaced" plane,[52] when the divine presence is felt. But it is also a time of challenge, and last but not least, a time of intensified emotions. Given that the *kuravai* sound – and the howl, too – mark points of extreme ritual depth,[53] it is important to be alert to the heightened emotional moments that accompany them.

[49] Hence it is said to be the *viḷaiyāṭal* mode of the goddess.

[50] On the erotic associations of *Pandanus odoratissimus* flowers, see Gupta 2001: 62f.

[51] I cannot go into descriptive details here, and merely refer the reader to Schuler 2009: 313f.

[52] On the notion of "unspaced," see Handelman 1999: 70. When he speaks of "unspaced time, "he is referring to "inner and concert time," to a "nonmediated immediacy" (70) that "shape[s] the emergence of the divine self" (67). For a neurobiological explanation of the "unspaced" and "timeless" quality of ritual experience, see Laderman 1991: 89.

[53] Blackburn (1980: 255) states: "the kuravai ululation [...] contribute[s] to the extreme ritual depth of the possession [...]."

In this endeavor, the following intensified emotional moments can be identified: There is first of all eroticized ecstatic joy upon finding the *Pandanus odoratissimus* flower, but also the moment of revenge killing (*IK*), both of which events are marked by ritual depth and accompanied by a *kuravai* sound. There is furthermore the moment of a furious explosion of emotion when the peg (*kāñciram muḷai*) at the top of Icakki's head is pulled out (local story),[54] and the moment of killing the *tuvaḷai* kid goat and drinking its blood. Particularly the latter is a moment that is "filled with the ambiguity of potency," since it violently connects death to life and severs life from death.[55] Here ritual depth is marked by a howl. A similarly highly suspenseful and spiritually heightened moment is the waiting for the divinatory coconut to stop rolling and speak the sign.

Musical instruments and silence play their part at moments of ritual depth as well. During the explosion of emotion – at this crucial moment of anger out of control – we witness exciting drumbeats, the high-pitched singing style of the bow-song, and the possession, each attracting and sending the other two spiraling to new heights. This is the moment that the audience is seized, since all is now synchronized.[56] We can see that the ritual participants must go beyond dramatic emotion and become filled with spiritual emotion.

Emotion Management

Any culture has at its disposal models for coding and managing emotions. These models are stored in its cultural memory.[57] The ritual (along with the *IK*; see Schuler 2010b) represents one such cultural memory. Its management of emotion is geared to alter emotions themselves.[58] It works on intense and even extreme emotions, reinforcing the positive emotions until they become powerful, overwhelming, and eventually the center of the participants' being.

If we consider the ritual's task as a coping with some crisis, namely a blocking of essential functions and resources, we can make out two domains that play a major part in the coping process: the domain of emotions that result from "stressors" (Frijda 1986: 290), in connection with the image of the self, and the domain of cognition that constitutes the emotional memory. An analysis shows that no problem-oriented approach is used for the coping. Rather, an emotion-centered method is applied. No change in the system-environment relationship is sought; rather, a shift in perception and in the meaning ascribed to the emotions (cf. Vester 1991: 54).

Importance is attached to ritual as a learning model. The emotional program of the ritual we are discussing here supplies a template for organizing emotions

[54] For descriptive details, see Schuler 2009: 306.
[55] I borrow this phrase from Kapferer 1997: 190, who uses it to explain the act of killing itself.
[56] For further details, see Schuler 2009: 305f.
[57] A term coined by Jan Assmann 1992.
[58] Compare this with modern emotional self-management, based on "the belief that everyone has the capacity to intervene strategically in the making of their emotions" (Neckel 2009: 192).

anew. The program thus guides and is supportive of emotional clarification. It allows one to gain control over one's emotions and has sufficient force to transport the goddess (and with her perhaps some of the childless couples) into a state of eroticized joy and deep satisfaction.

The program, however, also allows for a significant degree of disorder and chaos when relating the violent stories, and so recognizes the expression of emotions that are normally not sanctioned (cf. Riis and Woodhead 2010: 80). Particularly the moments of possession, those times when the host is absent from his body, permit the expression of feelings that run contrary to what is accepted in public. And last but not least, the emotional program of the ritual allows for emotional transcendence through the experiencing of the divine presence as the goddess transforms herself.

Emotional Style and Emotional Community

Emotional style is intimately linked to the complexities of group culture. Given the variety of ways in which emotions are understood and 'tasted' (e.g. through world views, group mentalities), it is not surprising to find a broad spectrum of emotional styles. Certain emotions are thought to cause harm unless released. However, how this is done differs, depending on the emotional style. Some groups tend to treat such emotions by calling supernatural agencies and possession (*cāmiyāṭṭam*) into play; others do not.

Clearly socio-cultural contexts influence how people feel and behave (Röttger-Rössler 2004; Solomon 1997). Ritual practice is no exception to this, and indeed it readily lends itself to the influencing of emotions. It dictates the emotional style – most notably that of the group to which the ritual specialists belong (cf. Schuler 2010a: 182f.) – and formulates its own emotional code.[59]

But what is the emotional style of the ritual practice under discussion like? The repetition of emotions like joy and ecstasy is striking. This emotional domain is the predominant one. An aestheticized pattern is established by means of repetitive phenomena, and semiotically rich forms of expression (music, narration, botanical markers, food offerings, fiery torch dance). The style is subtle, seductive, exorcising, intense, extroverted, intimate, and explicitly eroticized. There is one more feature to add: challenging. Joy is emphasized, but rage is not suppressed. Thus the described emotional style allows for the expression of all emotions, as necessary. At the same time, great care is taken to aestheticize the evoked emotions so as to make for the fullest experience of their essence.

[59] My use of the expression emotional code (or rule) follows Hochschild (2003: 57). Emotional rules are, according to this author, expressions of social norms (emotional norms) that influence individuals' emotions. Emotional rules provide (and here I borrow a phrase from Heelas 1986: 252) information about "how people should or should not feel" and "what people should do if their emotions are to remain in accord with the moral order."

Turning to the question of "emotional community," I cite Barbara Rosenwein who coined and defined the term as "groups of people animated by common or similar interests, values, and emotional styles and valuations" (Plamper 2010: 253). I doubt that all individuals who participate in our ritual can be associated with the emotional style described above. Nevertheless, they form an emotional group or community established by the ritual. This community consists of people from various social backgrounds who enter a common space that fosters a distinctive sensibility. They are united through their shared experience of a crisis (including sharing in the goddess's emotions and experiences). Beyond that, they come together to experience the emotional transformation of the divine and, if fortunate, of themselves as well.

Concluding Remarks

The present article comprises two interlocking parts: first, the dominant emotions named in the story of the goddess Icakki, and second, the consciously aroused emotions in her ritual. That a transition from one emotional program (that of the story) to another (that of the ritual) takes place thereby becomes clear. Such a design is only natural for a ritual that is primarily performed to review and alter certain emotions and master a crisis.

At the outset of the investigation, the first question raised was: What is considered an emotion by the Tamil culture, and what is not? I think I have been able to demonstrate that phenomena such as recognition, satisfaction, and fulfillment display enough family resemblance that they can be subsumed under the term emotion. A further central question of the paper was: What meaning is attached by the local culture to specific emotions?

In the foregoing we saw that emotions belonging to the honor–rage complex – semantically only little differentiated between ritual and story – are expressed as emotions that are taken seriously by the culture. It can be assumed that loss of honor (along with the attendant denial of recognition) overwhelms the one so dishonored and leads to rage strong enough to turn murderous. However, the honor–rage relation in our context does not spiral out of control, with the rage itself becoming a new source of honor being withheld (cf. shame–rage in Casimir and Schnegg 2002: 290). It leads rather to an act of honoring and a halfway sympathetic reaction to events. This seems to have to do with the fact that rage has a moral aspect to it and is assumed to preserve values (Power and Dalgleish 1997: 304f.; Demmerling 2007: 289). Thus aggression is diversely appraised. The case of Icakki demonstrates what categories of aggression in the traditional popular culture are 'just' and which ones are penalized.

The data used in this paper indicate that whenever rage surfaces, the way to cope optimally is through recognition and inducing pleasure/joy,[60] both

[60] On pleasure as an emotional strategy from the perspective of a neurobiologist, see Damasio 1999: 78. In our context, pleasure is produced by highly vivid sensual perceptions: the sound of

correlated with and generative of prosocial behavior in the wronged and enraged personage.[61] While joy seems to be an emotion associated with social bonds and relationships, recognition is closely bound up with the honor code, which in turn influences well-being.[62]

There is one more thing that the ritual can supply as an emotional resource, and that the text inscribed in cultural memory does not offer: fulfilment and satisfaction. The semantic range of optimal physical and psychic well-being within this extremely complex model of emotion–value correlations can probably best be described in terms, both socially and individually, of fullness.

It has been demonstrated that the ritual shows how to cope with honor lost, joy denied, uncontrollable rage, and tension. The solutions provided are expected to function as models of emotional behavior during domestic crises.

In the end, the conclusion is reached that the ritual of violent goddesses calls for emotional rules to be violated.[63] This I have attempted to validate based on the examples of female rage and eroticized ecstatic joy. Neither is generally 'allowed' publicly, the one because it is feared and considered disgraceful and antisocial, and therefore to be masked; the other because a woman's modesty (*kaṟpu*),[64] a normative quality, needs to be observed. However, in the ritual neither emotion is negatively marked as a violation of norms. On the contrary, a revitalizing function is assigned to them.

Thus the violent goddess Icakki and her story (offense–rage–retaliation) causes a good deal of our attention to be turned to undesirable emotions and domestic problems. The ritual, conversely, directs attention to positive emotions via the broadest possible range of shared understanding. The dangerous, unpredictable, and antisocial emotions of stored rage and vengefulness are temporarily done away with in the ritual. Yet their role in people's conception of the goddess's cosmos is paramount, as is the case with recognition and honor denied. These emotions the Tamil local tradition quite unequivocally places in Icakki's hands. But there is another, hidden side, as it were, to the goddess's cosmos. This is the fertile version of the goddess's cosmos. In order for it to emerge, it needs ritual practice.

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a drum, the touch of fresh flowers, the smell of the fragrant *pandanus* flower, and the dance, among other things.

[61] For the correlation of joy and pro-social behavior, cf. Vester 1991: 176.

[62] On the honor–well-being connection, cf. Casimir 2009: 299.

[63] For the success of the ritual, the boundaries of women's socially accepted roles need to be overstepped, and female rage publicly expressed.

[64] According to David Shulman, Hebrew University of Jerusalem (personal communication), *kaṟpu* refers not merely to a woman's modesty but her deeper spiritual being as well.

Nidān December 2012

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From Fierce to Domesticated: Mariyamman Joins the Middle Class[1]

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Abstract

The fever goddess Mariyamman, worshipped by Hindus of the southern Deccan of South Asia, is traditionally reputed to be a formidable, demanding and frequently angry goddess who insists upon regular shows of fervent devotion. Without them, she can become vengeful, vindictive and destructive. In her most frightening guises she will send plagues of fever on those who ignore her. The mythologies associated with her portray her as a 'wronged' woman, seeking rightful recompense for the injustices she has suffered in life. Usually men and the male establishment have been the instruments of these injustices. The most important of her traditional shrines in Tamil Nadu is the temple of Samayapuram, located in the midst of an isolated agricultural tract in a village whose economy is organized today around the worship of this goddess. But a new generation of upwardly-mobile Hindus have left the rural, agricultural context and have moved to the city to find middle-class employment in an economy that has seen remarkable gains in the past 50 years. A new kind of Mariyamman is thus appearing; one portrayed as much more accessible, less foreboding and less intimidating. Her temples have been organized into social service agencies, and the blood sacrifices and physically demanding forms of worship typical of the rural context have been replaced by moderated forms of devotion that focus on meditation, singing and act of charity in the community.

Key Words: Mariyamman, Samayapuram, Melmaruvattur,

Introduction

It has been common in the study of Hindu goddesses to couch analyses in bifurcated oppositions. These dualities have often proved helpful in the attempt to sort out the bewildering varieties of goddesses found in India. A.K. Ramanujan and Stuart Blackburn have, for instance, suggested a distinction between "goddesses of control" as opposed to

[1] *An initial version of this essay was presented as a paper at the Conference on Religions in the Indic Civilization, organized by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, New Delhi, in collaboration with the IIC and the IAHR, Dec 18-21, 2003. An earlier version of the paper appeared in* ***Manushi****, no 140, Jan-Feb, 2004, Pp. 2-14. It is reproduced here by permission of* ***Manushi.***

"goddesses of release". Goddesses of control are reserved, dependable, and unlikely to be depicted as passionate. Goddesses of release are unpredictable, sometimes erotic and sometimes angry, but never conventional.[2]

Goddesses have also been grouped according to whether they form a part of the "great tradition" or the "little tradition". And then there are the meat-eating goddesses as opposed to the well-heeled and less threatening vegetarian ones.[3] Married goddesses, again, tend to be the domesticated Lakshmis, the maternal Parvatis, and the cultured Saraswatis, in distinction from the threatening likes of Durga, Chandi and Mariyamman.[4]

These categories can prove helpful as heuristic devices and as organizing models, with all their implications for what persons (if any) may serve as priests; for the tenor, format, timing and intentions of worship, for the thematic mythologies attached to the goddesses and for which worshippers present themselves at shrines. But the realities are more subtle and far less neat. The classifications are permeable, in part because the worship, mythologies, and perceived "personalities" of goddesses change from one region to another, from one time period to another and from one community to another. M.N. Srinivas has noted this problem in his attempt to fine tune his analysis of Hindu deities by proposing three categories: the all-India deities, the regional deities and the strictly local deities, with overlaps occurring between each of the categories. But even with this refinement, goddesses are much too dynamic to stay put in any category forever.

Mariyamman, I have discovered, is one such goddess, for she fits not simply all three of these categories, but a fourth, which Srinivas might wish to have named "diasporic deities" – goddesses, that is, whose temples have moved beyond the boundaries of India to Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Paris, Port-au-Prince and Detroit. I propose to show how Mariyamman seems to have undergone tremendous mobility among these shifting categories, how her personality and functions have changed in the

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[2] Ramanujan and Blackburn (eds.), *Another Harmony*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986, p.20-21.

[3] The distinction was first suggested in Srinivas, M.N., *Religion and Society Among the Coorgs of South India*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952 and later developed by Milton Singer in *When a Great Tradition Modernizes: An Anthropological Approach to Indian Civilization*, Foreword by M.N. Srinivas, New York: Praeger Publications, 1972. On meat eating deities, see Dumont, Louis, "A Structural Definition of a Folk Deity of Tamilnad: Aiyanar the Lord", *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, n.s., No. 3 (1959): 75-87

[4] Babb, Lawrence A., "Marriage and Malevolence: The Uses of Sexual Opposition in a Hindu Pantheon", *Ethnology*, 9, No. 2 (1970): 137-148.

views of her worshippers and how another bifurcatory scheme (urban middle-class society as opposed to rural, subsistence, agrarian-based culture) might suggest new insights into the dynamics of goddess analysis in South Asia. The change in Mariyamman's nature can be delineated with particular specificity when we look at how the worship of this goddess has changed from the practices of older generations, whose residential roots tend often to be rural, to those of the younger generations, who have moved to the cities to pursue the opportunities middle-class lifestyle offers.



Figure 1: A RURAL MARIYAMMAN SHRINE, ATTENDED BY A PRIEST
(Photo by author)

Tracing Transitions

A year ago I was confident that this insight was exclusively my own. I have since discovered that several others have noticed the same phenomenon and have been writing about it with sophistication. In one case outside India, the rural traditions represented by Mariyamman were not able to make a successful transition to the urban middle-class environment. Elizabeth Collins' book on Hinduism in Malaysia notes an

explicit shift of worship and devotion over the past several generations, from agrarian, estate-based, rural Mariyamman temples – patronized by land owners and their bonded laborers – to more middle-class urban religions which these bonded laborers are now adopting as they leave their menial work in the countryside to seek middle-class clerical and managerial work in the cities. Collins observes that instead of adapting Mariyamman's cult to a new environment, worshippers among the newly upwardly-mobile middle classes are moving toward a worship of Murukan instead.[5]4 This could well be attributed to the fact that Malaysian Tamils, leaving rural work as indentured laborers, tend to have been devotees of Mariyamman at a shrine built and sponsored by landlord landholders. In leaving their indentured roots behind them, devotees might also be inclined to abandon Mariyamman as a symbol of the servitude perpetrated on them by their erstwhile landlords.

But such a trend seems to be the exception. In India, at least, the rural worship of Mariyamman is not displaced by the urban worship of another deity. Rather, Mariyamman changes. She develops another, more respectable, middle-class face.
James Preston has noted the growth and subsequent prosperity of goddess temples in the cities of Orissa. He finds that it tends to be those newly arrived immigrants to the cities from the villages who frequent such temples because the goddess, more associated with rural religiosity, provides newly-arrived immigrants with a much-needed sense of continuity and belonging. Joanne Waghorne has written most clearly about this process of what she calls "bourgeoisification" among the devotees of Mariyamman. She notes that, in Chennai, goddess temples, especially those dedicated to Mariyamman, seem to be transforming themselves into major middle-class institutions with middleclass values. These values reflect a concern for cleanliness, a disdain for the slovenly character of the slums in which these temples are often found (traditionally Mariyamman is considered a low-caste deity), a mixing of middle- to upper-middle class worshippers regardless of caste distinctions, a decorum in worship that eschews dramatic blood sacrifices and ecstatic possession trances, and an architecture that emphasizes much less the royal palace model and much more the home-like, domestic environment.

Writes Waghorne of one dramatic re-consecration ceremony of a major Mariyamman Temple in the city: the event, "a *mahakumbabhisekam* marked…." a key moment for this neighborhood: the articulation of a *consciously* multi-caste activity openly called "middle-class" in English. This Goddess temple further marks a new turn in middle-class religious

[5] See Collins, Elizabeth Fuller, *Pierced by Murugan's Lance: Ritual, Power, and Moral Redemption Among Malaysian Hindus*, DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1997.

sensibilities in relation to newer lower castes, new working classes and to shared *rural* roots. This temple and other goddess shrines like it, here and throughout Chennai, are giving shape architecturally and ritually to new religious sensibilities that are, I will contend, a vital part of what British historian Robert Stern calls the "bourgeois revolution" in India: "a momentous event not only in its own history but the world's." (1993, 6; also see p. 3)

Both Preston and Waghorne are concerned with the changes in the circumstances of goddess worship from earlier generations to the present one. My concern focuses more directly on the shift in peoples' perceptions of the goddess. How are her mythologies changing? How is her perceived 'personality' – as reflected in the stories about her and in the way people report their devotion to her – undergoing a clear modification?

This article proceeds in three distinct steps. First, I want to talk about the general traits of the more traditional goddess Mariyamman. They are most dramatically represented by her largest and most famous rural temple in the village of Samayapuram in Tamil Nadu, my next area of focus. Last, I move to what I identify as the new form of Mariyamman by inspecting a recent temple, 94 kilometers south of the state's capital Chennai, in the town of Melmaruvattur where, in this terrible *Kali Yuga* – this age of corruption, distress, destruction and the obliteration of tradition – the goddess has chosen incarnation in the form of a living, breathing, married-with-four-children human male, the famous Pankaru Atikalar, known simply as "Amma," the Mother.

A Goddess to Reckon With

I turn now to my foil: that goddess against which middle-class change shall be measured, the more traditional Mariyamman.[6] There is no way to know how long Mariyamman has been worshipped in southern India. The earliest written documents about her come quite late in her history and date from the 18th century. The earlier, rural Mariyamman is no middle-of-the road, namby-pamby, love and light, lace and silk goddess. She is much more active than decorative. She is said to cause, prevent and alleviate illnesses characterized by fevers or diseases pertaining to the eyes. She is worshipped primarily in the southern portion of the Indian subcontinent, in Sri Lanka and in Southeast Asia, most frequently among speakers of Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam or Tulu. Her most dramatic association is with deadly pestilences that suggest her common, but not entirely accurate, appellation, "The Smallpox Goddess."

[6] One of the earlier works that made Mariyamman visible in the Western world is Henry Whitehead's classic, *The Village Gods of South India*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1921.

Thousands of temples, particularly in agricultural and village settings, are dedicated to this goddess, whose name has undergone occasional and specifically localizing transformations, such as Karumariyamman, Bhadramariyamman, and Muttumariyamman.

Several etymologies have been offered for the basic forms of her names. *"Muttu"* is a word that means "pearl" but suggests the disfiguring pustules contracted during an onset of smallpox or chickenpox, pustules often referred to as "pearls". Certain iconographic representations depict the goddess aspersing these "pearls" onto humans from the ends of a flywhisk or a feather. The term "*mari"* is associated with pestilence and disease, giving one possible meaning to her literally translated title, "the disease mother". Others have associated the word "*mari*" with her ability to change suddenly, for "*mari*" can also mean, "To change" in Tamil. She is often described as having an unpredictably dangerous capacity for anger and violence. Still others have proposed that "*mari*" has a third meaning: "rain". She has been described, sometimes euphemistically, as a cool goddess or as a goddess whose image likes to be cooled with water. Because she is traditionally most active in the peak of the hot season, when contagious fevers pose great dangers and when rains are desirable, she is approached by worshippers requesting coolness and rain.

The term "*amman*" means "mother" and is more honorific than descriptive of a mythically attributed biological status. I have encountered no instance in which Mariyamman is a functional mother with actual children. She has been described as a widow who has murdered her husband; as a mistreated (sometimes raped) young girl whose propensity for vengeance must be propitiated; as a woman expelled from her home for the slightest of offences by some vindictive male in the family; even as a deified witch of a woman who developed the unfortunate habit of kidnapping and devouring children. The local stories vary remarkably from one village to another, but tend to paint the picture of a virtuous woman (in most cases, though not all), turned viciously dangerous and ready to wreak havoc on a civilization that has spurned her, a civilization dominated by males.

It is likely that in the Dravidian linguistic regions Mariyamman is the most commonly worshipped of all goddesses. Though most widely known in her role as an agent of fevers and diseases such as cholera and smallpox, she has also been credited with causing and relieving tuberculosis and chicken pox. She is frequently homologized to Sitala, a goddess of fevers found in central and northeastern India; others have understood Mariyamman to be a form of Durga or Kali. But the rituals and mythologies involved in the veneration of Mariyamman are quite different from any of these other goddesses.

Mapping Origins

Many of the stories about Mariyamman's origins are concerned with issues of caste. Her beginnings are often portrayed as being once respectable and high-caste, despite the fact that her worshippers and ritual ministrants generally come from the less 'pure' castes. She is pictured often as having once been the virtuous and perfect wife of a great *rishi* or the daughter of a high caste family. But then she suffers an unfortunate mishap which changes her life forever: inappropriate sexual advances by humans, *rishis* or celestial beings who, rebuffed, angrily curse her to take on the form of a pox-covered and deformed low caste human. In other cases, she is a high-caste woman whose father and brothers negligently give her in marriage to a low-caste man, condemning her, therefore, to be forever defiled. One round of myths describes how Mariyamman is beheaded by her own son, along with a low-caste companion, but then the two are miraculously revived and the heads are mistakenly transposed. The woman with the Brahmin head and the low-caste body becomes Mariyamman.

Generally in these stories, if Mariyamman has been inappropriately married to a low-caste man, her discovery of it precedes the appearance of her ferocious anger as she burns her husband to ashes, becoming a widow, and assumes the role of a superhuman force characterized by heat, anger and feverish vengeance. However she also expresses concern for justice, piety and proper conduct. Worshipped properly, she will protect; neglected, she will take quick offense.



Figure 2: DEVOTEES, HONORING MARIYAMMAN BY CARRYING FIREPOTS (Photo by author)

The Rigors of Worship

Perhaps most compelling in the worship of this goddess is the remarkable enthusiasm displayed during her annual festivals which most commonly occur in the hot season of April and May. Festivals celebrated in her honor will include upwards of ten days of activity during which time devotees will decorate either themselves or the gifts they give to the goddess with *neem* leaves, said to be sacred to her. Frequently a three-pronged post from the *neem* tree will be erected outside her shrine, sometimes understood to be an aniconic image of the husband whom she killed. At other times during the year a rough-hewn stone pillar serves that symbolic function. Because the goddess is believed to become heated during the festival season, certain devotees will vow to measure out multiple pots of water around the foundations or the entrances of her temples, in an effort to cool her. Others will take on the heated state she experiences by carrying firepots in processions throughout the town, ending at the temple. There the pots are offered to the goddess in a communal activity, often involving members of the extended family. The clay pots are filled with oil-soaked woodchips which are then ignited as the devotee endures the heat of the flaming pot during the journey to the temple.

The use of *neem* leaves as protection from the heat is one of many instances of the alternations between the colors red and green, suggesting the ambivalent nature of a goddess associated with both red heat and green coolness Fire-walking is also common: large pits filled with glowing coals provide a path over which devotees briskly walk barefoot in fulfillment of vows made. Sacrifices of male animals, most frequently goats and cocks, constitute that portion of the worship reserved for those who wish to offer blood to the goddess. Frequently humans will offer their own blood by piercing their tongues and cheeks; by pulling large wooden carts (attached to sturdy metal hooks embedded in a devotee's flesh) through the streets; or by sliding long metal skewers through the flesh near the ribs.

The practice of hook-swinging (whereby devotees are suspended from a pole and pierced in the flesh as they hang, attached only to the hooks) also occurs. Traditionally, most temples dedicated to Mariyamman have not been staffed by members of the Brahmin community because the goddess is generally understood to appreciate blood sacrifices. Many of the stories about the goddess specifically associate her with service castes, including barbers and washer folk.

Mariyamman also has a reputation as a goddess whose spirit is able to possess certain individuals, entering their bodies and assuming control. Her festivals can sometimes turn into events of major ecstatic trance possession. Generally, when she possesses a devotee she will speak through that person to express concerns about ritual slights she may have suffered during prior years or about particular offerings she wishes to be given. While such possessions tend to be regarded as auspicious, it is generally the case that devotees prefer not to deal with Mariyamman outside the festival or temple context. In the traditional rural context it is considered unwise to have an image of Mariyamman in the home. She is generally not a goddess to whom domestic hospitality is gladly offered. When serious illness attributed to Mariyamman occurs in the home, the afflicted person can be treated as the physical embodiment of the goddess. The home becomes a quasi-temple and it is decorated with *neem* leaves. Nothing foreign is admitted to the presence of the afflicted person lest the goddess (who is averse to the strange) be incited to feverish and potentially deadly anger. The sight of pregnant women is also forbidden, for the goddess is understood to be childless and could fly into a jealous rage at the sight of a mother-to-be.



Figure 3: POSSESSED BY THE GODDESS, CARRYING A FIREPOT (Photo by author)

A Goddess Revised

Because Mariyamman has been chiefly associated with smallpox plagues in the past, observers of Indian religious dynamics have speculated that her popularity and influence might well dissipate with the reported eradication of that disease in the last few decades of the 20th century. Those speculations have not proved accurate. Mariyamman is, true to her name, a changing goddess. Her temples are appearing more frequently in larger cities and her worship has developed an increasingly respectable, high-caste, Sanskritic character, with a de-emphasis on blood sacrifices and an increasing stress on her character as benign, gracious and generous. She continues to cause and cure illnesses involving fever, specially tuberculosis, cholera and typhoid. She also continues to inspire mediums whom she possesses and grants gifts of prophecy and clairvoyance. Her ability to change with the times is a clear testament to the esteem in which her devotees hold her, and to the persistence of the many traditions that coalesce in the image of a gracious, loving but unpredictable mother, worthy of fearful respect but concerned profoundly with the health and welfare of those devoted to her.

The temple of Mariyamman at Samayapuram illustrates both the goddess' traditional character as well as great change. In the past 30 years this temple has seen tremendous growth and development. Today it is one of the richest temples in southern India. Hundreds of buses disgorge thousands of pilgrims each day who come, make quick money offerings to the goddess and then leave quickly. It is not a particularly tranquil or spiritual place to tarry. Thousands of ill people have come to live at the temple, waiting for healing. They line the outer corridors and, as they beg other temple-goers for sustenance, their open sores, disfiguring body rashes, crumbling leprous limbs, screams of feverish delirium and nauseating odors all make it clear that folks concerned with purity or with nursing an appetite for a subsequent good meal would not do well to linger. In addition to this rather dramatic assault on well-heeled sensibilities, hundreds of shrieking, screaming people enter the temple any given day in a frenzied and possessed state, carrying dangerously blazing pots of flame that singe or burn whoever may not be quick enough to avoid them. Others will enter the temple accompanied by intense and deafening drummers, completely "tranced-out", pierced and bleeding, with skewers in their tongues, cheeks, backs or sides. They will have come to make an offering of their own blood to the mother. Often they will shriek out their requests for assistance, healing, grace. A significant proportion of the worshippers are clearly rural, agrarian and living on economic, psychological or physiological margins. I often got the impression that Mariyamman was not their first hope, but their last. Their speech, clothing and manners reveal little sophistication. Religion for them is, first and foremost, concerned with experience and with results. They come to Samayapuram because they expect something very specific.



Figure 4: WORSHIPPERS BEARING FIREPOTS AND NEEM LEAVES
(Photo by author)

But things at Samayapuram are changing. It is not unusual to see a more sophisticated clientele as well. Middle-class people will often travel to the temple, arriving in personal cars or taxis, and they almost always will worship quickly, deposit offerings efficiently and be on their way. It is significant to note that the town has no presentable hotels or temple rest houses. Staying at the nicest, the temple guesthouse is a rat and- roach infested penance in its own right. It is furnished with stinking, urine-stained mattress pads and no running water. But 11 kilometers away, at the urban bus station closest to Samayapuram in the town of Tricky, a brand new 5-star hotel has recently been completed, and in it I met several well-to- do families who had come to the hotel as a staging point for trips to Samayapuram. A few had come from Hindi speaking regions explicitly to visit the famous Samayapuram goddess.

There are other indications that things are changing in Samayapuram. When I visited the temple over 30 years ago, I saw several animal sacrifices occurring at the temple door. If you want to offer animal sacrifices to the goddess these days (and many still do), you cannot do it on temple property. You can give a gift of a live goat or a live chicken, and the gift will be recognized as pleasing to the goddess, but it is sold as

consecrated livestock by the temple to anyone willing to make the purchase. Devotion becomes translated directly into profits rather than into decapitated, twitching, bloody carcasses. This official revision in temple procedure is far more pleasing to the genteel and is less likely to put off the middle-class urbanite that, by the time she reaches the temple door, has already had to run the gauntlet of disfigured and diseased petitioners. But even that is changing. In an effort to remove these unfortunates from the public gaze, the temple *devasthanam* has constructed a hallway adjacent to the temple where only the seriously ill may stay. Their willingness to remain in this hall has not been unwavering, since so many of them depend on begging from healthier temple pilgrims and those visitors under no circumstances may enter this separate hall.

A Flourishing Commerce

Expansion plans are moving in various directions, financed enthusiastically by banks seeking a cut in the spiritual action. A long hallway at the east entrance has effectively tripled the protected floor space of the temple, serving as a place for a very brisk commerce in religious goods during the day and as a somewhat protected dormitory for travelers or long-term supplicants remaining at the temple. A relatively new marriage hall has been constructed, a fact which signals a radical departure from traditions surrounding Mariyamman. She is, even at Samayapuram, unmarried. Tradition associates her with anger toward men, even at this temple where, we are told, her arbitrary expulsion from her original temple home by servants of her big brother ended up with her enshrinement here, because she – both graciously and vindictively – incarnated herself in the form of an infant, about to be killed by her vicious uncle. Rather than permitting this to happen, she transformed herself into the avenging goddess she is now, and condemned the vicious uncle Kamsa to his own just death: a murder which would strike him down one day when he would least expects it.[7]

[7] Mythic materials about Mariyamman have been culled from a variety of sources, the most important of which are: *Arulmiku Samayapuram Mariyamman varalaru, Ptts Veliyitu* (publication sponsored by the Phone Company). A 30- page insert, with advertisements, in the newspaper *Malai Malar*, April 20, 1993. No author mentioned. I am grateful to the Samayapuram *devasthanam* for permission to duplicate this material. *Arulmiku Mariyamman Tirukkoyil Samayapuram, Ilalkuvi Vacanam, Tirucci Mavattam Taippusat Tiruvila: Tinamalar vanankum Cilappu Malar*, a 2-page insert in *Tina Malar* newspaper, February 10, 1998. No author mentioned. Rajintira, V. (Ed.), *Arulmiku Samayapuram Mariyamman Pumalai Varalarum Carntatu*, Tirucci: Shri Letcumi Puttaka Nilaiyam, no date. *Samayapuram Shri Mariyamman Koyil Varalaru*, Shri Rangam: Shri Rankam Tevastana Veliyitu, 1971. No author. *Tiricirapuram Camayapurattil Evuntarutiya Mariyamman Patikam*, Chennai: Periyanayakiyamman Piras, 1915. No author. *Samayapuram (Kannanur) Arulmiku Mariyamman Tirukkoyil*, Varalru: Talamum

But times change, and as respectability and visibility become more important, temples must change to accommodate the respectable, social needs of families who wish to celebrate publicly ostentatious and expensive weddings. Thousands of people each week come to the temple to have a ritual tonsure performed – but this isn't done inside the temple, as it was in the earlier days. It occurs well outside the temple, in an assembly-line setting where the temple has hired (and takes a significant cut from the earnings of) an army of barbers.

Priests inside the temple all identify themselves as Brahmins (a claim that is disputed, but which I could not afford to investigate and, at the same time, remain sure of maintaining direct access to temple proceedings). Temple rituals include elaborate *mantras*. Still, anybody, absolutely anybody, can enter the inner sanctum – for a price. Simply entering the sanctum costs money. Indeed, I have never been in a temple where money seemed to be so prominently featured. The large steel offering boxes ("*undiyal*" in Tamil) were 6 to 8 feet tall, and they were everywhere in the temple. Money, gold, silver, jewels – I saw all these things being placed in them. And I observed that from time to time, as the days grew late, the *undiyals* became so stuffed that devotees had to search out those that were less conveniently placed and so less likely to be full. Nightly, I was told, the *undiyals* are emptied under the watchful eye of accompanying armed guards.

Iruppitamum. No author. No date. 11-page typescript consulted in *devasthanam* offices of the temple.



Figure 5: TRANCE POSSESSION AND DRUMMING AT A MARIYAMMAN FESTIVAL (Photo by author)

The Ironies of Reversal

Samayapuram, then, represents the more traditional, rural approach to the worship of Mariyamman, but it is changing in noticeable ways. Its fantastic financial success, in fact, has brought about a somewhat embarrassing situation in the more traditional Brahmin Sanskritic culture, centered in the huge, classically famous temple to the deity Vishnu, the architectural masterpiece at Sri Rangam about 7 kilometers away. There the deity Vishnu is kept quite pure – only acceptably clad and respectable-looking Hindus may be considered for admission. No amount of money granted me access. But no one is beating down the doors to get in either. Compared with Samayapuram, Sri Rangam feels eerily abandoned and deathly silent: a veritable refuge from the busy activity of the market place or the average goddess temple. And so, every day, thousands of worshippers ride right by Sri Rangam in the shadows of its enormous imposing towers, on their way to the screaming, suffocating, sweating, bleeding crowds that await them at Samayapuram. And, perhaps most revealing, one of the primary sources of income for support of the Sri Rangam temple is an annual gift from the Samayapuram Temple. I met no priests from Sri Rangam who claimed that this was galling, but I met plenty of people who helped administer

the Samayapuram temple and who pointed out this piece of information with some enthusiasm. Indeed, the financial facts seem an interesting reversal of the mythology regarding how the Mariyamman temple originated in the first place.

There are several mythologies about how the Mariyamman temple was constructed. All of them point to the common theme of royal patronage. Just as landed estate owners in Malaysia were expected to be the primary builders of Mariyamman temples there, so kings often are the ones who are responsible for the village temples in Tamil Nadu. But before the temple was built in Samayapuram, the story goes, Mariyamman had a small place (now an abandoned shrine, to which devotees will point even today) inside the walls of the great Sri Rangam temple. This is because she is understood to be the younger sister of Vishnu – a tradition we find spread over much of Tamil Nadu.[8] However, the worship of Mariyamman inside the walls of the Sri Rangam Temple developed into something that, according to the priests, lacked control, decorum, discipline and propriety. Devotees of the goddess broke out into ecstatic song and dance and this was most inappropriate in the presence of the more disciplined, controlled demeanor of the priests of a decidedly staid, purity-conscious Vishnu. And so, the story goes, the priests of Sri Rangam threw little sister out of the temple. She and her worshippers were an embarrassment.

Interestingly, devotees will mention this story when they are quizzed about one of the temple's main festivals in the month of *Thai*, when Mariyamman is taken in procession to the banks of the Cauvery River, very near the Sri Rangam temple. There, it is said, she receives gifts from her brother Vishnu and, indeed, some of Vishnu's Sri Rangam priests do make a trip through the lower-caste neighborhood on the island of Sri Rangam to appear with gifts for the Mariyamman temple officials. This occurs on the small spit of land in the Cauvery where the goddess temporarily appears in a pavilion constructed of bamboo and palmyra palms on the night of the *Thai* full moon.

How long this festival has been celebrated I have been unable to determine. It is by no means new. But neither is the fact that the Samayapuram Mariyamman has long been the main source of financial support for her big brother. The respectability which association with him entails seems well worth the trip. In Samayapuram, then, we have a temple in the gradual process of change that comes with growth, success and wider appeal to India's growing middle class.

[8] See my "Kinship Metaphors in the Hindu Pantheon: 'Siva as Brother in Law and Son in Law", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 53, no. 3 (September 1985): 411-430.

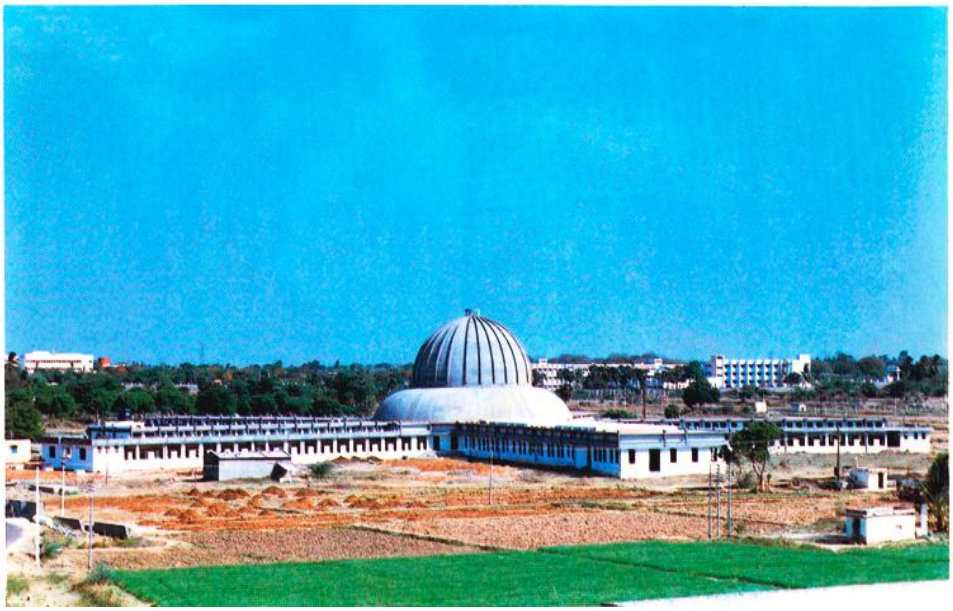


Figure 6: THE HOSPITAL AT MELMARUVATTUR (Photo by author)

A Mellowed Mariyamman

I move now, quite abruptly it feels, to a very different Mariyamman temple in a town 90 kilometers south of Chennai, the temple in Melmaruvattur. I first learned about it from a regular Sunday morning television show broadcast in Chennai. Featured on that show each week were the oracular pronouncements of a rather unassuming man to whom they referred as "The Mother". When I investigated the very sophisticated website advertised on the TV show, I became convinced that this Mariyamman temple was like no other I had ever seen. It is thoroughly middle class with (as might be appropriate to the traditional goddess) a vengeance. First of all, there is plenty of information about the temple. In addition to the television shows and web sites, this is one of the first Mariyamman temples I have studied where the literature is abundant and can be purchased in Tamil, English and Hindi. In contrast, I did manage to find a few pamphlets about the Samayapuram temple, but they were all in Tamil, and they were brief.

The Melmaruvattur temple itself is quite impressive: clean, quiet and yet relatively crowded by disciplined followers who conduct themselves with a cultivated decorum and most of whom wear the red *saris* and red *dhotis* typical of the goddess' serious devotees. The temple's grounds are huge and include a training center for destitute widows who learn marketable skills to support themselves, skills such as sewing. Several educational institutions are attached to the temple and are run by the

funds donated. They are all administered by the Adhiparasakthi (another term used to describe Mariyamman) Charitable Medical, Educational and Cultural Trust: a vast organization, according to the website, with over 2,000 chapters throughout the world. The local institutions near the temple include a secondary school, a polytechnic and engineering college, a college of sciences and colleges of pharmacy and nursing. All are accredited by the Indian government. An enormous medical and research college is in the process of being constructed a few kilometers from the temple. It now has 250 beds, but is slated to have 4,000. Its site is the locus of a rather impressive set of medical services made available for free, 24 hours a day, to the poor.

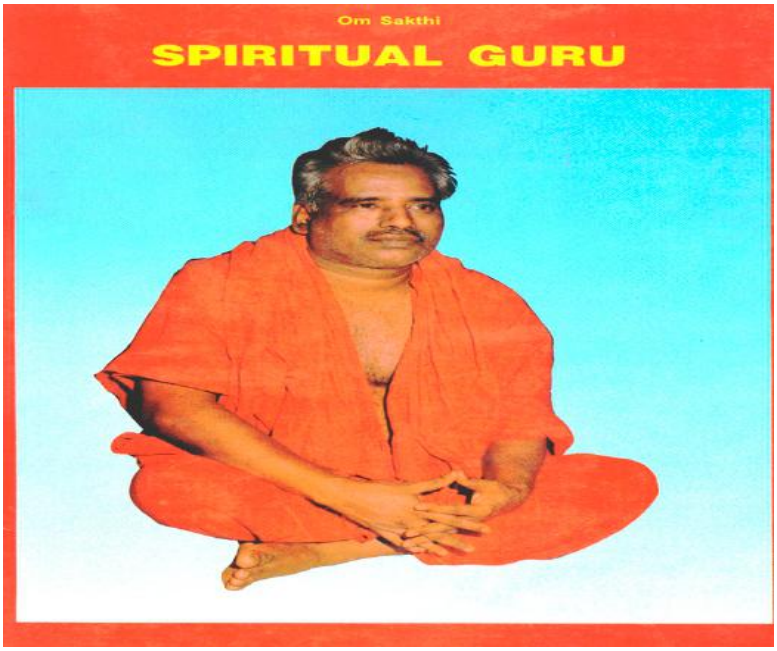


Figure 7: A POSTCARD DISTRIBUTED BY MELMARUVATTUR TEMPLE
(Photo reproduced by author)

Mother of Melmaruvattur

When we ask what all this has to do with Mariyamman, we get the story of "The Mother of Melmaruvattur", Pankaru Atikalar. But there is no vindictive, angry goddess anywhere to be seen. On March 3, 1942 Mariyamman simply decided, out of a sense of grace and compassion, to incarnate herself in human form, that of Pankaru. Nobody really knows why, except that the site of the present temple is said to be an ancient place where a group of great holy men called *cittars* lived and taught. In many ways, the story of the Melmaruvattur tradition is the story of Pankaru, and proof of the site's holiness almost always is associated with the many miracles attributed to him/her. As a child, Pankaru was chosen

by the goddess Mariyamman; the parents realized this when they found the child sleeping one day with a cobra caressing him, giving him a mild massage. The child showed no fear and was not bitten. Other miracles followed: he had the habit of thinking about his deceased sister (who had died of chicken pox) by going to the graveyard and sitting near her marker. As he ate peanuts there, one day, the Goddess appeared to him to give him water. Later, during a festival to Mariyamman in the home, Pankaru went into a trance and bent the heavy, brass offering-tray used in the rituals, a superhuman effort. At that point, the Goddess appeared to the whole family, announcing that she would henceforth reveal herself through this young man by making oracular pronouncements. She instructed the parents not to be concerned about his education. His father was so impressed that he asked the Goddess then and there for permission to build a temple. She agreed, and around that structure has grown the present multi-acred complex.

The movement is an interesting combination of modern and traditional. It insists Pankaru is the literal incarnation of the Goddess. Indeed, in much of the literature, Pankaru is referred to as "she" and "her". Twice a week, Pankaru is possessed by the Goddess. Holding a *neem* branch (which almost all traditional possessed worshippers of Mariyamman throughout the South carry during their trance possession states) s/he appears twice a week, Tuesdays and Fridays (with special pronouncements on holidays), to channel communications from the goddess. During these oracular pronouncements, Pankaru's demeanor completely changes. S/he walks like, acts like and talks like a woman. Members of this movement other than Pankaru do not become possessed. Thus, there is no risk of decentralizing the power and authority of the leader of the movement. Nobody gets direct messages from Mariyamman except the Mother. Anarchical losses of decorum on the parts of others don't dilute the Mother's basic message, and yet possession states centering on Mariyamman remain crucial.

Redesigning the Fold

The heart of the teachings can be found in his/her oracular pronouncements which began on a consistent basis in 1968. Some of the most prominent departures from what we find in normal Mariyamman temples are embodied in their articulation and enactment. A consistent theme in the teachings is the need to serve the poor: a message which seems clearly not to be aimed at the poor, rural, subsistence folk. Web sites, television shows, social service projects and building educational institutions are not activities typical of the rural, marginal subsistence population. A common slogan heard during the oracular pronouncements is "*Ore tay; ore kulam,*" that is, "Only one Mother, only one family."

Pankaru insists that caste divisions are absolutely irrelevant because we all have one mother, the Goddess. Anyone can perform rituals before the image of the goddess in the sanctuary. Indeed, there are no designated priests. Every day in the temple there is a food distribution, and it is done without reference to class or caste. In this temple, women are admitted on a par with men, even women who are experiencing menstruation. They administer most of the rituals to the Goddess. Yet, while the incorporation of women into temple activities is quite evident, the active participation of the poor is not.

This dynamic has been especially documented in the city of Chennai by Waghorne. She observes, "...as willing as the middle classes are to appropriate the power of the Goddess, they do this by cleaning her house and purifying or isolating her coarser elements, including her unrefined devotees."[9] Pankaru has encouraged generosity to the poor, but the poor must constitute themselves as a community quite apart from normal devotees in order to be eligible for this generosity. What defines Pankaru's followers is that they give to the poor. Therefore they cannot be poor. At the same time, the coarser elements are theoretically incorporated but their roles in the movement are rather clearly ascribed and limited. They must be recipients of religious gifts from Pankaru's followers. As recipients rather than givers, they exclude themselves from participating actively in the tradition. Though more subtle, the exclusion of the poor from worship is perhaps more effective here: in Samayapuram you need money to enter the inner sanctum. Here you need to be able to give gifts to the poor; that is, here, you can't be poor. You have to be middle-class.

[9] Waghorne, Joanne Punzo, "Reinventing the Village Goddess. Previsioning the Urban Middle Class", paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Asia Studies, San Diego, California, March 11, 2000, p. 20.



Figure 8: A COST-FREE MARRIAGE FOR POOR PERFORMED BY PANKARU (Photo by author)

A Pattern to Prosper By

Pankaru spends quite a bit of time engaged in modeling the kind of social service he advocates in his/ her oracular trances. Publications of the temple show him/her working among devotees as they distribute food and clothing to the poor; building low-cost housing; doing relief work during natural disasters; building orphanages; digging wells for village drinking water; arranging for the burial or cremation of deceased orphans; distributing agricultural equipment to the poor; arranging for low-cost loans to weavers, barbers, blacksmiths and washer men; establishing scholarships for students from deprived backgrounds; and much more.

This is a rather different religious activity than what we have seen at Samayapuram. Indeed, there is only one specific ritual activity I have found that is similar. In both places, the practice of *ankappiratakshanam* is considered an appropriate expression of devotion to the Goddess. It consists of lying on the ground and rolling the body the entire distance around the sanctum where the Goddess is housed. In some cases several trips are required. At Samayapuram, hundreds of devotees do it every day as the result of individual vows. At Melmaruvattur, the style is different. It started for the first time in 1973 when Pankaru decided to do it on the

occasion of a particular festival.[10] Now it occurs only once a year, when thousands of devotees do the activity behind the lead of Pankaru, who does it in order to demonstrate her/his own humility in relation to the Goddess.

One particular oracular pronouncement has been revealing in this regard. Through her medium, the Goddess has declared that she requires nothing of devotees in terms of ritual actions, that devotees can do nothing to earn her grace. She accepts whoever reveres and trusts Pankaru. This, of course, means paying special attention to Pankaru's pronouncements; to take them seriously is to become involved in the myriad social service activities of the temple. It also involves spiritual self-development, which focuses on cultivating certain virtues. For Pankaru, the basic virtues are very much what we might expect among the upwardly mobile, wage-earning, family-centered middle-class. He lists as most important, particularly for, as he says explicitly, "succeeding in the office," (1) adaptability, (2) self-reliance, (3) patience and perseverance and (4) punctuality and regularity. Negative attributes include: (1) shyness, (2) timidity, (3) pessimism, (4) intolerance, (5) indecision, (6) carelessness, (7) dishonesty, (8) bribery and (9) jealousy.[11] Pankaru also prescribes a daily exercise in meditation, and devotees often come to the temple for group meditation.

Another distinguishing characteristic of the tradition is its claim not to be sectarian Hindu. The Goddess supersedes all distinctions in all religions, and there is some pain taken to include members of a variety of faiths in special activities of the temple. In the literature, Pankaru is frequently pictured conferring with Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, Hindus and Jews. Indeed, his oracles often incorporate teachings from each of these traditions to support his points. He has made the point that the tradition he promotes is confined to no single geographic area or cultural context. The literature claims that there are over 2000 centers of worship, some of the most active in the United States.[12]

[10] Govindaraju, Sakti R., *Divine Glory of Melmaurvathur Amma*, Melmaruvathur: Adhiparasakhti Charitable Medical, Educational, and Cultural Trust, 3rd edition, 1999, p. 6.

[11] See Govindaraju, op. cit., pp. 70-72.

[12] See the following web sites: (1)http://www.parashakthi-temmple.com/index.htm and (2) http://www. adhiparasakthi.org/adigalar.htm



Figure 9: A WOMAN CONDUCTS RITUAL WORSHIP AT MELMARUVATTUR (PHOTO BY AUTHOR)

Internalizing a New Ethic

Much more could be said about the teachings of this new tradition. But I will try to reach a few conclusions in terms of what it illustrates about the direction toward which the transformation of the worship of Mariyamman is headed in this new generation of increasingly middle-class Indian values. In southern India, Mariyamman is the paradigmatic expression of the traditional village goddess. She has always been identified with the spatial and emotional turfs that constitute traditional origins. She is the protectress of the locale and, as long as she is honored and obeyed, she will provide protection. She is, then, a source of security; she is also the one to whom you appeal when misfortune and suffering seem to be prevailing. Her very powers – to heal and to assist devotees in practical matters – reflect her involvement in the world and her immersion in the ambiguities which devotees sometimes experience as a capricious, volatile or whimsical unpredictability and changeability.

As new and aspiring members of the mobile middle class move from secure village contexts into urban centers, they have a particular concern for re-establishing connections with traditional sources of security.[13] The

[13] James Preston made this point quite deftly in his article, "The Goddess Chandi as an Agent of Change", in Preston, James J. (ed.), *Mother Worship*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982, pp. 210-226.

old caste and family categories no longer hold. A new ethic must be internalized, one that emphasizes success, relative equality based on performance and efficiency and careful attention to the bottom line, as reflected in identifiable results. The traditional agrarian lifestyle, often based on an exchange of services rather than on a salary, focuses much more on the locality, as do the more traditional Mariyamman temples.



Figure 10: FEMALE SANNYASI VISITING SAMAYAPURAM TEMPLE
(Photo by author)

The basic paradigm in traditional Mariyamman temples involves the vow in which a person offers to the goddess blood offerings, physical penance or money, in exchange for a boon sought. In Melmaruvattur, the paradigm is never one that involves approaching the goddess in need. One approaches her by graciously offering gifts of money to be used, in most cases, for the benefit of the poor. What the worshipper receives (and wishes to receive) is much less tangible: wisdom from the guru for making one's way in the mores and structures of a new world and a sense of having fulfilled the guru's will by reaffirming faith in that virtue especially praised in kings and great persons, the virtue of generosity.[14] And, not coincidentally, in giving to the poor, we assure ourselves that we are not – or are no longer, or perhaps never have been – poor.

[14] In this sense the Melmaruvattur model is a return to the dynastic royal temples patronized by the Chola and Pandeya royalty. The great temples of Madurai and Tanjavur were centres for redistributing agricultural wealth and employed huge numbers of people to support their grandeur.

The new Mariyamman at Melmaruvattur does all the things the old Mariyamman did: she heals people of fever and disease; she possesses people, grants success and happiness. But she does it through the examples and teachings of a single person, her human representative, and she does it in order to inspire people to follow the pronouncements of that person. In so doing, they too in their social service activities will become like the goddess. Devotees themselves will become the instruments for the healing, uplift and prosperity of the poor. They will thus distinguish themselves from the poor. In following the Mariyamman of Melmaruvattur one becomes, almost *ipso facto*, a member of the new generation of middle-class devotees.

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The Ascetic Goddess Who is Half Woman: Female Authority in the Discourses of Māriyamman̲'s *Tapas*

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Abstract

This paper explores the popular narratives of *tapas* (or ascetic penance) of Māriyamman̲, a south Indian goddess of diseases associated with poxes. Unlike the *tapas* of the goddess Pārvatī of Śaiva temple legends (*talapurāṇam*s), which is predicated upon her erotic longing to re/unite with the male god Śiva through marriage, Māriyamman̲'s *tapas* aims to subvert the male authority through pox-affliction and/or violence. In the narratives, not only is Māriyamman̲'s marriage with Śiva ruled out, but Śiva's conventional androgynous (Ardhanārī) form is appropriated by her in such a way that her supreme authority and cosmic sovereignty are reinforced. Māriyamman̲'s *tapas* provides a model of female asceticism that underscores a significant female autonomy.

Keywords: Māriyamman̲, Tapas, Poxes, Ardhanārī, Ardhanārīśvarī, Śiva, Goddess, Feminism, Tamilnadu, Samayapuram, Bhṛiṅgi, Asceticism, Androgynous, Authority.

In a garden on the bank of the Kaveri river
With a desire to do a great *tapacu* (in Sanskrit, *tapas*; in English, austerities or penance) Pūmāri (Flower-Māriyamman̲)
Planted a post of fire, and kept seven pots on the post
On one golden pot, she placed seven plantain flowers
Above the plantain flowers she placed a lotus petal
Over the lotus petal she tied seven wheels
Above the seven wheels she stacked seven red tender coconuts
Above the red tender coconut she heaped seven coconuts
Over the coconuts she placed a lime
And above the fruit a copper needle.
Standing on the copper needle, with one hand raised above her head
Controlling her breath our goddess of great fame
Prayed to Śaṅkaran̲ (Śiva), as the wheels turned
Our goddess of all times performed a great *tapacu*

Introduction

The above lines from a garland of verses ("*Māriyammaṉ Pāmālai*," n.d.) describe the *tapas* (austerities or penance) of Māriyammaṉ, the goddess of fevers, poxes, and rain, who is enshrined in Kannanur-Samayapuram on the outskirts of Trichirappalli in Tamilnadu. The strenuous nature of the practice is underscored as the goddess is described as standing upon the tiny needle, on which are placed, vertically stacked, sundry objects that encompass varied and even opposite properties (such as hot fire and cool tender coconut, hard coconut and soft petal, thick post and thin needle, mobile wheel and stationary objects and so on). The precarious balance embodied by the goddess in such a posture prefigures her successful accomplishment of the arduous task of *tapas*. Her victory appears in the usual form of a boon from Śiva; she receives a "garland of heavy pearls" (*pāramuttu mālai*) which is made of "four thousand four hundred and forty eight diseases and eighteen incurable varieties of pearls," with the term "pearls" carrying a euphemistic reference to poxes, or diseases, and she is now called "Devi ("Goddess) Muttumāriyammaṉ" (Mutumāriyammaṉ literally means Pearl-māriyammaṉ). The narrative informs us that the "heavy pearls" received by the goddess are in response to a request made earlier by the earth-as-woman, who has asked the goddess to relieve her of the "heavy burden" resulting from the steadily increasing number of births and decreasing number of deaths.

The mythological discourse of the *tapas* of the virgin goddess is nothing new to those familiar with temple legends in Tamilnadu. Several Śaiva *talapurāṇams*, or temple myths of Śaiva shrines, speak of the austerities of the goddess inhabiting the shrine. In the temple myths, Pārvatī or Śakti usually undertakes austerities in order to get married to Śiva, and the wedding event is deployed to articulate the localization of the divine couple at a specific place on the earth (see Shulman 1980: 138-39). The goddess's *tapas* on the earth is triggered by her need to "expiate some fault" committed by her in the abode of Siva's heaven, or Kailasa, which forces her to descend from heaven. For instance, Umā or Pārvatī, the consort goddess of Śiva closes his eyes playfully thereby plunging the world into darkness; or she tests Śiva's ability to provide food for every living being in this world; or she defeats Śiva in a game of dice inciting his wrath; or she is just inattentive to him when he instructs her. Her 'misdeed' of challenging the male god's skills or intelligence or authority is eventually followed by his curse upon her and his commanding her to go down to the earth and get rid of her sin through *tapas*. At the same time, Śiva also offers some succor by promising to (re)marry her after her penance is over so that she can join him again.

Compared to that of Pārvatī, Māriyammaṉ's *tapas* provides a different model of female asceticism that emphasizes much more female autonomy. At the outset, the objective of Māriyammaṉ's *tapas* and her relationship with Śiva are in striking contrast with those of Pārvatī. A conversation with Savithri, a 78 year old woman from Mayavaram, who helped in my field research on the worship practices of Māriyammaṉ in Tamilnadu (2008) first drew my attention to this contrast.

(I was reading the *Pāmālai*'s description of Māriyamman̲'s *tapas* aloud to Savithri and I was curious to know how she would interpret it.)
"What makes Māriyamman̲ perform such a difficult *tapas*?"
"She does it for the world to remain good. She does it even now."
I continued: "Kāmākṣī (the term for Parvati in Kanchipuram) also did *tapas* in Kanchipuram."
"Yes, but you cannot compare Māriyamman̲ and Kāmākṣī"
"But why?"
"Because Kāmākṣī is married and Māriyamman̲ is not."
"I heard that Kāmākṣī did *tapas* only to get married, and not as you have said."
"Go there [Kanchipuram] and enquire properly. Kāmākṣī is already married. She did *tapas* to marry Śiva again."
"But what about Māriyamman̲?"
"Māriyamman̲? She is a pure virgin girl (*cuttamāṉa kaṉṉippoṇṇu*). She cannot stand the smell of men. That is why her austerities are severe and her power (*śakti*) is more."
"Why do you say that?"

"Māriyamman̲ does not like the intimacy of men. That is why, during *ammai* (poxes), we refrain from using the white long dhoti that men wear. We use only a sari (woman's drape) for the (afflicted) person to lie upon." (I am familiar with this practice and also with the convention that during affliction of poxes sexual intercourse at home is strictly prohibited. Those with whom I conversed would refer to this prohibition euphemistically as "*cuttam*" (purity) or "*cuttapattam* (sustaining purity)."

Sometimes, another expression "*pāypa√ukkai avaḷukku ākātu*" meaning "Mattress-bed is a taboo for her (Māriyamman̲)" is also used to imply the convention)
"But then Śiva appears to her and gives her *muttu* to her."
"What? Kiss? I told you that she cannot stand men. But you are talking about Śiva kissing her? But I have never heard anything like that. It is not correct."

Her misunderstanding of my word was justified since in Tamil "*muttu*" refers to both "kissing" and "pearls." Nevertheless, the indignation felt by Savithri at this (misunderstood) reference to "kiss" in association with Māriyamman̲ was striking. Savithri's perspective which emphasizes Māriyamman̲'s dislike for males, in contrast with Pārvatī, provides us with a springboard for exploring the gender relationship foregrounded in the *tapas* of Māriyamman̲ and the discursive dimension that it takes in the context of pox-affliction.

The figure of the austere Pārvatī is interpreted by David Shulman as a combination of eroticism and asceticism, since the goddess's *tapas* works primarily as a "method of seduction" and she partakes more of the nature of "the *apsaras*" (heavenly nymphs)

than "the ascetic" (1980: 144; also see Doniger 1973: 154).[1] The goddess, who, as a virgin, undertakes austerities because of her desire to join Śiva is perceived to be the very embodiment of this desire; at the same time, an extraordinary power is said to accrue in her by virtue of her austerities. The objectives of her *tapas* are tied to tapping this power, which entails benevolence, benefitting this world, including in some cases slaying of a demon threatening the world. Simultaneously, her *tapas* renders her a worthy partner of Śiva, ushering the goddess into the realm of marital auspiciousness. However, since the virgin woman is considered to be a locus of "dangerous" power (*aṇaṅku*), and since "preserving" this power in its potent form of virginity of the woman is underscored in the Tamil cultural context, Śiva, who is bound to violate the power in the event of his marriage with the virgin goddess, faces a perilous situation. Even though the danger is dealt with through sacrifice of Śiva to the goddess and his subsequent revival, most often other imaginative resolutions appear in the myths: for example, the virgin goddess's persona is split into golden and black parts, leading to Śiva's non-erotic, androgynous marriage with the "tamed" golden one, and marginalization of the erotic and "dangerous" black goddess (Shulman: 140-41; 350). Or, the narratives bring in a "surrogate victim" who substitutes for Śiva and faces death at the hands of the goddess. As Shulman observes, the *talapurāṇams* (temple legends), concerned with the Tamil Śaiva ideal of purity, employ such narrative devices in their attempt to present Śiva as *nirmala* ("pure") in order to keep him out of the ambit of the "dangerous" power of the feminine.[2]

Against this introductory backdrop concerning the Tamil *talapurāṇams* on the goddess's austerities, Māriyamman̲'s *tapas* may provide an interesting point of departure. I observe that unlike the goddess of *talapurāṇams*, the figure of the goddess Māriyamman̲, who is engaged in ascetic *tapas*, articulates not her eroticism and sexual longing but her subversion of male authority. Further, the discourses of Māriyamman̲'s *tapas* work toward establishing or maintaining the sovereignty of the goddess over the world, and the direct and unmediated violence that Śiva faces from her work toward that end. Moreover, in the case of Māriyamman̲, the *tapas* is not the means through which the goddess attains bodily purity so that she can unite with *nirmala* Śiva as in the case of Pārvatī.[3] Since, "purity" is solely concerned with preserving her virginity or sexual abstinence intact, an absolute separation of the goddess and Śiva is insisted upon, and, therefore, the teleological goal of the divine marriage is completely ruled out. At the same time, the conventional "Śiva-Ardhanārī" ("Śiva, the lord who is half woman") form is challenged and appropriated in such a way that the supreme authority of the goddess and her cosmic sovereignty are reinforced.

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[1]Pārvatī is said to win Śiva through both her *tapas* and beauty and the "two paths are inseparable" (Doniger 1973: 153).

[2] See David Shulman's discussion on Tamil temple myths (1980). I am summarizing some of his main arguments here. See especially Shulman 140-41; 351-52.

[3] In one classical *purāṇa*, Śiva observes that "I cannot unite with her [Pārvatī] until she has performed *tapas*. Without *tapas* the body is never purified, and I cannot unite with a woman whose body is not purified" (Doniger 1973: 153).

Garland of Flowers, Garland of Pearls

In the stories of Māriyamman̲ that delineate her *tapas*, one finds three patterns, which sometimes appear in combination in the same story: Māriyamman̲ performs an arduous *tapas* addressed to Śiva in order to get a boon of pearls (poxes); alternately, Māriyamman̲ undertakes *tapas* to get a child in order to rectify the bad reputation that she is unkind to beings since she afflicts them; or, Māriyamman̲ meditates on Śiva, and this meditation is her daily practice, devoid of any specific objective. Let me first present a narrative that I gathered from Mukkanamalaippatti near Pudukkottai, which features Māriyamman̲ inflicting Śiva with poxes, since he desires her and sends a signal desiring to marry her. The phallocentric ideology running through the Śaiva temple legends that a virgin performs *tapas* only to marry the male god is turned upside down in this narrative. Here is the story that I gathered from Alakammai, a local healer of poxes, from the village of Mukkanamalaipatti:

> Māriyamman̲ is one of the seven divine virgins who came from Kerala to Tamilnadu. She was doing *tapas* toward Īśvaran̲ (Śiva) at the bottom of a mountain. She took seven lemons, on which she kept seven coconuts, on which she put seven needles, onto which she tied strings of jasmine flowers. On top of all these, she stood and was doing *tapas*. At that time Īśvaran̲, the one who has created and is sustaining all of us, was also doing *tapas* on the top of the mountain. On seeing the girl's *tapas*, he became curious. He came down and asked her for details (*vivaram*) of her *tapas*. The girl asked him, in turn, to tell her the details of why he came all the way to ask her this. Īśvaran̲ was piqued. Asking "Oh, you want the details?" he threw on her a garland of (jasmine) flowers, which fell around the neck. She just let it remain on her neck for an hour, but after that she threw back the garland, which had become a string of pearls, saying, "I wore the garland that you threw upon me. Now let us see whether you can wear the same garland for at least half an hour. Let us see whether these are false pearls or shallow pearls." Immediately, the pearls started spreading over Īśvaran̲'s body. Unable to bear the pain and the burning, he pleaded with the girl to remove them. But she said she would not do it unless he brought her brother Raṅkanātan̲ from Srirangam to her. Raṅkanātan̲ and Mari were not on talking terms with each other then. Therefore, Īśvaran̲ needed to go twice or thrice to request him to come. Finally, Raṅkanātan̲ arrived and told Mari, "Amma, Īśvaran̲ is the one who has created, and is protecting, this entire universe. You have thrown the pearls on him. Take them." On listening to Raṅkanātan̲'s words, Mari brought a big winnow, took a branch of margosa leaves, and touched Īśvaran̲'s body from head to toe three times. Pearls, pearls, pearls. The winnow was filled with pearls. After Īśvaran̲'s pearls were removed, he made a *vākku* (promise/vow) to Mari: "Seven worlds below, seven worlds above, those ten thousand that fly, those eight thousand that have descended on ground, from the tree, from the leaf, from the sparrow, from the crane, from the fish, from the water, from the creeper, from the bunch. You, who put pearls

> on all these and play, will be celebrated as the "one with margosa leaves" ("*vēppilaikkāri*").

What could have made Īśvaraṉ come uninvited to Māriyammaṉ's place, and throw a garland upon the divine virgin performing *tapas*? Did Śiva mistake the goddess as the female figure engaged in *tapas* that he has been familiar with in the *purāṇic* legends—someone like Kāmākṣī who performs *tapas* for marrying or uniting with him—and, therefore, does his act of throwing the garland stand as a sign of his marrying her and accommodating her as his left part? Or does he throw the garland to discipline and tame her since she is "disobedient" to him, for she fails to reply "properly" to his question about the details of her *tapas*, and instead retorts asking for the details of his own *tapas*, perhaps teasingly implying it is he who seeks her and not otherwise? Going by Shulman's analysis of Śaiva temple legends, where Pārvatī is subjected to control in and through Śiva's androgynous marriage with her, these interpretations are not mutually incompatible. Further, does the garland imply Śiva's gesture to offer Māriyammaṉ his left half or even to wed her as such? The "wedding" aspect is, however, ruled out by the story-teller Alagammai, who insisted that Māriyammaṉ is a "*cutta kaṉṉimār*" (pure virgin). Notwithstanding the ambiguity concerning the wedding, Māriyammaṉ challenges and subverts Śiva's act, since the garland thrown by Śiva, when it is flung back by Māriyammaṉ, turns into poxes spreading on Śiva's body. Subjugating Śiva thus through affliction, Māriyammaṉ extracts a *vākku* from him so that she obtains control over all the fourteen worlds and beings in them by means of her play of pox-affliction. Viṣṇu (as Raṅkanātaṉ), who is considered to be Pārvatī's brother and who gives her in marriage to Śiva, is brought into the narrative as well. As he has been a key witness from Pārvatī's side to her wedding with Śiva, he is now made to serve as a witness for Śiva's subjugation by Māriyammaṉ and his handing over his sovereignty in the form of his *vākku* to her. Additionally, the "long history of alternating dissention and reconciliation" that Śiva and Viṣṇu are said to have (Harman 1989: 87), is reworked into a minor quarrel between Māriyammaṉ and Viṣṇu in the narrative, with Māriyammaṉ usurping Śiva's place. The subordination of Śiva is further underscored as he has to run back and forth between them "twice or thrice" as an intermediary so that they arrive at a reconciliation.

Uyirmāriyamman's *Tapas*

Māriyammaṉ's throwing pearls on Śiva, and her afflicting him thereby, is not a motif peculiar to this story. In the stories that describe Śiva's boon of pearls (poxes) to Māriyammaṉ, she throws the pearls at Śiva invariably, supplying a pretext that she needs to "test" the pearls. A story that I gathered in Ulundurpet that describes Māriyammaṉ performing *tapas* as Uyirmāriyammaṉ ("the life-changed goddess") is no exception. Uyirmāriyammaṉ is the second incarnation that Śakti takes after she is born as Reṇukā or Uṭalmāriyammaṉ. Velmurugan, who told this story, is a famous *uṭukkai*-singer (a singer with the hour-glass drum) in Ulundurpet area. According to him, since Reṇukā was beheaded by her son Parasurama and since her head joined later with the body of a cobbler woman, she was bestowed with the name, "Uṭalmāriyammaṉ" ("the

body-changed goddess"). Uyirmāri is her younger sister, and it is she who performs *tapas* toward Śiva. In her first *tapas*, Uyirmāri receives the boon of pearls, and in the second one she receives a child. An abridged version of the story of her first *tapas* follows:

> Brahma and Sarasvatī came into our world due to Śiva's curse, and gave birth to seven children. Uyirmāri is their seventh child and she had four hands at birth. … As soon as she was born, the couple left that place and went back to Brahmaloka. (Brahma's heaven) …A washerman took the child to his house and brought her up. … As a young girl, she erected a sand *liṅgam* of Śiva in the middle of the Kollidam River, and worshipped Śiva. *Gaṅgai* (waters) first tried to kill her, but Uyirmāri's *śakti* was superior and she continued worshipping Śiva in the midst of the lashing waters. Āndi vaṇṇār arranged for the girl's wedding, but Uyirmāri refused it disclosing her real [divine] nature to him, and left for the Kampa river near Kanchipuram. There she erected a post sixty feet high, by conjoining the thirty feet high copper post of Kāla Bhairavar and another thirty feet high diamond post of Kālī. On the post she placed a lemon. Upon that she placed a copper needle. She placed her toe on the copper needle and did *tapas*. She did a fierce *tapas* (*akōra tavam*), which is unfit for a woman. She did not close her eyes, and ate only the wind. She stood on her toe like this for twelve years and did the *tapas*. Śiva's body was burning like anything because of her *tapas*. Śiva appeared in front of her asking her what she wanted. She said: "I should have authority (*atikāram*) over this world. Give me the different varieties of pearls." She asked for several types of pearls (poxes) so that she can rule this world. Śiva first dissuaded her: "Don't ask for this boon. You cannot manage this." But the goddess insisted and Śiva gave her the boon of pearls asking her not to throw the pearls casually upon anyone. …
>
> Śiva gave away this boon, but his body was burning because of the power of her *tapas*. He wanted to leave the place at once. But Uyirmāri did not allow him to leave easily, and she said she had to test the pearls upon him first. Śiva pleaded with her not to do so, but she did not relent and threw the pearls upon him, causing him suffering. As Śiva sang songs praising her, she removed the pearls. Śiva told her: "From today, I will be your slave." And he gave a sword to the goddess. (Māriyammaṉ then went to the world above and threw her pearls upon various gods including Viṣṇu, Brahma, and Yama, who conducted sacrifices of buffaloes and goats, and gave her various mounts and weapons as offerings to her. She later settled down in Samayapuram.)[4]

[4] Māriyammaṉ's travel through various realms of gods throwing "pearls" upon them is a lengthy song in itself. Sometimes the song is performed by singers during Māriyammaṉ temple festivals in north Tamilnadu.

The scene of Māriyammaṉ's first *tapas* replicates that of Pārvatī-Kāmākṣī's *tapas* in the *purāṇams* (Shulman 1980: 60), even though the goals are different. Both do their *tapas* on the bank of Kampa river. However, unlike Pārvatī, Māriyammaṉ is not born into this world due to any curse and her birth rather rectifies the curse borne by her divine parents, who obtain salvation on giving birth to her. Further, the heat of Pārvatī's *tapas* forces Śiva into her close proximity:[5] a temple legend speaks of the "heat of desire" in Śiva as created by Devī's *tapas*. He tried "to cool the heat of desire by embracing troops of *yoginīs*," and "bathed in the Ganges," but nothing worked, and later the heat cooled by the embrace of Kāmākṣī (Shulman 173). Māriyammaṉ's *tapas* too makes Śiva's body "burn," but soon a different kind of heat—the heat of pox-affliction—soon replaces it. And like Kāmākṣī, again, the goddess alone can alleviate this heat. The motif of test that appears in the narrative of Kāmākṣī figures in Māriyammaṉ's narrative as well, but the roles of Śiva and the goddess as well as its consequence are reworked. Śiva sends the Ganges to test Kāmākṣī's devotion and disrupt her *tapas*. As the goddess embraces the sand *liṅga* in fear, Śiva amalgamates her in their androgynous marriage (Shulman 173). In Māriyammaṉ's story, not only does she encounter the disruption in the form of flood on her own, but when she gets a boon of pearls from Śiva, it is upon him that she first tests it. At one level, the hegemonic relationship between the boon-giver and the boon-receiver is challenged when Śiva is humiliated as his boon is tested upon himself. At another level, in contrast to Śiva's test of Pārvatī which operates as an occasion for the god to bestow his grace upon the goddess, Māriyammaṉ's test ends up in her conquest of Śiva, making him Māriyammaṉ's slave. At the third level, with the pox-affliction, Śiva's sexuality gets identified with that of the goddess, a significant point which I will return to soon.

On Śiva's Subjugation

The sword given by Śiva as he accepts his subordination to Māriyammaṉ raises a few questions: Does Śiva's gift signal the bisexual nature of the goddess? What does this event say of Śiva, especially of his sexuality, at this particular moment? The "aggressive virgin," who "violat(es) the ideal of womanly submission" and who uses weapons such as sword or bow or any such "symbol of masculinity" in the Śaiva temple legends, is viewed by Shulman as displaying an androgynous and bisexual nature (1980: 351). Such nature, Shulman observes, is at its peak, in the "confrontation" between the virgin goddess and the male god; and in his "confrontation" with her, he is "left castrated" and "womanlike" (351). In some instances, the bisexual goddess is absorbed in the Ardhanārī form of Śiva and such absorption protects Śiva against the dangerous power of the virgin, maintaining his *nirmala* nature, while making it possible for him to contain the "power of the woman in inseparable union" (Shulman 351).[6] Shulman's interpretation provides insights in understanding the reified notion of the

[5] See also Wendy Doniger's discussion on how "the limbs of all creatures are burnt by her [Pārvatī's] *tapas*, so that Viṣṇu asks Śiva to marry her, and she even heats the seat of Śiva on Kailasa, so that he is forced to appear before her" (1973:153).

[6] See, for instance, Shulman's discussion on a legend pertaining to Tiruvannamalai (179-80) and on another narrative contained in *Tiruvātpokki Purāṇam* (182-3).

virginity of the goddess/woman in the Tamil discursive sphere; it also underscores how even an androgynous model of the divine is invested with the idea of male supremacy that controls and subordinates the power of the female. However, there are certain limitations that are evident in this interpretive framework since it frames traits such as "aggression," "dominance" and "valor," represented as they are in the legends, as essential and given traits of the male, and, in a similar vein, traits such as "submission," "lack" and "loss" as those of the female. Secondly, it posits a limited theoretical model where the woman/goddess functions as a repository or site of power, which is contained or controlled by the male in the androgynous union. This model is also in conformity with the dichotomous grid of power/authority employed by a few scholars who consider power to be that possessed by both men and woman and authority to be "held by men" in Hindu patriarchal society. For instance, Rita M. Gross, while observing such "distinction" being made by "some anthropologists," writes:

> Authority, which is men's prerogative, is the right to command and to be obeyed. Power is the ability to influence how things happen, even though one does not [have] the formal authority to determine what is done. Women often have considerable power in patriarchal societies, even though they have little or no authority. (2000: 108)

Drawing upon Shulman's reading of the virgin goddess, one may be tempted to argue that the sword functions as a sign for both Śiva's "symbolic" castration and Māriyamman̲'s accentuated bisexuality at this narrative moment. Nonetheless a careful reading reveals a complex scenario problematizing such interpretation. Even before the sword figures in the narrative, Śiva's male nature gets transformed due to the appearance of pearls of poxes on his body: for, in the Tamil discursive context, not only references to poxes are often couched in terms of female fertility and plenitude and Māriyamman̲ celebrated as a deity of rain associated with these qualities, but a nuanced perception of pox-affliction prevails, where an afflicted body as such is visualized both as an anthill inhabited with snakes and as an agricultural field replete with crops, with both these imageries conventionally identified as/with the female.[7] Such a conception of the pox-afflicted body works through its way in the discursive process of identifying a pox-afflicted person as Māriyamman̲ herself, entailing, therefore, reverential treatment befitting the goddess at the house. Further, since the term "*ammaippāl*," literally meaning "milk of the mother," also refers to the liquid matter in the pustule, bearing poxes on the body implies carrying "milk of the mother" on the body, thereby attributing a certain female quality to it.[8]

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[7] I have analyzed such conceptualization in detail in my Ph.D dissertation (2009, The George Washington University). Please see Chapter Four (143-208) which is entirely devoted to this subject.

[8] In *Māriyamman̲ Tālāttu* ("*Māriyamman̲ Lullaby,*" n.d.), addressed to the afflicted person for cure, the body with oozing pustules of poxes is conflated with the goddess-mother with "milk" oozing from her breasts.

> "The pearls that are strung dance, Milk oozes from the two breasts,
> Devī, you grant boons to the deserving."

In remarkable reversal to Pārvatī's accommodation in the left half of the body of Śiva by virtue of her *tapas*, Māriyammaṉ renders the body of Śiva feminine through pox-affliction. In the place of Śiva of the Śaiva temple legend, who after all grants half of his body after testing the austerities of Pārvatī, here he is forced to yield his entire body to Māriyammaṉ for her to manifest, which she does through a sudden, unexpected attack. In the first narrative from Mukkanamalaippatti, Raṅkanātaṉ pleads to Māriyammaṉ to take the pearls away by referring to Śiva's creating and protecting the universe. Perhaps Raṅkanātaṉ's appeal to Māriyammaṉ is in consideration of the role that Śiva's androgyny plays in creating the universe and sustaining it, as the androgynous Śiva's association with creation is expressed in several classical mythologies.[9] Māriyammaṉ withdraws her pearls from his body; nevertheless she secures control and authority through pox-affliction over gods and human beings.

Māriyammaṉ who is Half Woman

Can we construe that the bisexuality and androgyny of the goddess get highlighted as she accepts the sword from Śiva? Did she not erect a vertical post, a combination of "thirty feet high copper post of Kāla Bhairavar and another thirty feet high diamond post of Kālī," corresponding to an androgynous identity at the first place? To get a perspective on the notion of the goddess's androgyny, exploring two terms referring to Māriyammaṉ, "*āṇaḷagi*" and "Ardhanārīśvarī," that we come across in the discourses would be helpful. The epithet "*āṇaḷagi*" meaning "the beautiful man maiden" appears to be suggestive of her androgynous nature. The line of the *Māriyammaṉ Lullaby* that contains the term also brings in the notion of the "slave," reminding us of the sword-giving Śiva: "*Āṇaḷagi* Mari-pearl, Protect your slaves." Further, the *Lullaby* is sung to heal the pox-afflicted person.

In resonance with the epithet, I also came across a narrative where a beard and a mustache are accorded to the goddess.[10] Elumalai, a priest in a Māriyammaṉ temple in Gingee, in his story on the birth of Māriyammaṉ as Ādi Parāśakti talked about a male with a sword who guards the goddess. As Elumalai told me, Pāvādairāyaṉ, the guardian figure, wields the sword to "shave" the beard and the mustache of the goddess. From our conversation:

> "Does the goddess really sport a beard and grow a mustache?"
> "Yes, they grow very long every day. To remove them daily, she keeps this man [Pāvāṭairāyan] who has a sword."

Such descriptions constitute the afflicted body as the body as/of the goddess.

[9] According to Doniger, in one set of myths comprised in various *purāṇas,* Śiva "becomes an androgyne, splits the woman away from himself, and mates with her to produce the race of mortals" (1980: 312-13). Ellen Goldberg also points out that creation and dissolution of the universe are brought forth by "Ardhanārīnaṭeśvara," the "cosmic dancer," who is "comprised of Śiva and Śakti" (2002: 110).

[10] Māriyammaṉ's mustache in this narrative has resonance with Reṇukā's sporting of a mustache. Ellammā-Reṇukā of Saundatti in Karnataka is a goddess with mustache. See Assayag (1992: 394) cited in Hiltebeitel (1998: 151).

Intrigued by his reply I asked him what he thought about the term "*āṇaḷagi*." According to him, Māriyammaṉ is more authoritative or has more "*atikāram*" (meaning authority, but could indicate power and sovereignty as well) than any male god and that is why she is referred to by this name. As I shared Elumalai's story with some other story-tellers and priests whom I met, I was also trying to find out whether the epithet suggests any possible androgyny of the goddess. However, none of my conversationalists would encourage my idea, and for them the term as well as the story is an allegorical statement that the goddess is more authoritative, valorous and courageous than all others including male gods. Even Elumalai, who shared his great narrative on Māriyammaṉ's beard and mustache, would not agree with the notion of androgyny: "No, Māriyammaṉ is a female. She is our mother."[11]

The second term "Ardhanārīśvarī" appears in the story pertaining to Uyirmāriyammaṉ, narrated by Velmurugan, and it concerns the sage Bhṛiṅgi (Bhṛṅgin) and the punishment meted out by him. The story also illustrates how the "composite form of the androgyne" came forth:

> Bhṛiṅgi, an ardent devotee of Śiva, was used to worship only Śiva and not the goddess Śakti. Śakti was annoyed with his attitude, and she and Śiva decided to take the form of Ardhanārīśvara. On seeing this form and still unwilling to worship Śakti, Bhṛiṅgi took the form of a beetle, carved a hole in the middle of Ardhanārīśvara, and started circumambulating just Śiva leaving out Śakti, who got angry with this and took away all energy from Bhṛiṅgi. Still Bhṛiṅgi would not yield. Śiva then intervened, asking the goddess to give back the energy to his devotee. Śakti listened to him, but then she foretold: "Bhṛiṅgi will be born seven times in this world and he will remain unmarried in all these births. In his seventh birth, he will seek me in marriage. On the day of the wedding, I, Ardhanārīśvarī, will kill him and wear his body as my *uṭukkai*."
>
> Bhṛiṅgi took six births in this world. When he was in his seventh birth, Śakti was born as Uyirmāriyammaṉ. After she received pearls from Śiva, Māriyammaṉ made the four *Vedas* into four sticks, tied them together with the moon as the rope, put her basket of pearls over the sticks, and twirled it. The pearls fell upon this world and the other world. Many of these pearls fell in Kannapuram-Samayapuram where several children died. As people were terrified, she appeared before them and asked them to worship her. That is how Uyirmāri took Samayapuram as her abode and ruled it. After she settled down at Samayapuram, she continued to be ferocious, and threw the pearls upon anyone at her will. As a girl she dominated everyone. Unable to bear with her deeds, people living with her planned for her wedding. Like a nose-rope binds a bull, a wedding binds a girl. So people thought marriage would control her. However,

[11] Such notion would go along with the representation of Devī in the *Devī Mahatmya*, where she is occasionally referred to as a "'masculinized female'" and yet she is regarded basically as a "female" (see Humes 2000: 133-35).

> since no man came forth to marry her, they brought Bhṛiṅgi *muṉivar* (sage) from Naimicaranyam from the north to marry her. The wedding day was fixed. On the day of the wedding, Śiva bestowed the girl with the maternal uncle's gifts, namely bangles and a garland. Brahma was reciting the chants for the wedding. Viṣṇu arrived with the gifts for the wedding.
>
> As soon as Bhṛiṅgi came upon the stage that was erected for the wedding, the goddess was enraged. She tore his body with her bare hands, killed him, and held his dead body as an *uṭukkai*. Bhṛiṅgi's skin and flesh served as the skin of the *uṭukkai* drum, his neck bone became the instrument's sphere-shaped bells, his nerves became the rope tied to the drum, the skin of his back was turned into a broad strip attached to the instrument, and his small and big intestines were turned into its cone-shaped adornments. As soon as she killed Bhṛiṅgi, she removed her bangles and tied them to the drum. After this furious deed of hers, the frightened people started blaming her, saying that she was childless and that was why she killed children with poxes and was ferocious. Hearing this, Māriyamman started performing *tapas* toward Śiva to get a child. That child is Kāttavarāyan. When Kāttavarāyan grew up, he indulged in unjust acts, which made Māriyamman impale him on the stake.

Bhṛiṅgi's narrative in this version is distinct from his story available in Śaiva temple legends (Rao [1914] 1985: 322-23), which is as below: Bhṛiṅgi, who "had a vow of worshipping only one Being" circumambulated only Śiva leaving Pārvatī out. This angered Pārvatī, who therefore caused his flesh and blood disappear. As he remained merely a skeleton covered just with skin, Śiva granted him a third leg to support himself. The delighted Bhṛiṅgi "danced vigorously with his three legs and praised Śiva for his grace." The irritated Pārvatī went down to the earth for undertaking *tapas*, and at the end of the *tapas*, Śiva "granted her wish of being united with his own body." Ardhanārīśvara form thus came forth. The unrelenting Bhṛiṅgi, however, took the form of a beetle, pierced a hole in the androgynous body and continued to go around just Śiva. His determination made Pārvatī "reconcile" with his vow and she even "bestowed her grace" upon him.

Māriyamman's story of Bhṛiṅgi emphasizes the authority of the goddess in determining the fate of Bhṛiṅgi in contrast to the above legend: In the former, it is not just Śiva, but both he and Śakti decide to take the androgynous form. Bhṛiṅgi's disrespect even to that form makes Śakti suck his energy. Śiva's granting the third leg, which has erotic connotation (Shulman 188) is not only absent in the story centering on Māriyamman, but Śiva's intervention at best could only postpone his execution. Bhṛiṅgi waits through seven births to get killed in a way similar to Pārvatī who waits through the *tapas* to get married. In the Śaiva temple legend, the androgynous Śiva comes forth through Pārvatī's *tapas*, as he unites her in marriage; the female-in-waiting is finally accommodated by him. Whereas Ardhanārīśvarī as Māriyamman kills her suitor, forestalling her union with a male forever; the misogynist male is doomed to

punishment by death. Bhṛiṅgi who dances in delight celebrating Śiva's support for him in the Śaiva temple legend becomes a music instrument in the hands of Māriyammaṉ. As Śakti warns about the punishment that awaits Bhṛiṅgi, she addresses herself as Ardhanārīśvarī, meaning the "Īśvarī (Lordess?) who, is half woman." The feminine-gendered suffix in this compound word (akin to the term "*āṇaḷagi*") is remarkable. First, the term turns upside down the gender hegemony inherent in the term "Ardhanārīśvara," which is grounded on the male identity despite its reference to half-woman forming part of the figure.[12] Even though Ardhanārīśvara, the "two-in-one," embodies Pārvatī as/in its half, it is still a form of the masculine Śiva.[13] The sublation of the female within the androcentric figure is further substantiated by a version of the temple legend from Tiruvannamalai: The legend which articulates Śiva's "giving his left half" to the goddess describes that Śiva "amalgamated the goddess (*ambāḷ*) within *himself*" (1998: 89; italics mine). In contrast, the import of the epithet "Ardhanārīśvarī" is such that the androgyny conveyed by it is primarily predicated upon the femaleness or female identity of the goddess. Secondly, in our conversation, Velmurugan, the narrator of the story of Uyirmāriyammaṉ, never hesitated for a moment to assert that Māriyammaṉ is "our mother goddess (*tāy teyvam*), and therefore, a female." He clarified further that "Ardhanārīśvarī is Śakti," and his clarification emphasizes the allegorical register of the discourse on the goddess's androgyny that primarily invokes the supreme female nature of the goddess.

As the divine drama unfolds in the earthly realm, Ardhanārīśvarī' avenges Bhṛiṅgi in front of Trimurti. The wedding dais becomes the sacrificial dais and her wedding, planned by people and supported or blessed by Trimurti, is foiled. After all, why would Māriyammaṉ subject herself to the "nose-rope" or control in the guise of the marriage with a male, who is identified with/as Śiva?[14] As Ardhanārīśvarī the post that Māriyammaṉ erects for her *tapas* before in the narrative is more meaningful: The post contains the male and female components, of Kāla Bhairavar and of Kālī. Nevertheless, it is the goddess Māriyammaṉ who stands upon the post, and in a sense, "above" it. The post vividly represents the female identity of the goddess who is superior to and who contains the male and female components, forming part of her.

[12] Goldberg argues that even though the "theological motif" of Ardhanārīśvara betrays the ideology of patriarchy, the symbol can still be subjected to "alternate and countervailing interpretations" (2002: 5). She, for instance, points out how the motif "encodes a description for attaining emancipation" (136). My concern in this essay pertains to the interpretation of the androgyne imagery, deployed as it is, within the narratives of Māriyammaṉ, paying attention to the narrative context of such deployment.

[13] In Tamil, Ardhanārīśvara is known by names such as Ammaiyappaṉ, Mātorupākaṉ, and Maṅkaipaṅkaṉ. And all these names end with the masculine gender suffix "aṉ." Doniger also notes the "nonequality, the primary maleness" inherent in the figure of Śiva-Ardhanārīśvara (1980: 331).

[14] The "nose-rope" alludes to the "*tāli*" or the yellow thread that the woman wears from the time of her wedding. As Susan Wadley notes, the thread tied by the husband "demarca[tes] that she is bound to him," and "is under his protection and control" (1980: 159). Further, with the tying of the *tāli*, "[her] behavior becomes even more restricted and it is expected that her self-control will grow" (Wadley: 159)

From Avenging Goddess to Female Sovereign

The description "Īśvarī" implies Māriyamman̲'s sovereignty over all the worlds and beings. Her sovereignty begins with conquering Śiva, extends into the realms of other gods, and then expands to cover the earth, when she settles down in Samayapuram. Māriyamman̲ is described as a queen in her songs like *Lullaby* and *Patam*, with the pearls or pustules of poxes being called *muttirai*, indicating them as her royal seal on the body.[15] Her rendering courtly justice is also a common theme in the songs and in everyday discourses: In Samayapuram, a story goes around that if someone, say A, has wronged another person, say B, then if B fails to get justice by legal means or mediated negotiations, it will suffice for B to utter, "Let our mother ascend her chariot" ("*eṙika ātta tēr ēṙattum*"), with the utterance referring to the day of her chariot in the annual festival. If B utters such a statement, it infers he has brought in the goddess to arbitrate in the matter and it is his hope that she will punish A. I was told that people would be terrified to hear such a statement, because they know for sure that the goddess would render proper justice to the affected person by punishing the unjust. The running of the chariot and the administration of kingly justice would make more sense if it is read along with the Tamil lore of the Maṉunīti Cōḻaṉ, who ran his chariot over his son and killed him in order to render justice to a cow, whose calf was killed when his son's chariot had run over it earlier. Against the backdrop of the lore of the Cōḻaṉ, the notion of Māriyamman̲'s queenly status and sovereignty is again reinforced in the story of Kāttavarāyan̲, the son whom Māriyamman̲ earns through her second *tapas* to Śiva. As narrated by Velmurugan, Kāttavarāyan̲ was mischievous and engaged in acts including collapsing the "orthodoxy of Brahmins" (*ācāram kulaittal*). Despite Māriyamman̲'s warnings, he married Āriyamālai, when she was sleeping, and Māriyamman̲, therefore, ordered him to climb the impalement stake. The story thus articulates that Māriyamman̲ does not hesitate to punish her own son, a boon of her *tapas*, when he performs "misdeeds" violating the prevalent hegemonic social norms, exactly as a ruler is "expected" to do. The child who is supposed to rein her in—since people attribute her deed of throwing "pearls" at her will and her "ferocity" to her childlessness—in turn gets reined in. It is as if the son is produced through the *tapas* only to be impaled for demonstrating Māriyamman̲'s impartial nature, validating and reinforcing the goddess's reign as a just and sovereign ruler.

What is the background of Māriyamman̲'s challenge to the conventional male-dominated androgyny that Śiva-Ardhanārīśvara represents? A story that I gathered from Jeyaraman, priest at a Māriyamman̲ temple in Gingee, traces a perpetual battle between the goddess and the male gods, especially Śiva, during their several births through *yugas* (ages), and finally connects it with pox-affliction. Briefly the story: In the Kiruta age, the primordial mother, produced in the heat, had to lose her third eye to Śiva, with whom other gods had conspired; In the Treta age, in her second birth as Takkaṉ's daughter Pārvatī, the mother took revenge upon Śiva by forcing him to accept

[15] *Māriyamman̲ Lullaby* (n.d) , refers to poxes as the seal of Māriyamman̲: "The seal of the fastened garland, Mother, make it descend. The seal of the jewel, Mother, make it descend."

her as his consort; In her third birth in Dvāpara age, as the mother took birth as Reṇukā, Śiva in his incarnation as Jamadagni, avenged the goddess by arranging to behead her;[16] As she was reconstituted as Māriyammaṉ in the Kali age, now it is her turn to avenge Śiva and others by throwing pearls, finally demonstrating her superiority over them.[17]

The primordial mother loses her eye to Śiva and other conspiring gods; her obtaining the left half of Śiva through "force" in the next birth appears to be her revenge; Reṇukā's decapitation is another turn in the course of their battle: even though versions of Reṇukā's story that I gathered in my field research are silent about Śiva's androgyny, a *pūcārippāttu* ("songs of the priests," n.d.) gives a clue about it. After Reṇukā's head is joined with a Paraiyar woman's body, she comes to Jamadagni's place: as Jamadagni sees a different body joined with her head, he tells her: "Beautiful Reṇukā, go to the world and fend for yourself. Leave the left part right now." (67) When Reṇukā asks for the means of fending for herself, he provides her with "nine grains" and instructs her about them. True to the pattern that we are familiar with, as soon as she receives them, she throws them upon him. Against the backdrop of this diachronic narrative of the eternal battle between the goddess and Śiva, the interlinked discourses of authority and androgyny that work through the motif of violence (in terms of pox-affliction and killing) in the narratives make more sense. As one of the seven virgins from Kerala country and as Uyirmāriyammaṉ, notwithstanding her *tapas* toward Śiva, she throws back what she receives from him, perhaps from caution, since she has been cheated in her previous births and now it is her turn for revenge. The story also reveals why incorporation within/as Śiva's androgyny does not appeal to the goddess anymore: she has been evicted from it before. As "vengeful" Māri,[18] she takes hold of Śiva through pox-affliction and renders him feminine. As Ardhanārīśvarī she usurps the conventional title of Śiva indicating his androgyny. Even as the androcentric Ardhanārīśvara imagery is appropriated into a female-centric Ardhanārīśvarī imagery in her self-reference, the latter imagery is still not an androgyny in a "realistic" sense. At one level, inasmuch as her androgyny is deployed only as an allegory to articulate the superior courage, authority and valor of the goddess, such deployment collapses the essentialist assumptions that fix and consider these qualities/traits as "naturally" belonging to the

[16] Due to want of space, I am unable to give the full version of Reṇukā's story here. For variant versions of her story, see Whitehead 1921: 116-117; Beck 1981: 126-27; Biardeau (1989) 2004: 112-13; Craddock 1994: 120-142; and Voorthuizen 2004: 252-54. My Ph.d dissertation (2009) contains some versions of Reṇukā's story that I gathered during the field research. The list of references is selective and is not exhaustive.

[17] The full version, for which I have given the title "The Eye," is available in detail in my unpublished dissertation (2009: 249-50). It varies from the Ellammā-Adiśakti's myth that Shulman discusses (1980: 241-3) in significant aspects. In the version that I gathered, more than the "incestuous lust" of the mother for her sons, what seems to bother the male gods is her "power;" since she created them, they fear that she could even destroy them.

[18] A line in *Māriyammaṉ Lullaby* (n.d.) goes: "The Snake-eyed Nīli, The Vengeful Māri-pearl." Nīli of Tiruvalankadu, who avenges her husband for his murdering her in their previous births, is a fitting description of Māriyammaṉ here.

male sex. At another level, due to the mere allegorical import of the expression, the marital union with the male is rendered redundant. Nevertheless, as Śiva who sends her out from his androgyny is avenged through pox-affliction, Bhṛiṅgi, who seems to be a surrogate of Śiva and who disrespects her in her androgyny is killed and obliterated from the narrative scene.

The figure of the avenging goddess problematizes the Śaiva temple legends and *purāṇic* narratives which work around the themes of control and taming the "erotic" and "dangerous" virgin goddess. There is no doubt that in securing the distance between Māriyamman̲ and Śiva, the discourse of "purity" in terms of the goddess's "protected/preserved" sexuality operates: as we have noted, a correspondence between purity and virginity is forged explicitly in the narrative from Mukkanamalaippatti, and Māriyamman̲'s sexual abstinence is reiterated throughout in other narratives too. Moreover, since the violence of the virgin goddess toward a male violating her protective "sanctuary" is not an uncommon trope in Tamil temple legends, aggression of Māriyamman̲ toward Śiva can be explained on similar lines as well.[19] However, seen against the background of the continuing battle between the goddess and male gods, the discourse of "purity" operates merely as a pretext for the goddess to take on Śiva for his disregard and disrespect toward her in their earlier births. Even though the goddess is constructed as an essential "locus of power" by virtue of such "purity" (Shulman 1980: 349), this power is still very much embedded within a discursive field of conflicting gender relationship that runs through the ages, as espoused in the narratives.[20] Significantly, the narratives of Māriyamman̲ constitute her as the one who has the authority or command over this power: articulated as her ability to afflict, punish and kill, it is "tapped" by her for subjugating Śiva (and other male gods) and for subverting his conventional androgyny, thereby challenging the notion of male authority. Māriyamman̲'s authority further assumes the form of territorial sovereignty as she takes up her queenly residence in Samayapuram. Against the narrative backdrop of a perpetual battle between the goddess and the male gods, whether Māriyamman̲'s *tapas* is devoid of purpose or performed for getting a specific boon, it operates at best as a ruse to win back her position of authority in relation to the male sex and in establishing her sovereignty over the earth and beyond.

[19] Shulman, for instance, discusses mythological instances where a male who is exposed to virgin's power entails punishment that takes the forms of "blindness," "castration," or "death," which are "symbolically equal" (1980: 192; 211).

[20] An elaborate discussion on the discursive dynamics of power would be beyond the scope of this paper; nevertheless, in this context, I would like to add that in my unpublished dissertation (2009) I have tried to show that chastity (as virginity and marital fidelity), which is "localized" in the goddess's body, is, in reality, the reiterative heteronormative power that produces the feminine subject/goddess according to hegemonic cultural norms. Sometimes, the heteronormative power works along with other vectors of power such as those that reiterate caste hegemony as well. See especially Chapters Five and Six. I have benefited much from the works of Judith Butler and Michel Foucault in my analysis concerning this subject.

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An engagement with the forces of time: Worship at the goddess Guhyeswari temple[1]

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Abstract

The paper is about Hindu conceptions of time - especially the disintergrating force, conceptualized as Kali. The discussion focuses on the ritual performed at the Guheyswari temple, located in the grounds of Pasupatinath in Kathmandu. It's an odd site unlike others given that it is not a temple in any conventional sense, just as its sacra also is unusual. I try to make this comprehensible by linking this to certain propositions of Tantric Philosophy.

Key Words: Guhyeswari, Guhyakali, pitha, puja, prasada, tamas, sattva, rajas, samsara, Dasi, mantra, rasa, tantra

Introduction

The temple of Guhyeswari is a fabled site[2]. Nepalis say it is a place where, at the beginnings of time, parts of the body of the great goddess Devi fell to earth. Here in Kathmandu Valley, the goddess is not represented by any image, but takes the form of a pot-hole, with a small opening to the expanse of water hidden below. The site's name, Guhyeswari, indicates its conceptualization as 'mysterious', 'hidden', 'secret', since the word *guhya* means just that. According to some experts (Pal 1991: 42-43), Guhyeswari is another name for Guhyakali - the hidden, secret Kali - thus connecting this form to the forces of time. Kali is the active, destructive force of time, and her consort is Shiva or Kala, the generic term for time. Here, I explore the proposition that time itself incorporates the process of disintegration.

Temples congest the valley. The old city of Kathmandu, especially, contains a great variety of holy sites, ranging from small road-shrines to the great temple of the kingdom's tutelary goddess, Kumari, as well as ritually marked pipal trees associated with Hinduism and clusters of small Buddhist *caitya* shrines[3]. On the urban outskirts, in the vicinity of the Shiva temple, stands that of Guhyeswari, the focus of this paper.

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[1] Reprinted from *Anthropological Forum,* Vol. 11, no. 1, 2001, pp. 93-108, by permission of Taylor and Francis Publishers.

[2] Most italicized foreign terms are Sanskrit and Nepali.

[3] For an account of art and architecture in the Kathmandu Valley, see Sharma (1973); Slusser (1982: vols 1&2).

Unlike the human-fashioned idols or impressive temple architecture, it is regarded as self-manifested, that is, a *pitha*[4]. Such holy sites not only beckon worshippers but also excite the curiosity of scholars[5].

My concern in this paper centers on the exploration of the nature of the ritual associated with this form of Devi. I am interested in the pragmatics of the ritual, in terms of what objects are framed, or what actions are taken, as these bear on the sensibilities and sensitivities of the ritualist.

I also propose to question the possible relevance of Kristeva's concept of 'abjection', which she applies in Hindu contexts, adapting Douglas's (1966) work on 'matter out of place' to her own conceptual purposes. In her book, *Powers of Horror,* Kristeva (1982) formulates her thesis about people's sensitivities towards such kinds of matter, which in non-ritual contexts may be characterized as 'betwixt and between', yet in ritual become the stuff of the sublime. For her, the fascination and horror of what for worshippers in the cosmic have their foundation in the traumas of relations with mothers, and religion finds its essence as sublimation. It is worth asking what is lost in this theory of matter.

The pot-hole shrine

The status' of this pot-hole as a Devi temple is recognizable by the diagnostic images painted outside on the cement walls. On one side of the entrance is a human figure rendered as a skeleton: on the other is another human figure rendered as pulpy flesh. This is reminiscent of the common Nepali saying that every human is composed of both male and female components, bones and hard stuff from the father, blood and cognate stuff from the mother; both sets of components are co-present in any body. What distinguishes the male from the female depends on which set predominates. So the graffiti on the walls communicate their bits of metaphysics.

Even before entering the temple, the required actions articulate a concern with matter; since leather footwear is the treated skin of a cow, it is dead matter, which will deteriorate. Therefore, it must be left outside. Inside, on a Tuesday or Saturday, or during the great annual 10-day Hindu festival known in Nepal as Dasai, Durga Puja, or Dashera, the place is packed with worshippers, since at these times Devi 's potency is accessible and most desirable. These are the times of the right ' *chairos',* we might say, to translate the Hindu notion of *'auspicious'(mangala).* This doctrine, indicating the right time for effective action, applies to all the cosmic powers, and is not restricted to the goddess.

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[4] See: Sircar (1973) for details on pitha sites for South Asia; Eliade (1971:346-348).

[5] Slusser (1982:326-380) give accounts of Nepalese temple architecture as well as details of the Guhyeswari shrine somewhat at odds with each other. Snellgrove does not refer to the prohibition on non-Hindu entry to this temple. Levy (1992:715-716, n.26) also refers to the representations in the city of Bhakta pur; a hidden Guhyeswari shrine in the Taleju temple complex and a public one at the entrance to the city. Anderson (1971:32-33,190-193) provides certain cosmological details that connect specifically with the Nepalese locale.

What is unique is the goddess's form. There are no idols *(murti)* or icons to speak of in the inner sanctum where people mill around. What is there is a rock shaped like a raised mound, to one side of which stands a rather small water container marking the opening to an ever-flowing underground stream. For those familiar with the esoteric literature, the place *(pitha)* is one of the numerous sites in South Asia where different parts of Devi's body fell to earth. Whether or not familiar with the knowledge concerning *pithas,* believers know that the Guhyeswari pot-hole is a self-manifesting object, unlike idols, which are fashioned by humans[6]. There is uncertainty about which particular body part fell to earth here. Some Nepalis say it was a lower part, perhaps the pudenda or anus or both. One constant in the worshippers' orientations towards the goddess is their understanding that her ways are mysterious, not to be fathomed by ordinary humans. They insist this is why she is called the 'secret hidden goddess, Guhya'. Judging from what is said and left unsaid, it would seem that too much rigor in the detailing would betray the essential imponderability of her nature. Yet some know that, according to local belief, a subterranean fire bums in the depths of the pothole beneath the running water. For Buddhists, this is the site of the goddess Nairatma ('no soul'), which is connected through underground passages to the sacred hill of Swayambu with its stupa dedicated to the masculine forms-the celestial Buddhas—thus joining the male and female Tantric powers. For Hindu Tantrics, the male principle of Shiva is also present at the Guhyeswari temple in his distinctive form, Bhairab[7].

Touching the cosmic forces

Puja, the term for a pan-Hindu ritual form, entails the placing of offering on the idol of the deity being worshipped. However, to worship the secret goddess, Guhyeswari, offerings must be made first to the stone and then to the hot spring water flowing in the cavernous space of the pot-hole. One has to fix one's mind on the object, place the offerings firmly, and then take back something from the pile of things already touched by the sacred object and therefore affected by the shrine's forces. The procedure is straightforward in the case of the mound. With the spring, however, the ritualist has to drop the offerings into the murky depths, and reach down to pull up whatever comes to hand along with the water. This can be snippets of matted flowers, or a solution of beer, or water, or old rancid food, or any combination of these. What exactly it will be is not known until one grasps it. Then one must sprinkle one's head with some of the liquid, drink the rest, and put the more substantial stuff in one's hair. The placing of this bundle *(prasada)* constitutes the culmination of the rite, and Nepalis repeatedly stress that without this taking back of previous offerings the ritual would be incomplete.

[6] The Nepalese term for self-fashioning is *chai chait*.

[7] Chakravarti's (1963) commentary on Tantra is extremely useful not only for its exposition of this difficult knowledge and 'peculiar' practices, but also because he does not deny its significance for South Asian religiosity. Like the Tantras, the Agamas are basic procedural texts. The Samkhya principles are intrinsic to the metaphysics of creation.

One might say that these simple and straightforward rituals are of the self *(jivatma).* Though not as formidable or as inspiring as the practice of self-discipline of the holy men *(sadhus),* their intent is of the same magnitude: to move into the same channel that connects with the cosmic forces. Even though the method of meditation *(sadhana)* is impressive, it demands skill, practice and flair to make the cosmic *kundalini* fire located within oneself progress through the *chakra* centers to reach the ultimate stage: realization of the bliss of merging with the powers of the cosmos. Some local commentators say that many who are not adept simply experience a brief passaging, then a stalling at the lower part of the spine and a burning sensation, beyond which point they are never able to advance. The ritual form *puja,* however, is quick. One is immediately there within a virtual cosmic reality at the place of worship. One may marvel at this shrine and be marvelous with it; obtaining *prasada* is something like this because it can entail transformation. *Prasada* (flower petals, leaves, beer, water and whatever else is at hand), pundits say, is potent. Transmutation, according to pundit Tripathi, occurs through 'influence', contact first with the localized body parts of Devi, then with the worshipper's own body. It is a case of the influence of the sacralized matter (the *prasada)* on the body of the ritualist, by virtue of its special capacity as something touched by Devi[8]. The phrase 'contagious magic', if applied here, would merely signal a process of transfer; but the notion of 'influence' not only indicates the direction of effect but also presupposes that worshippers' bodies are amenable to change. They are not closed off, but modifiable through the ritual action of placing matter on matter.

There is both the input of matter (the offerings) and an encounter with the forces of matter. This is not only worship of a stone and water-hole; it also entails an encounter with the specific energies contained within them. Through taking stuff vitalized by contact with the secret body parts of the goddess, the worshipper acquires something of her nature.

Imaging time's workings

As matter is especially subject to modifications, this means that the disintegrating force is relevant, and is especially active when the modification has reached the end stage of its development. This is known throughout the Hindu world as the *tamasi* force, the force that splits apart, which is usually associated with a black or dark blue colour. Together, the disintegrating force and the generative *(rajas guna)* and stabilizing *(sattva guna)* forces comprise the power of Sakti-energy, propelling the sequences of 'rise, growth and decay'. Experts explain that each sequence is propelled by its respective *guna* force. In the running-down stage, in which the *tamasi guna* force is operative, energy in the form of Kali is at play.

This breaking-down force in some guise or other is said to work in all manner of cycles; for example, through the fire *in* the stomach that is part of the digestive system, or the

[8] Much of the earlier literature referred to *prasada* simply as' remains', which is inaccurate. Gellner (1992:1 07), in this study of Newar Buddhism, also protests against this misrepresentation.

fire in the womb that arouses the winds to push out the baby, separating it from its mother (see Basu 1974). In such processes, certain constituents of an elaborately amalgamated entity are separated. With death, for example, it is understood that the material body is rendered inert while the transmigrating soul and its consciousness are expelled. Everyday existence is thus characterized by a number of mini-cycles, entailing the processing of matter and passaging along the various planes of existence, which constitute the transmigratory cycle *(samsara).* Other cosmic cycles are the year and that vast category, aeon, which Hindus call the Yuga cycle[9]. In such conceptions of the operation of everyday affairs, the cosmic powers, in whatever form, are not rendered as aloof and irrelevant but as fulfilling functions in the here and now.

To what extent the metaphysical details are known to all and sundry is a moot point. Yet it would be unwise to presume total lack of knowledge, especially since *The Garuda purana,* read at the time of death in orthodox households, itemizes esoteric notions. Moreover, people do act on the esoteric ideas in the practicalities of the rite; take, for example, the way people put their hands over a sacred fire and then touch their own eyes; light for light, visibility for vision (put differently, without light, one sees naught). There is also recognition that eyes are of the same ilk as fire; eyes shine, too. In short, while the initiated may be cognizant of the metaphysical esoteric details, others operate with a practical knowledge of these same details.

We are now led directly to consider local understandings of the nature of the deity, Guhyeswari. If the site is recognized as the place where the anus (or pudenda) of the goddess fell to earth, then the shrine of Guhyeswari is a site of decomposition operating through destructive energy *(tamasi guna).* It is thus understandable that certain experts (see Pal 1991) say that Guhyeswari is another name for Kali, the power of time's workings.

To return to our specific theme, what is happening in the ordinary worship of Guhyeswari? With the taking up of the *prasada,* the ritualist is placing a cosmic metabolism, so to speak, on the body whose faculties, mind and passions constitute the living self. For Guhyeswari, especially, it is the destructive cosmic force that predominates, given the nature of this shrine. Implicit in the procedure is the expectation that there be good endings for the mini-cycles of life. The assemblage of factors comprising the ritual undertaking then also entails a conceptualization that acknowledges the marvels of decomposition, breakdown and decay, which are necessary sequences of the processes of life and its continuity.

[9] Unsurprisingly, the different Hindu philosophical systems and schools do not give identical formulations. For some textual accounts, see Gupta (1972); Basu (1974). The latter is important since it is read as part of the funeral complex, and therefore people will be familiar with the details. For a brief summary of the six major systems, see Monier-Williams (1878), Dasgupta (1932) and Eliade (1971), who spell out some of the disagreements among the various schools.

Accordingly, the working of the destructive force is not necessarily assessed as undesirable, though in certain instances it is. A pregnant orthodox woman who desires a successful birth will not enter a Devi temple after the fifth month, the time when the transmigrating spirit is thought to enter the foetus in the mother's body. The reason given by Nepalis is, 'Devi gives life and she takes life'.

Access to the destructive force may also be desired for use against an. enemy, an obstruction or anything else that could harm one. Nepalese Hindus have such a purpose in mind during Dasai, the 10-day annual festival[10], when they give blood sacrifice (or surrogates) to the goddess-as well as to her eight protective forms whose temples demarcate a strategic mandala in Kathmandu valley (see Slusser 1982).

The festival reaches its peak on *kalratri*, the night of Kali, when thousands of animals are sacrificed. The secret goddess, Guhyeswari, also receives killed animals, but in this case via her partner, the fierce Bhairab[11]. One reason this frenzy of killings occurs, and such an activity is judged appropriate, is that, on this night, cosmic time has run its course. It reaches the state of cosmic dissolution *(pralaya)* when for a moment there is an interregnum, during which, Nepalese experts say, one may insert oneself into other planes of existence and other zonings of time. Whether or not the less erudite recognize the gap, they do acknowledge this as being the time to engage with this kind of force. This is the time, Nepa!is say, to try to tap the divine power in order to 'overcome obstruction', to get its ' involvement in one's affairs', or to 'appease it' and so 'avoid making it angry'.

While intentions are various, the purpose *(phal)* of the Dasai ritual enactment is–'victory over the enemy', over 'obstructions' and over those things that hamper well-being, in short, to obtain 'good fortune for the whole year'. So, whether from the angle of formal ritual requirements or from the angle of ritual doings, irrespective of whatever else is going on, the notion of destruction, especially *vis-à-vis* the unknown future, is being demarcated as relevant to existences and ways of existence.

It would be unwise, however, to limit the discussion to the end stage as if it operated in a kind of hiatus, or to neglect to mention that at certain sites all over South Asia people worship objects regarded as other parts of Devi's body, each part being characterized as operating a specific kind of force, reflecting the cosmic energies (see Sircar 1973). The theology spells out a metaphysics: energy, Sakti, is projected as the originary and pervasive power and as feminine. In popular discourse, people cite the chorus: 'Brahma the creator, Vishnu the preserver; and Shiva the destroyer,' but metaphysical discourse

[10] For accounts of Dasai proceedings, see Anderson (1971:142-155); Kondos (1982:242-286, 1986:173-185); Levy (l992:523-576). The hymn chanted during this period is locally known as The Chandi, otherwise formally known as The Devi Mahatmyam (Jagadishvarananda 1972). For the Dasai ritual procedure, see Ghosa (1871). See Allen (1975) regarding the Dasai Tantric rituals involving the goddess, Kumari, the state's tutelary deity, who is linked to Guhyeswari and Durga Taleju.

[11] I am unsure why she does not receive these sacrifices directly.

elaborates further, proposing that inherent in the energy is a combination of three kinds of forces. This much is well known. These forces operate in three ways that underpin the broad stages of development, and time's progression. There is the force of activation itself *(rajas guna),* which can make things rise up; it is the force that pushes out the seedling from the ground, heralding the sequence of creation *(sristhi).* There is also the force that integrates and holds things together *(sattva guna),* operating at the maintenance stage *(stithi)* before the last stage when things come asunder. Then there is the braking-apart force *(tamas guna),* pertinent to the stage of dissolution *(samhara)* in which Kali figures (see Jagadishvarananda 1972), especially verses 75-87; Anderson 1971:142-155; Kondos 1982:242-286, 1986:173-184; Monier-Williams 1878:83-96,115-133). The connections between male and female principles vary according to the stage of development involved. Apparently, in the first stage the male principle relates to the female by touching or inciting it. In the second stage, there is a folding into, a clinching together of the two principles. In the third stage, the male and female separate from each other.

An interesting feature of this theory that is not so widely known is that, while one *guna* force is predominant during each stage, this does not exclude the co-presence of the other two forces, which, according to local discourse, operate in a more subdued way. This point is important because it indicates the manner in which continuity and change are possible. Forces do not operate exclusively and separately, but work most effectively when predominant over the other co-present forces. Furthermore, the end is not the end but one ending, which allows for the possibility of another cycle to begin under the right conditions. It is only with unions of the two principles that another cycle is possible. Yet if continuity always goes towards an ending, that termination moves to other possibilities. For something new to appear, the work of the disintegrating force is first necessary, in order to end the old entity.

Endings may be associated with violence. With one version of the cataclysm, Shiva dances the universe to its end with his wild frenetic *tandaba (tandava—Skt)* dance. As one Nepali recounted, 'When Shiva danced with passion, his steps rocked the whole world.' Violence and destruction are also accompanied by passions of anger, fury, and rage. This association applies to the fierce cosmic forms, masculine and feminine alike. Another version of cataclysm refers to the direct involvement of the female principle. The event is told as the story of Sati Devi and is often recounted in Nepal[12]. The story of the origin of the aniconic shrine of Guhyeswari is local history in Nepal:

> Sati Devi had become angry when her father, Daksia, had not invited her and her consort Shiva to a grand celebration, a fire sacrifice, where all the other deities were assembled. Her father had insulted her and his son-in-law by this omission. So, she descended on the place [of sacrifice]. From her brow there emerged the 'furies' and they brought utter turmoil. And

[12] For textual accounts of this cosmic drama, see Kooij (1972:120-121); Kramrisch (1981:319-340); and, for a popular version, Anderson (1971:191-192).

> then she destroyed herself by jumping into the fire. Time stopped. Shiva went crazy, carried her body, or its remnants, around while the world was shrouded in darkness. Then Vishnu, in order to bring Shiva to his senses, hit Devi's body with an arrow, dismembering it. All the parts fell to earth, all over the sub-continent. And one part fell in the forest of Kathmandu Valley.

Several aspects of this story warrant comment. Regarding the aniconic form of the Guhyeswari temple, if the metaphysics is hinted at by the placement of the sacred object (the mound) and the nature of the geophysical pot-hole locale, there is also the universally known myth, cited above, that tells how the disintegrating cosmic force got to this place. In this locale, the here and now is not restricted to the immediacy of the environs, but is extended out expansively, in a mix that goes to infinity, because 'the power of time is not itself time', as one Nepali put it. Whether approached via esoteric formulations or more straightforward mythic details, it would seem that the disintegrative force, along with other forces of existences, is being conceptualized as both transcendent and immanent.

The temple of Guhyeswari, then, is an apt place for pilgrimage *(pitha),* because there is an immediate and concrete manifestation of the hidden, invisible, cosmic power. To clarify, the reason the temple is a *pitha,* in the sense of its origin, is given by the Shakta myth (Sircar 1973) and expressed in the local discourse about Sati Devi. Additionally, the fact that it is an open-air temple with a pot-hole, mound and underground hot spring renders it a fitting place for a *pitha-one* of the fragments of cosmic matter with its corresponding energies. This is a conception of matter that is as fabulous as it is geological and metaphysical.

For those worshippers not cognizant of the metaphysical details, the ritual encounter is not necessarily less intense. There is a constant in the confrontation with the awesome potency of the cosmic form right there beside oneself.

Puja: Experiences at the pot-hole

If being at the Guhyeswari temple means that one is right there, in the middle of a cosmic geography, the local procedure demands that the ritualist dip into the cavity and take up whatever substances come to hand, previous offerings churned by the rush of the hot spring mixed with bits of earth and water. The idiom is materiality, the movement is for contact.

The Guhyeswari shrine's requirements diverge from ordinary worship. For purposes of comparison, I recount one example of a different kind of ritual performed elsewhere. First, the man rolled up his trousers with meticulous care. Then he washed his feet and hands with thoroughness and deftness. There was more at stake than a quick purification of those body parts. One sensed his satisfaction with the 'properness' of his body. Then he began the proceedings with measured speed, bare feet hitting the wet

tiled floor in rhythm with his chant. Soft as it was, the Sanskrit chant resonated, filling the space as he advanced, arms raised a little, holding a burning lamp in each hand. The encounter began. The man sat on his haunches and went through the *puja.* All actions were directed forwards towards the idol in front. All senses were engaged: the smell of the burning incense, the taste of the water, the sight of the flames, the touch of the smoke from the lamps and consciousness of being present in this space.

In ordinary *puja,* certain things that make conscious life possible, because they are things we engage with, are placed on the icon. Though we call these offerings, they are instances of primordial elements, here in manifest form. In ordinary *puja,* the ritualist puts food into the idol's mouth, waves lamps before its eyes, sprinkles water all around and on its head, and utters the *mantra,* the sound form of the particular deity being worshipped. The actions are horizontal-the body reaches forward and engages directly, so one can see what one is doing and can do it comfortably.

However, the site of Guhyeswari requires a different ritual engagement. Since there is no idol, but just the mound and pot-hole, the ritualist cannot approach them in the way usual at other site: 'At Guhyeswari, it's not there standing straight, it's not in the up position ..... So, to take *prasada,* to get it, you have to reach down with your hand .... . bend over. But as with other rituals you must not recoil, for these are the *prasada* from the Devi.'

This site obviously brings the body's faculties into play: the senses, those organs of cognition or consciousness *(buddhindriyas,* as the Hindu texts describe them), the organs of action *(karmenindriyas),* and mind *(manas)*[13]*,* the faculty of judging and feeling. Here, however, their involvement can be anomalous. In the pot-hole ritual sequence, the aesthetic unfolding entails uncertainties: 'You don't know what's swimming around in the darkness of the hole, what is making this or that noise; you don't know what kind of offering, egg or matted flowers, you' ll bring up with your vision blocked.'

To worship here, the ritualist must put aside certain habits and adopt unusual postures, such as folding over the body and putting an arm into a black hole. If ordinarily the ritualist feels unease with the stench of rancid things, rotting leaves or stale beer, and if this kind of reaction would be improper, the occasion can invoke a feeling of trepidation. Of course, the intensity or relevance of feelings can differ from individual to individual, but these conditions definitely conduce to a certain sense of unease, unusualness and puzzlement. The mental effort of imaging this deity would not be straightforward. There is no idol, no pictorial image, and no reality like the sun in its splendor. What the ritualist confronts is a mound and a hole. Of course, some may ignore the actualities of the ritual situation and treat the specifics as irrelevant, going instead straight to a fixed, pre-given image of Devi. Yet, according to the procedural

[13] This does not mean that the latter is a homology of the former, as microcosm is to macrocosm. This is elaborated in the adage: " The spider is in the web, but the web is not in the spider'.

requirements, the ritualist must think about the kind of force and its specific attributes; imaging would be difficult in this context.

These aspects of the ritual undertaken at this particular site can thus involve the ritualist in a certain kind of unfolding of aesthetic experiences. What predominate are unusual involvements, uncertainties in what can be sensed, requirements of body mobility and security, a dislodgment of the banal self in encountering stuff that is distasteful. If the heart is at work, so is the intellect, as it wonders about this unusual form. Therefore, it appears that worship at the pot-hole would entail an aesthetic based on the prevailing *rasa* mood of puzzlement and wonder (see Gnoli 1968; Coomaraswamy 1956; Anand 1959; Dimock et al 1974).

So, what is happening when doing this kind of *puja*? The ritual procedure is an encounter with matter. If it means a direct experiencing of the constituents of the place, and of its processing forces, one would experience the goddess in terms of the workings of a certain materiality, and also via one's own energies. One is reminded here of Spinoza, especially as cast by Deleuze and Guattari (1987:256-270) in their concept of 'becoming'. Adhering to their formulations, it could be said that, if one lets the body take over the ritual gestures one is becoming-lurch, becoming-bend, becoming-extension, becoming-stillness. Variations are a difference in intensity or vigour. Moreover, this ritual sequence is not to be dismissed as banal because it is one of the basic properties of being alive. The concept of exertion *(conatus)* in Western philosophy finds its resonance in the Hindu formulation of the energetic, the active *(utsaha),* where the corresponding aesthetic experience of the heroic *(virya rasa),* the will to endeavour, is set forth. If one were to leave the discussion with only these details, there would no doubt be a risk of inflating the importance of this sequence. If one bears in mind the other sequences to which it is attached, however, the notion of venturing forth gains in credence.

The *prasada* appears to be anomalous, especially in relation to most others. Yet when one bears in mind the nature of the deity, and her shrine, this *prasada* is not incongruous. It adheres to the general Hindu principle of appropriateness (see Kondos 1982:242-286, 1986: 173-197). The *prasada* of Guhyeswari is of a kind that is usually avoided: putrid things, deteriorated food, gluggy stale rice-matter that in other contexts is designated as polluted and polluting. Here, putrid things are the *prasada,* and accordingly sacred. *Takingprasada* is the formalizing action of any ritual because 'without it the ritual is incomplete', to repeat the Nepalese doctrine. It thus seems that what this Tantric ritual is unfolding through its procedural requirements is the final sequence of processual cycles, the sequence of decay and disintegration (see Gupta 1972:ch.5, verses 1-8; Monier- Williams 1878: 193-200; Kondos 1982, for pundit Tripathi's outline of his understanding of Samkhya theories). Given the nature of shrine, it is a virtual cosmic cycle that appears to be relevant. This would seem so because the forces intrinsic to the unfolding of disintegration are operative at this site. After all, for believers it is the site where Devi's body part fell; put metaphysically, it is the localized

energy of the cosmic female principle. In effect, the *prasada* of Guhyeswari elaborates a point that any cycle will have its detritus of decay, whether of the cosmos or the individual body. When this kind of *prasada* is taken, the ritualist has to overcome or, better still, pre-empt any feelings of repulsion. The Tantric aesthetic requires that one be at ease with uneasiness.

The 'abject', the object and horror

Kristeva (1982) locates the consideration of waste and refuse within a general psychoanalytic paradigm, which could possibly be helpful to my analytical concern with the unusual ritual *prasada.* Kristeva's complex argument conceptualizes body excreta, waste, refuse, the corpse and so on as 'abject' things. For Kristeva, building on Douglas's (1966) work on Hindu practices of pollution, this is all stuff at 'border zones'. As she says, 'We might call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity' (Kristeva 1982:9).

So, for Kristeva, the disturbing relation is that of 'ambiguity', the ' in-between', the 'composite', with matter like excreta, the corpse, and waste being neither subject nor object but 'abject', and therefore capable of instilling nausea. Although this kind of matter incites horror, for Kristeva it also has its fascination, its power. Mostly, however, she emphasizes the loathsomeness, as in her description or coping with the skim of boiled milk caught in her lips. For Kristeva, its abjectness lies in its location on the edges of the milk and in its sticky feel as it touches the lips.

Kristeva may have a point, for the aesthetic feeling of disgust (horror) is relevant as a possibility in worship at the pot-hole shrine, which for Hindus and Buddhists is a body part of Devi. There is, however, one major reason why Kristeva's psycho-analytic formulations would not be of great assistance: it is a meager theory, with respect both to the way of conceptualizing the occasion and to the effects of this kind of approach.

In regard to the first deficiency in Kristeva's formulations, there is a tendency to take the abject out of context, while noticing its repeatability (the skim of boiled milk, waste, and so on). Diagnosing stuff as matter out of place leaves no space for the 'object' of concern to be matter in its own place. *This* is one kind of criticism of the limitations of certain psychoanalytic formulations (see Deleuze & Guattari 1987:257, 259-260,264). In contrast, Hindu aesthetic theory incorporates an assemblage of factors, what Coomaraswamy (1956) refers to as the entire 'factible', things to be done, and things that are being done, which create the terms for the engagement. According to Hindu *rasa* theorizing, the particular circumstances are critical in constituting the kind of aesthetic experience that will be enjoyed, tasted, realized. It is not simply the ' abject' object that is of relevance, but the circumstances brought together in the art-piece that gives the object its potential to be tasted or sensed in a certain way. *This* is not reducible to feelings usually aroused in other contexts by any object like waste.

There is also meagerness in Kristeva's conceptualization of 'fascination', since the *rasa* theory implies a widespread fascination. For this kind of theorizing, 'horror' and disgust can figure, as can many other emotions and moods: grief and compassion, delight and sexual play, energies and venturing forth, fear and terror, laughter and the comic.

What this amounts to is a basic difference in conceptual approaches. For Kristeva, the issue revolves around an oppositional structuration: repulsion and attraction, the stuff of horror and its fascination. This, however, would melt away with an aesthetic that diagnosed the complete emotional repertoire as having an appeal, since each emotional state could be taken up in the artwork (sculpture, ritual, drama, or whatever). The supposed ambiguity would not amount to much, being contingent to this particular occasion. Yet the Guhyeswari ritual occasion does entail some kind of enthrallment, in which there is an aesthetic communication with a remarkable object and unusual *prasada,* alongside the contemplation of a wondrous cosmic force. If there is a jolt to one's sensibilities, it is more the intuiting of the paradoxical nature of the entire assemblage than of its registering its ambiguity. In her formulation of how *this* phenomenon would figure in the psyche, Kristeva puts it on the limits of 'primal repression', stemming from relations with the mother. For her, art and religious endeavors provide the routes of sublimation and therapy, respectively (Kristeva 1982:11-15). So if the abject is matter that 'disturbs identity, system or order' (p. 4), it is catered to in other endeavors of a 'fantasy kind' (pp. 15-16, 38).

There are at least three major differences in the ways Kristeva and Hindu metaphysics conceptualize 'waste' and similar stuff. First, Kristeva's [Taming sets up static architectural boundaries for determining the 'inside/outside' or 'in-between' characteristics of matter, thus providing a rationale for assessing it as 'ambiguous'. In Hindu metaphysics, however, the nature of matter is determined by its location on a route of development; waste is the end product of a developmental process and, therefore, hardly ambiguous. In other words, Kristeva's approach is oppositional and static in its conceptualization, whereas the Hindu interpretation is processual, emphasizing how time figures. Secondly, whereas Hindu ritual endeavor is open to metaphysical issues, such as puzzlement at time's work and its passaging, Kristeva' s theorizing locates such endeavors as stemming from 'originary loss'. It is the child's dislocation, its separation from the mother-child unit, the primal loss of the loved object, which, she says, installs a phobic proclivity towards what is lost. Accordingly, Kristeva sets up a field for the operation of abjection, a feeling of loathsomeness and fascination for body waste and the like[14]. Thirdly, the Kristeva thesis does not reveal

[14] Hindu theory's spinning of a matrix of ontology, metaphysics, aesthetics and cosmology is slurred in accounts like those of Kristeva (1982) and Douglas (1966). The complexities, including the relations of the male and female principles, are spelt out in the conceptualization of the Shivalingam design, with its four faces, top and bottom, central *lingam* pole and protruding yoni-shaped platform. Sharma (1976:3-5) provides a succinct account of the sets of correspondences that link a particular kind of force, its spatial direction, its corresponding color, its proclivity and passion and the effects of the operation of this force. These together form one of the sets that constitute the series on the Shivalingam. With this kind of

much of an appreciation of matter, its singularities, its variations, or its relations with time. If applied, it would render the Guhyeswari enterprise as little more than a variation of humanism's despondency.

The stark differences in the two approaches indicate the undesirability of any attempt to apply the abjection theory in this Hindu context, as Kristeva (1982:53-89) has done, to certain other Hindu phenomena of a comparable nature. Kristeva's conceptualization, cast in a universalistic framework, takes up what for Tantric culture is a cosmic sensitivity and gives it a source in experiences of excreta, refuse, waste, and so on. The Hindu approach, however, takes these very same things and locates them in terms of cosmic patternings and processes. What makes me slightly uneasy is not so much that Kristeva and other theorists deal with the psyche but that they would humanize a metaphysics, rendering people's amazement and wonder as phobic as a pathology and thus converting what people recognize as the sublime into simply sublimation. There is meanness in this orientation that would imperiously 'blot out the planet's mysteries' (Guattari 1995:22). While Kristeva scatologizes cosmic thought and turns ritual action into a kind of therapy, Hindu thought takes stuff, refuse and waste, and presents them as miracles of the forces of time.

It should not be forgotten that Guhyeswari's other name for those with esoteric knowledge is Guhyakali, the Goddess of Time. What is happening at the sacred site is a singular version of process. For our purposes there are two relevant points that bear on this special stuff. First, the nature of the *prasada* is *tamasi,* that is, disintegrating, breaking down, just like the force that rendered it so, the *tamasi* goddess. The ritual is elaborating its version of the metaphysics of time. What to Kristeva (1982) may be conceptualized as the 'abject', diagnosable by its capacity to upset 'a system, identity, order', in the Tantric context is located as part of a processual system, moving of necessity towards crudification, decay and death. Yet it is also regenerative. Tantra especially, does not shy away from endings and terminating processes. Tantra and Samkhya thought put in place a vast comprehensive metaphysics that refers to stages of creation, to growth as much as to disintegration. Further, these kinds of formulations provide a processual scheme along a dynamic route (this and then this and then this and .... .) involving category differentiation. One thing is different from another because of its location on the developmental path, but each is also connected by virtue of belonging to the route of unfolding—and then and then .... .

Finally, I want to make few simple points. Worship at Guhyeswari entails the assembly of a wide range of components. It is not that one kind of function operates to the exclusion of others, but that all have a place in the assemblage. The test is to determine how these different components relate to one another.

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format, there are the dark fierce forms (Kali and Bhairab), with their characteristic power to break down, which have their own place as much as any other.

The Guhyeswari assemblage opens up many possibilities. Just as there is a multiplicity of features at this site, so there is a variability of worshippers. Some may be aware of the esoteric knowledge concerning the creation of the universe and how it operates in time, and so feel empowered and exalted by that knowledge. While these and most others would be familiar with the Sati Devi myth that localizes the cosmic there in front of them, this knowledge, in combination with the activity of worship, renders the ritual procedure an extremely potent way of providing contact with 'the real Sati Devi' and therefore with the experience of being proximate to the wondrous and amazing.

In addition, and this is the most important aspect of this essay, there are the special requirements for this particular site. One must begin with the directions for getting there: go past the forest where 'Shiva and Parvati dallied'. There are also ways to proceed to the shrine, to move one's body and limbs and project oneself down; one must also accept the smells of the place, the noise and the vision of what it is, known as *darshan.* All these aspects coalesce into an aesthetic unfolding; there is constancy in this practical detail. The experience is a function of the body's intelligence, its sensitivities and sensibilities. As such, it is 'pre-verbal' and not reducible to the input of knowledge. This kind of site affords the possibility of a pragmatic aesthetics: becoming projecting arms, and becoming the smells and visions. Nonetheless, the practical knowledge of its unusualness feeds the significance of the necessities of the procedure, just as these feed the knowledge. While there is a kind of folding over, there is also a special and necessary silence. When discussing this site, worshippers reveal not simply a reluctance to talk about it, but a recognition that talking is limited. Talking blots out the mysteries. For Hindu theorizing, the hidden is to be heard in the inaudible sounds: that hum is what endures throughout all processes and is the force of time.

It's fair to ask, what does all this amount to. For one thing there's an aptness in the connection between the nature of the sacrament and the deity of concern (decimated bits of matter, the *Prasad* and the great force of destruction, Mahakali, articulated as Guhyeswari.) Secondly, in this procedure, destruction is given a power of place, a location's force. And just as important and perhaps more significant is that the ritual procedure is of a kind that does entail an actual transformation. It's more than symbolic, not just dependent on the magical power of words that occurs with so many rites, but a physical event, happening there and then: decomposition.

What's interesting about this site is not merely that the destructive power is played out in the ritual process (as occurs in blood sacrifice enactments where the force is constituted as violent) but rather it's a softer power, effective no less, but entailing a different procedure. The worshipper is to dip down into the stream and grab the rotted bits and pieces: results from the power of decomposition. The features are certainly interesting. To repeat: there's an aptness in the nature of the sacrament. Destruction as decomposition is given a power of place, a location's force. But just as important and probably more significant is that this force and its breaking down function are being recognized as holy, a religious power – unlike Christianity where the creator is god the

creator, and after that metaphysics shifts to morality. And of course this diverges from blood sacrifice. Whatever else killing the goat can evoke the thrill of uncertainty (success with one stroke, otherwise failure): the thrill of doing violence alongside the uncertainty of the outcome. The encounter here is somewhat different: it's the incorporation of decomposition (the floating and submerged bits and pieces of the offering) into the divine agenda.

Here at the pot-hole there's no thrill of violence. Rather it's a confrontation with our present reality — the decomposition that constitutes the workings of time. At the temple's entrance that power is given cartoon representation: two figures, one on each side, showing the end process of keeping alive - defecating. A vision of the surge to the sublime It's fair to ask, what does all this amount to. For one thing there's an aptness in the connection between the nature of the sacrament and the deity of concern (decimated bits of matter, the *prasad* and the great force of destruction, Mahakali, articulated as Guhyeswari.) Secondly, in this procedure, destruction is given a power of place, a location's force. And just as important and perhaps more significant is that the ritual procedure is of a kind that does entail an actual transformation. It's more than symbolic, not just dependent on the magical power of words that occurs with so many rites, but a physical event, happening there and then: decomposition.

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But just as important and probably more significant is that this force and its breaking down function are being recognized as holy, a religious power - unlike Christianity where the creator is god the creator, and after that metaphysics shifts to morality. And of course this diverges from blood sacrifice. Here at the pot-hole there's no thrill of violence. Rather it is the decomposition that constitutes the operation of time. A remarkable vision of the surge to the sublime!

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Female Danger: "Evil ", Inauspiciousness, and their Symbols in Representations of South Asian Goddesses

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Abstract

Goddesses associated with danger, inauspiciousness or even "evil" have been part of South Asian and especially of Hindu and Tantric pantheons from a very early stage. Prominent examples are Nirṛtti for the Vedic and Alakṣmī for the *Purāṇic* and contemporary periods. Less known but even so highly relevant representations are Jyeṣṭha in later Vedic and South Indian medieval and Dhūmāvatī in Tantric medieval and contemporary contexts. Despite their highly divergent origins and backgrounds all these goddesses (as well as others perceived as potentially "evil") share certain symbols of "evil" and danger in their representations. This article aims at segregating such highly important attributes, like the winnowing fan, and accompanying animals, like the crow, in the textual evidence of South Asian goddesses' representations. It discusses their role as a bond between the textually very closely associated or even identified goddesses and their general symbolic potential for alleged (female) "evil" and danger in South Asia.

Key Words: Evil, Danger, Inauspiciousness, Goddess, Winnowing Fan, Crow, Dhūmāvatī, Jyeṣṭha, Nirṛtti, Alakṣmī

Introduction: "Evil" Goddesses, their Symbols and Interrelations, and the Goddess Dhūmāvatī

Potentially "evil" and/or inauspicious, dangerous and fierce goddesses are inherent part of Hindu and Tantric pantheons, both. As mythological personifications of rather dark or terrifying aspects of life they are also often interrelated in textual as well as in practiced ritual traditions in South Asia. This article analyses and discusses symbols of "evil" in representations of Hindu and Tantric goddesses referring to the goddess Dhūmāvatī as a starting and focal point. The goddess, belonging to the basically Tantric Daśamahāvidyā group of goddesses, shows one of the highest potentials of "evil" and, in general, of very dangerous, dark and fearsome aspects in the Hindu and Tantric goddess pantheons. Though Dhūmāvatī very clearly is part of tantric traditions throughout most of her textual history, i.e. until the late 19th century, and though her representation primarily has to be understood within this particular frame, she also is a paradigmatic representation for South Asian goddesses perceived and depicted as potentially "evil". For instance, her textual tradition repeatedly interconnects her with other "evil" goddesses beyond tantric contexts, mainly with Jyeṣṭha. Both goddesses are very closely affiliated in Dhūmāvatī's textual tradition – in a good number of texts this goes as far as to identify them.

But also other well-known goddesses connected to "evil" and inauspiciousness, namely Nirṛtti and Alakṣmī, are identified with Dhūmāvatī in contemporary texts. As all these goddesses differ to a substantial extend in their textual background, with regards to chronology, types of text, and contents alike, these equations seem rather random at first sight. Especially Nirṛtti and Alakṣmī may be clearly differentiated from Dhūmāvatī concerning details of the ritual practice, iconography, and conceptual representation. It seems that there are two main reasons for nevertheless so casually associating all the goddesses in question. First, there are a number of symbols apparently denoting "evil" in Hindu and Tantric pantheons since, latest, medieval times. These symbols include attributes, such as the winnowing fan, and accompanying animals, such as the crow, which are partly perceived as a bond between the goddesses discussed here. Second and apart from any such connecting features representing "evil", contemporary textual evidence points at the fact that the dangerous and "evil" potential ascribed to all these goddesses is felt sufficient to closely relate them. In such contemporary contexts, it is obviously not of concern to locate "evil" goddesses in their respective Vedic or *Purāṇic* periods or in respective Tantric, Vedic, *Smārta*, popular or 'folk' traditions.

The first section of this article introduces Dhūmāvatī's medieval textual Tantric background and especially highlights the dangerous, harmful, fierce, and, in general, "evil" potential ascribed to Dhūmāvatī in it. For this, the most influential sources for information on the goddess' visual and conceptual representations throughout her textual history up to the present are analysed: her *dhyānamantras* from the 14th to 16th century text Phetkāriṇītantra and from the 1588 compilation Mantramahodadhi by Mahīdhara, respectively. Symbols of "evil" and danger in these hymns are highlighted and discussed. The overall analysis of Dhūmāvatī's textual tradition reveals that the goddess' alleged 'evilness' stretches across all aspects of her textual, Tantric representation: it is clearly traceable in her textually attributed iconography, character, and ritual. The next section focuses on symbols of "evil" and inauspiciousness, as they repeatedly appear in South Asian goddess representations. Namely, the winnowing fan as attribute and the crow as accompanying animal are introduced as ritual, visual and/or conceptual marker of (mostly female) danger and "evil". They are discussed in their perception and underlying symbolism throughout textual history up to the present, in contemporary Internet discussions. The last section surveys the interrelation of "evil" goddesses in South Asia and Dhūmāvatī's position in this. Following an introduction of Jyeṣṭha, Nirṛtti, and Alakṣmī, the section analyses the textual references for their early association and/or identification. It proposes reasons for why these goddesses are frequently perceived and depicted as closely related despite their highly individual backgrounds. A conclusion summarises this paper, highlights the findings and pulls together the results.

"Evil" and its Symbols in the Visual, Conceptual and Ritual Representations of Dhūmāvatī

The textual tradition of Dhūmāvatī reveals a goddess firmly integrated in the Tantric belief and ritual system. From the first reference in the 11th century Śāradātilakatantra (*paṭala* 24.10-14) on, the goddess stays remarkably stable in her visual and conceptual representation, in ritual, and in the sphere of action attributed

to her, for more than six centuries to come.[1] Only in the late 19th century, in the nearly contemporaneous texts *Mantramahārṇava* and *Śāktapramoda*,[2] a transformation becomes visible. These texts, for the first time in Dhūmāvatī's textual history, include longer hymns which contain ideas and beliefs from a Sanskritized Hindu orthopraxy *in addition* to the established Tantric exoteric representation and ritual practice transmitted before. Quite late then in her textual tradition, we first find tendencies of *'saumyaization'*, pacifying or sweetening, as well as general unitizing tendencies trying to propagate a new identity of Dhūmāvatī as belonging to the pan-Hindu *Smārta* goddesses-pantheon. This goes as far as to partially identify Dhūmāvatī with the virtuous Durgā-Mahādevī, acting in favor of the universe and of human beings.

This rather recent development in a certain way softens the goddess representation prevailing in *all* texts before. From the 11th to the late 19th century, Dhūmāvatī was consistently depicted as radical dark and "evil". In this period, specifications and details on the goddess' iconography and on her visual and conceptual representations are spread – nearly without any exception – in her *dhyānamantras.* In Dhūmāvatī's textual history until the late 19th century these short hymns, which are part of the ritual instruction and which are especially used for mental consolidation and meditation, offer the only detailed insights into the goddess' representation. The most important *dhyānamantra* is given in the 14th to 16th century text Phetkāriṇītantra[3]. It is still regularly incorporated in texts on the goddess up to the present and gives a clear account of her Tantric textual representation:

> "Vivarṇa cañcalā duṣṭā dīrgghā ca malināmbarā |
> vimuktakuntalā rukṣā vidhavā viraladvijā ||
> kākadhvajarathārūḍhā vilambitapayodharā |
> śūrpahastātirukṣākṣā dhūtahastāvarānvitā ||
> pravṛddhaghoṇā tu bhṛśankuṭilā kuṭilekṣaṇa |
> kṣutpipāsārddhitā nityambhayadā kalahāspadā ||"[4]
>
> "She is pale and fickle, angry, of high stature and wears dirty clothes. Her hair is discolored. The widow is rough and has intermittent teeth. She sits on a cart which has a crow in the banner. Her breasts hang down. In the hand she holds a winnowing fan and her eyes look very cruel. She has unsteady hands and her hand shows the gesture of wish-fulfilling. She has a big nose, is exceedingly deceitful and has crooked

1 For a complete account and detailed discussion of Dhūmāvatī's textual history from the 11th century to the late 19th century including translations of important sequences, see Zeiler (2011: 47-63) and Zeiler (2012: 169-176).

2 For a discussion on the background and dating of both sources, see Zeiler (2011: 64-68) and Zeiler (2012: 176-177, 181-182).

3 For a discussion of the Phetkāriṇītantra and the chapter on Dhūmāvatī (paṭala 7), see Zeiler (2011: 41-47) and Zeiler (2012: 172-174). The text so far has not been translated or critically edited. For a short summary of its contents, see Goudriaan and Gupta (1981: 115-116).

4 *Dhūmāvatī-dhyānamantra*, paṭala 7 of the *Phetkāriṇītantra*.

> eyes. Permanently afflicted by hunger and thirst she arouses horror and has her abode in conflict."[5]

This *dhyānamantra* names all the characteristics, which also in following sources consistently identify the goddess Dhūmāvatī and which denote her "evil". Even in the rare cases of sources presenting a different formal composition of the *dhyānamantra*, the details of the information laid out here prevail. She is a widow, and she wears dirty or ragged clothes and a winnowing fan. She is depicted sitting on a cart with no animals to pull it attached, and the crow is presiding on her banner or flag. Her hair is discolored and/or disheveled or unbound and her teeth have partially fallen out. She is rough, deceitful, unsteady and unstable, fierce and terrifying. She has her abode in quarrel, strife and conflict. Her body is emaciated, and she is permanently afflicted by hunger and thirst. These characteristics clearly present the goddess as an outsider beyond social bounds and as closely connected to poverty, misfortune and even "evil". She is enduringly angry, unsatisfied, resentful and symbolically lives in quarrel and strife and in ruined and deserted places. In fact, only one single reference to a milder, well-wishing aspect of the goddess' personality is given in this *dhyānamantra*, without commenting on it in any way: the *devī* shows the gesture of wish-fulfilling. This frequency and intensity of dark and furious characteristics especially puts Dhūmāvatī in a particular and outstanding position among goddesses associated with "evil" in South Asia. Dhūmāvatī remains markedly ferocious *without* showing a second, gentler or kinder side.

The *dhyānamantra's* influence on the perception of Dhūmāvatī in medieval and recent sources cannot be overestimated. It is repeatedly reproduced in nearly all classical Sanskrit texts on Dhūmāvatī as well as in the modern popular Hindi and academic secondary literature.[6] Only very few sources, among them the *Mantramahārṇava*, give a second *dhyānamantra*. The *dhyānamantra* from the Phetkāriṇītantra also actively contributed to shape the goddess' understanding in contemporary popular culture and academics. *All* modern ritual compilations from the 20th and the 21st century that I was able to trace, which deal with the Daśamahāvidyās and Dhūmāvatī as their member, present the *dhyānamantra* of the Phetkāriṇītantra.[7] Its wording or even just a summary of contents was very often the only short information given on Dhūmāvatī in recent academic publications on the Daśamahāvidyās,[8] thus strongly influencing the general reading of her textual Tantric background. This is especially true for the contemporary perception of Dhūmāvatī's visual representation: depictions of the goddess in every modern compilation I traced

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[5] *Dhūmāvatī-dhyānamantra*, paṭala 7 of the *Phetkāriṇītantra*, translated by the author.

6 For a detailed listing and discussion of classical Sanskrit, Hindi and secondary academic literature on Dhūmāvatī, see Zeiler (2011: 13-15, 41-74, 75-87).

[7] For instance, Caube (2003), *Daśamahāvidyā* (V. S. 2058), also see fig. 1, Dīkṣit (1999), Jhā (no year, ca. 2000), Rākeś (1999), Śarmā (no year, ca. 2001) or Yaśpāl (1988).

[8] Examples for such short introductions to Dhūmāvatī based on the *Phetkāriṇītantra-dhyānamantra* may be found in Bandyopadhyay (1990: 23), Gauṛ (1991: 110-111), Kumar (1974: 158-159), Sahāya (1977: 68), Satpathy (1992: 61-62, 70), Singh/Singh (2006: 59) and many others.

as well as most of Dhūmāvatī's paintings known to me depict the goddess according to this *dhyānamantra*.[9]

Only one further *dhyānamantra* has some slight influence in Dhūmāvatī's textual tradition. It never gained the popularity of the one presented in the Phetkāriṇītantra, even though it basically describes the same characteristics. From the 16th century on, the Daśamahāvidyās as a group rose to a broader significance and Dhūmāvatī, along with the group, is more frequently mentioned in textual sources. In 1588, Mahīdhara compiled the Mantramahodadhi[10], which gained popularity in India very quickly. This text, a compilation arranging ritual information on several deities from different Tantric sources, also depicts the Daśamahāvidyās. Though the ritual information given here for Dhūmāvatī, i.e. *mantra*, *yantra* and *prayoga*, exactly correspond to ritual prescription already stated in earlier texts, such as in the Phetkāriṇītantra, the *dhyānamantra* differs. This newly composed hymn is transferred to a small number of texts on the goddess later, the most popular one being the late 19th century Mantramahārṇava, and thus gained a limited significance. The modifications as compared to the Phetkāriṇītantra are mainly formal, but we also find some altered details describing the visual and conceptual representation:

> "Atyuccāmalināmbarākhilajanodvegāvahā durmanā |
> rukṣākṣitritayā viśaladaśanā sūryodarī cañcalā ||
> prasvedāmbujitā kṣuddhākulatanuḥ kṛṣṇātirukṣāprabhā |
> dhyeyā muktakacā sadāpriyakalirdhūmāvatī mantriṇā ||"[11]
>
> "Very tall and dressed in dirty clothes the angry one creates agitated fear among all humans. She is stern through (her) three eyes. She has mighty teeth and a belly (swollen) like the sun[12]. She is unstable. She is covered with sweat, her body is afflicted with hunger and she is of black, very dark complexion. With this *mantra* one should meditate on Dhūmāvatī, who has dishevelled hair and who always is in favor of conflict."[13]

Also here, we find the exceptionally dark, dangerous and potentially "evil" representation known to us from all preceding Tantric sources on Dhūmāvatī. She is described as "angry", "creating agitated fear", "stern", "unstable", "afflicted with hunger" (which is an explanation for the dangerous, fierce nature of the goddess rather than a dark feature in itself), and "in favor of conflict". Some of these

9 For a discussion of several paintings of Dhūmāvatī from different periods and regions of South Asia, see Bühnemann (2000: 123).

10 For information on the author and the dating see Bühnemann (2000: 5-8, 10-13). She also discusses the commentaries, editions and translations of the *Mantramahodadhi* in detail.

11 *Dhūmāvatī-dhyānamantra,* taraṇga 7 of the *Mantramahodadhi*.

12 „*Sūyodarī*" probably denotes a large belly. *Sūyodarī* is most likely a corruption of *śūrpodarī*, „having a belly like a winnowing fan". This reading is to be found in one earlier text on Dhūmāvatī already, in the Padārthādarśa commentary on the Śāradātilakatantra of Rāghavabhaṭṭa from 1493, and seems more coherent because of the goddess' close connection to the winnowing fan. Also see Bühnemann (2000: 122, fn. 134).

13 *Dhūmāvatī-dhyānamantra,* taraṇga 7 of the Mantramahodadhi, translated by the author.

characterisations may denote "evil" even more clearly and categorical than the ones included in the Phetkāriṇītantra. But what is missing here at first sight, are some of the most important symbols, such as both the winnowing fan and the crow. But if we consider "sūryodarī" a corrupt grammatical form of *śūrpodarī* – which is most likely – we can still trace the winnowing fan. Even though the crow stays absents, we find new symbols of "evil" in this 16th century hymn. Namely, a sweaty and black skin complexion obviously is chosen by the *dhyānamantra's* compiler as new identification marker for Dhūmāvatī's danger and "evil".

It is important to mention here that all ritual procedures ascribed to the exceptionally dangerous and dark goddess clearly point at an "evil" potential ascribed to her representation. Without any exception and throughout her textual history up to the present, Dhūmāvatī is associated with *śatrunigraha*, "restraining an enemy", and *uccāṭana*, "dispelling". Her rather aggressive ritual is thus entirely tailored to render enemies inoffensive or harmless. And also in the ritual procedures, *prayoga*, at times we find references to the symbols applied in the goddess' *dhyānamantra* to denote her "evil". Namely, the crow – one of the most established symbols of "evil" in South Asia, as the following section will discuss – is used as an empowering agent in certain rituals for rendering enemies harmless or even to harming and/or killing them. Such potential of 'crow potency' is especially applied in the goddess' *uccāṭana* rituals and will be discussed in more detail in the following section. The dangerous, harmful, fierce and, in general, "evil" potential ascribed to Dhūmāvatī thus stretches across all aspects of her textual, Tantric representation: iconography, character, and ritual.

Symbols of "Evil" and Inauspiciousness in Representations of South Asian Goddesses

The previous section highlighted the symbols most frequently used to denote Dhūmāvatī's "evil" potential, as they are depicted in her textual tradition. In order to once again emphasize Dhūmāvatī's paradigmatic role as "evil" and dangerous goddess in South Asia it is important to note that nearly all of them are not unique to her representation (though they appear in an exceptionally dense manner in her texts). The only exception here, the only marker of (explicitly female) "evil" and inauspiciousness unique to the textual representation of Dhūmāvatī, is the status of widowhood ascribed to her.[14] *All* other symbols are repeatedly used to mark an alleged exceptional "evil", inauspiciousness and danger in deities, in Hindu and Tantric pantheons alike. These markers may be applied to female and, in some cases, also to male deities. An analysis of the most important symbols, namely the winnowing fan and the crow, may further clarify their repeated use and general role as markers of "evil" in Hindu and Tantric goddess representations.

[14] Dhūmāvatī is the only goddess depicted as widow in the Hindu and Tantric pantheons, both (for the debated *contemporary* one-night widowhood at times ascribed to the goddess Māriyamman, see Beck (1981: 83-91), Biardeau (1990: 28-30), Foulston (2003: 90-91, 110-111, 114-115) and Harper (1969: 86). For a discussion of Dhūmāvatī's widowhood status and its use as a very powerful marker of danger and "evil", see Zeiler (2011: 183-186). For a good summary on widowhood in contemporary India, see Chen (1998: 19-59).

The winnowing fan is the only attribute held by Dhūmāvatī in her texts. Like the widowhood and the crow it is thus also one of the very few stable identification marks throughout her textual history up to the present. Despite this highly significant fact and despite the unchanging repeated ascription no text comments on why the goddess and the winnowing fan were brought together. But most likely it is one certain aspect of the symbolic character attributed to the winnowing fan in South Asia which established or motivated the pairing of both. The winnowing fan, as a popular and well-known device in everyday life in South Asia, figures also in ritual traditions.[15] It was first mentioned in such contexts already in Vedic times, where it was used for the ritual production of the ritual beverage *brahmaudana*.[16] In non-sanskritic 'folk' Hindu traditions, the winnowing fan acts as an important ritual device in rituals, practices of worship and customs undertaken to request protection for infants and smaller children from certain deities.[17] In these contexts, the winnowing fan is a symbol for reproduction and prosperity. But a high magical potential is ascribed to the winnowing fan, as well. Local healers use winnowing fans because they are perceived as impure and, as such, as predestined for (ritual) use in dealing with "evil" or malevolent spirits. For instance, ritual offerings for spirits, which are to be pacified, are very often placed inside winnowing fans during *ojhāī*.[18]

The only goddess (at times) related to a winnowing fan besides Dhūmāvatī is Śītalā.[19] Typically, Śītalā is depicted holding a broom, but at times this attribute is complemented by the winnowing fan. In contrast to Dhūmāvatī, Śītalā is then shown with the winnowing fan not in her hand, but placed above her head in the way of a parasol (see fig. 1).[20] This is most likely due to Śītalā's local, popular or 'folk' background and to one of the spheres of action ascribed to her, i.e. the protection of children. In the case of Dhūmāvatī, on the other hand, the close connection to the winnowing fan is surely based on its accredited magical, dangerous and 'dark' potential. Obviously, this was felt to adequately match the goddess' Tantric magical background. To choose this symbol above others as the *only* attribute held by Dhūmāvatī then clearly marks her overall malevolent, dangerous, and "evil" aspects in, especially, iconography.

[15] This is not unique to South Asia. World-wide, it was especially used as an instrument in rituals to detect thieves and as a ritual container. For some examples, see Crooke (1993: 30-31) and Dhal (1995: 155-156).

[16] For instance in Atharvaveda 9.6.16, 10.9.26, 11.3.4 and 12.3.19. See Auboyer/Mallmann (1959: 214, fn. 33).

[17] For detailed examples in the ritual tradition of the Tamil goddess Ankāḷamaramēcuvari, see Meyer (1986: 138-152). For examples in local traditions, see Crooke (1993: 307-308) and Dhal (1995: 155).

[18] See Auboyer/Mallmann (1950: 215), Crooke (1993: 308), Dhal (1995: 155) and Meyer (1986: 213-214). For a detailed discussion and analysis of *ojhāī* as healing rituals or exorcisms that borrow from both local/regional 'folk' traditions and Tantric practices in general, see Zeiler (2011: 293-295), for *ojhāī* related to Dhūmāvatī in her temple in Benares, see Zeiler (2011: 296-308, 278-281).

[19] For an introduction to the goddess, see for instance Ferrari (2010).

[20] See, for instance, Auboyer/Mallmann (1950: 210, 215) and Srivastava (1979: 175).



Figure 1
Śītalā. Kālīghāṭ painting, watercolor on paper, ca. 3rd quarter of the 19th century. Photograph by courtesy of Peter Blohm (www.indianminiaturepaintings.co.uk)

A very dangerous, dark and "evil" reputation also marks the second, highly meaning-loaded symbol of "evil" in the goddess' representation. The crow is the only accompanying animal ever related to Dhūmāvatī. From the earliest descriptions on the bird is portrayed as presiding in her flag, for instance in the Phetkāriṇītantra's *dhyānamantra*. The crow, in general, is a highly symbolic animal in South Asian traditions and it is mainly looked upon with anxiety and fear.[21] In mythology, iconography and ritual it is primarily represented as feared and inauspicious omen and bearer of evil; only in ancestor worship a positive character is ascribed to crows.[22] Crows are represented as vehicles, *vāhana*, of both gods and goddesses. All these deities share a certain characteristic background – one of inauspiciousness, danger and "evil". Gods and goddesses with whom crows are closely affiliated are the deities Jyeṣṭhā, Śani and, at times, Nirṛti and Yama. Just as the female deities Jyeṣṭhā and Nirṛti, who will be discussed in the next section in more detail, the male deities Śani and Yama are believed to have a strong inauspicious, dangerous and "evil" potential. Śani, the personification of the planet Saturn, is believed to have a very harmful and inauspicious character, i.e. to be the source of several diseases, bad luck and ghost possession on humans. Yama has but one sphere of action in mythology: he is depicted as the god of death and crows as his messengers. It is thus obvious that crows are paired with dangerous and inauspicious deities.

[21] For perceptions of the crow in Hinduisms, see Leslie (1992: 119) and Sivaramamurti (1974: 31).
[22] See Zeiler (2013a).

It is also widely accounted for that the crow is often looked upon as an inauspicious omen and the bearer of bad luck or "evil" in popular practices and beliefs.[23] This becomes especially apparent in recent discussions on the Internet. The so-called new media and especially the Internet play an increasing role in the negotiating and the (re)construction of religious topics in South Asia.[24] It is therefore not surprising that several Internet discussions on South Asian religions also reflect on the crow's alleged "evil" potential. The most recurring questions and concerns in Internet forums, blogs and social networks are about how to deal with crows in general,[25] how to counter their alleged inauspicious potential,[26] and where to find information about their connection with death[27]. The majority of information presented in new media is drawn from popular narratives based on older textual material, mainly commenting on the connection of Yama and crows.

Tantric ritual, both Buddhist and Hindu, shows still another inclination to crows. In *uccāṭana* rituals, aiming at rendering enemies harmless or even harming and/or killing them, dead crows or their body parts are repeatedly used as empowering ritual offerings. Such 'crow potency' is applied especially in left-hand Tantra, where concepts of auspiciousness and purity as prevalent in Brahmanic Hinduism are obliterated. Many substances and materials regarded as impure or dangerous in Brahmanic Hinduism – for instance alcohol, meat or blood – are utilised in Tantric ritual *precisely* because of their reputation in Brahmanic Hinduism. The reason why animals perceived as inauspicious or "evil", like the crow, were incorporated in Tantric rituals probably follows a similar reasoning. Thus, while most Hindu traditions try to pacify the dangerous potential of the crow and to render its alleged inauspiciousness harmless, most Tantric traditions accept or even welcome it, actively take advantage of it and try to utilise it for ritual purposes.[28] As Dhūmāvatī is closely connected to *uccāṭana*, 'crow potency' is at times utilised in her rituals. The *prayoga*, ritual application, of the eight-syllable *Dhūmāvatīmantra*[29] in the *Dhūmāvatītantra* section of the Mantramāharṇava[30] incorporates 'crow potency' thus:

> "If one burns a crow in the fire of a cremation ground, takes her ashes, implies the mantra on this and throws it at the head of the opponent, he will be ruined immediately."[31]

[23] See, for instance, Sivaramamurti (1974: 31).
[24] For an introductory discussion on the increasing importance of mediatized religions in South Asia, see Zeiler (2013b).
[25] See, for instance, Moksha (2009) and Anonymous (2011).
[26] See, for instance, Anonymous (2005) and Kapoor (2009).
[27] See, for instance, Tulasi (2010).
[28] For a more detailed discussion of ‚crow potency' and its application in Hindu and Buddhist Tantric ritual traditions, see Zeiler (2013a).
[29] Reading "dhūṁ dhūṁ Dhūmāvatī svāhā".
[30] For the first translation from Sanskrit and a detailed analysis of the *Dhūmāvatītantra*, see Zeiler (2011: 60-74).
[31] *Mantramāharṇava, Dhūmāvatītantra*, prayoga of the eight-syllable Dhūmāvatīmantra 8, translated by the author.

But also other deities may be associated with Tantric destructive rituals or rituals for self-defence. For instance, in a ritual for Hanumān aiming at the killing of enemies, the Mantramahodadhi outspokenly refers to the "evil" potential of crows:

> "A sacrifice performed in a sacrificial pit in the shape of a half moon, and by means of products associated with evil such as the wings of crows and sticks from the *śleṣmātaka* tree [*Cordia latifolia*], is also very harmful towards an enemy. One should perform it with dishevelled hair during the night while facing the South, and repeat it 300 times. After that the enemy will die."[32]

This statement bears witness to the reasons why 'crow potency' is considered important in Tantric destructive rituals and in rituals for self-defence. What is made clear here is, first, that crows – and surely not only their wings – are associated with "evil". The statement also highlights the precise ritual concept underlying the application of 'crow potency' in Tantric rituals: as for many other magical rituals the idea is that evil counters evil. Accordingly, individuals considered harmful or "evil" have to be defeated by entities or objects associated with "evil".

The Interrelation of "Evil" Goddesses in South Asia: Dhūmāvatī, Jyeṣṭha, Nirṛtti, and Alakṣmī

The symbols of "evil" discussed before also function as bonds or linking attributes between certain South Asian goddesses. The goddesses most widely perceived as highly dangerous, inauspicious, and even "evil" are Nirṛtti from Vedic and Alakṣmī from *Purāṇic* periods, the goddesses maybe most paradigmatic for such potential are Dhūmāvatī from Tantric and Jyeṣṭha from mainly South Indian medieval contexts. Representations of "evil" and dangerous goddesses thus expand over a very large variety of texts, periods and traditions. Despite their highly divergent origins and backgrounds all these goddesses nevertheless at some point have been interconnected and even identified and they share some of the discussed symbols of "evil" and danger in their representations. In order to trail their interrelation in textual evidence, Dhūmāvatī is again taken as a starting point.

Since the very first detailed reference in her textual history, since the Padārthādarśa commentary on the Śāradātilakatantra by Rāghavabhaṭṭa from 1494, Dhūmāvatī has been constantly identified with Jyeṣṭhā.[33] She is repeatedly and explicitly refered to as Jyeṣṭhā, for instance in the Padārthādarśa commentary on the Śāradātilakatantra or in the Mantramahodadhi by Mahīdhara.[34] This interconnection is not commented on in any text on Dhūmāvatī, but obviously both goddesses' representations were perceived as extraordinarily close. This becomes markedly visible in one symbol of "evil" shared by both deities. A crow is repeatedly put in relation with Jyeṣṭhā, mainly as an ensign on the goddess' banner – which is a feature shared only with one more

[32] *Mantramahodadhi* 13.12, quoted in Goudriaan (1978: 89).
[33] To my best knowledge, only contemporary sources identify Dhūmāvatī also with Nirṛtti and Alakṣmī. This is done, for instance, in the publication *Daśamahāvidyā* (2001: 15) by Gītāpres Gorakhpur.
[34] The *Mantramahodadhi* repeatedly uses synonyms for deities, see Bühnemann (2000: 57). For iconographical differences between Dhūmāvatī and Jyeṣṭha, see Bühnemann (2000: 122).

deity, with the goddess Dhūmāvatī. Jyeṣṭhā is explicitly called *kākadhvajasamāyuktā*, lit. "'having a crow in her banner", and *kākkaikkoḍiyāḷ*, lit. "crow-bannered".[35] In the goddess' iconography, the crow is often depicted at her side (see fig. 2).



Figure 2
Jyeṣṭhā. Coḷa stone relief in Thirukattalai, Tamil Nadu, 9th century. Photograph by courtesy of Saurabh Saxena (http://puratattva.in)

Jyeṣṭhā, a goddess prevailing in medieval South India, is described as having an unconventional character with a strongly inauspicious or even dangerous side.[36] She is widely accounted for in especially the 7th and 8th centuries and there are a good number of statues and reliefs as well as inscriptions from the early Coḷas testifying for her popularity then.[37] The goddess disappears from textual and iconographical sources after the 11th century.[38] Jyeṣṭhā and her worship can be traced back to the 6th to 3rd century BC Baudhāyanagṛhyasūtra (3.9).[39] As an attribute she often holds a broom. This as well as the donkey *vāhana* connects her iconography to Śitalā.[40]

[35] See Leslie (1992: 117).
[36] See Leslie (1992: 113-127).
[37] See, for instance, Bhattacharyya (1999: 176), Leslie (1992: 113-114) and Sastri (1986: 216-218). For the goddess' different names in Tamil Nadu, see Bhattacharyya (1999: 176).
[38] See, for instance, Venkataraman (1956: 254).
[39] For a short summary on the contents in the *Baudhāyanagṛhyasūtra* and in later texts on Jyeṣṭha, for example in the Purāṇ□as, such as the *Lingapurāṇa, Padmapurāṇa* or *Matsyapurāṇa*, see Leslie (1992: 115-123) and Srivastava (1979: 174-175). For Jyeṣṭhā's depiction in Vedic and Purāṇic Literature, see Lal (1980: 81-87).
[40] See Bhattacharyya (1999: 176) and Srivastava (1979: 176). It is important to note that beyond iconography, these two goddesses are not connected.

Besides Śitalā, Jyeṣṭha especially in textual tradition is often interrelated with two other goddesses perceived as inauspicious, dangerous and "evil": Nirṛtti und Alakṣmī.

Textual references for Nirṛtti reach back as far as the Ṛgveda (for instance 1.117.5, 6.74.2, 7.37.7). She is the earliest known divine female personification of negative aspects in South Asia. Nirṛtti, who is to be worshipped with black offerings, is in detail described in Vedic literature as causing danger or even death[41] and she is connected to the southwest region[42]. The goddess is very often interpreted as the first predecessor of later inauspicious and ‚evil' goddesses.[43] At times, Nirṛti is ritually identified with a crow. For instance, the Kauśikasūtra describes a ritual to dispose of the goddess' evil influence. Among other things the sacrificer has to pierce with an iron nail the thigh of a black crow, which is identified with Nirṛti. The crow is then expected to fly away and trouble one's enemies.[44] Jyeṣṭha was related to Nirṛtti since her very first textual reference in the Baudhāyanagṛhyasūtra. But also Alakṣmī belongs to this group of goddesses with strong textual interrelations already in early times.[45] Again the Baudhāyanagṛhyasūtra (3.9.4) for the first time in textual history uses Alakṣmī as a synonym for Jyeṣṭha. As a counterpart to the auspicious and benevolent Lakṣmī she is represented as dark and highly inauspicious.[46]

Representations of inauspiciousness, danger, and "evil" in female deities then exist since the Ṛgveda. Most certainly, all goddesses discussed in this article developed from similar ideas, i.e. out of a rather general acknowledgement of dark and fearsome aspects of life. It is important to note, though, that all these goddesses are to be understood as representing harm, disaster, affliction, quarrel, distress etc. rather than as actively causing them. Due to their very close conceptual disposition – which nevertheless goes along with chronological disparities – the goddesses have at times been interpreted as succeeding deities. Nirṛtti, the only one of the goddesses in question already accounted for in the early Vedic period, disappears after Vedic times. In later Vedic texts, she is still mentioned along with Jyeṣṭha, but also this connection declines. Jyeṣṭha, on the other hand, first appears connected to Alakṣmī, but after a rather short period in medieval times she looses influence. In the *Purāṇic* and contemporary panhindu pantheon, Alakṣmī holds the position of the most well-known goddess with an inauspicious and "evil" potential.

The dangerous and "evil" potential is what these goddesses share and what interconnects their representations. Though texts and popular lived religion give

[41] For a summary of references from the individual texts, see Agrawala (1984: 111-113), Bhattacharji (1988: 80-84), Guleri (1990: 66-68, 124), Kramrisch (1974: 254) and Lal (1980: 109-119).
[42] Bhattacharji (1988: 81) gives the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* (9.1.2.9.) as first reference for this. Dhūmāvatī, in nearly all medieval and contemporary sources, presides in the southeast region.
[43] See, for instance, Lal (1980: 110-111), O`Flaherty (1988: 349) and Bhattacharji (1988: 84-91). Bhattacharji (1988: 84-91) gives references for an interrelation between Nirṛtti and several other female deities personifying danger and ‚evil' in Epic and Purāṇic literature. Most frequently, Alakṣmī, Jyeṣṭha and Kālī are named as succeeding goddesses to Nirṛtti.
[44] See Dhal (1995: 131-132).
[45] For a comparison in the concepts of Jyeṣṭha, Nirṛtti, and Alakṣmī, see Kinsley (1998: 176-181).
[46] For Alakṣmī's representation and ritual in Vedic literature and for parallels between her and Jyeṣṭha, see Dhal (1995: 129-163) and Lal (1980: 78-80).

distinctive reasons for the dark aspects in each individual goddess, in a more general sense all of them are obviously considered and depicted as predominantly inauspicious, potentially dangerous, and "evil" in their conceptual representations, i.e. in their ascribed character or nature. What then ultimately defines this perception is the use of certain symbols. Symbols of "evil" are not only applied to illustrate or emphasize the dark aspects in representations of South Asian goddesses (and some male deities, for that matter). More importantly, they also contribute to visually and conceptually codify "evil" and inauspiciousness in South Asian pantheons and more so in goddesses representations.

Conclusion: Female Facets of "Evil," Inauspiciousness, and Danger in South Asian Pantheons

"Evil," inauspiciousness, and danger are ascribed not only to female deities in South Asia. A number of male panhindu deities, such as Śani and Yama, are perceived as dangerous, as well. But most certainly, a highly dark potential is more frequently found in female representations of South Asian deities. Even if we here leave aside the particularly South Indian pantheon – in which fierce and potentially dangerous goddesses play a very significant role – and discuss a panhindu frame it is still obvious that "evil" is much more regularly depicted as a domain of goddesses than of gods. Significantly, all the goddesses in question share certain symbols. Among the most important markers of alleged "evil" and danger in the Hindu and Tantric pantheons are the crow (in a few cases also connected to male deities) and the winnowing fan (never connected to male deities). Symbols of "evil" and inauspiciousness in the South Asian pantheons, on the one hand, are applied to illustrate or emphasize dark aspects. On the other hand and more importantly, they also contribute to visually and conceptually codify "evil" and inauspiciousness in goddess representations.

The shared symbols are also perceived as a bond between certain goddesses. Representations of "evil", inauspiciousness, and danger in goddesses reach back as far as the *Ṛgveda*. Though Nirṛtti disappeared from texts and lived religious practice by the late Vedic period, she still is often interpreted as the precursor in a group of associated and even identified goddesses. Both Jyeṣṭha and Alakṣmī were related to Nirṛtti from a late Vedic period on, first in the *Baudhāyanagṛhyasūtra*. Especially Jyeṣṭha and Alakṣmī were textually used as synonyms, before also Jyeṣṭha lost influence in texts and lived religious practice (mainly in South India), both. From the *Purāṇic* period up to the present, Alakṣmī certainly is the most well-known goddess with an inauspicious and "evil" potential in the panhindu pantheon. Though these goddesses then all have distinctive individual backgrounds, though they belong to different chronological periods, and though their representations differ in details, all are repeatedly associated and interconnected in texts as well as lived religious practice because of their "evil", inauspicious and dangerous potential.

Dhūmāvatī is the fourth goddess in this group. She is constantly identified with Jyeṣṭha in her textual tradition from the 15th century on and contemporary texts later also associate her with Nirṛtti and Alakṣmī. Belonging to still another background, namely to a distinct Tantric pantheon, Dhūmāvatī shows one of the highest potential

of “evil” and, in general, of very dangerous, dark and fearsome aspects in the South Asian goddess pantheons. Significantly, her visual, conceptual and ritual representations all include symbols of “evil”. Leaving aside her unique widow status, which is a highly symbolic mark of female inauspiciousness, danger and “evil” but which was not the focus of this article, Dhūmāvatī in her representation brings together some of the most significant recurrent symbols of “evil” and danger: the winnowing fan and the crow. Dhūmāvatī’s representation, centred in a marked Tantric background, then also accounts for the vast extent in which symbols of “evil” in South Asia are applied across borders of religious traditions (and chronological periods, as well). The symbols discussed here are consistently ascribed the same “evil”, dangerous and/or inauspicious potential and they are applied as markers of such potential in goddess representations from a (later) Vedic, Tantric, *Smārta*, popular or ‘folk’ traditions alike.

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The Half Male, Half Female Servants of the Goddess Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari

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Abstract

This paper argues that although Tamil tirunangais, or male-to-female transgender individuals, have historically been stigmatized and marginalized, they negotiate a more tenable status by engaging in distinctive social, kinship and ritual spheres. Tirunangais have a special relationship with Tamil goddesses and channel divine power by performing divination and healing rituals at temples. In particular, Aṅkāḷamman serves as an indigenous goddess whose worship and service connects the tirunangai community spatially and temporally, bestows social and cultural power, and allows tirunangais to more fully embody and enact their identity.

Key words: Tirunangai, kaṟippu ritual, Mayāṉakkoḷḷai Festival, Aṅkāḷammaṉ, Siva, Tamilnadu, Kuri, Amman, Vinayaka, Parvati, Kali, Periyāyi, Kulatevam, Ardhanārīśvara, Bahuchara Mata

Introduction: The Tamil Tirunangai Community

Communities of male-to-female transgender[1] individuals exist in many regions of India (Nanda 1999, Reddy 2005), including in the southern Indian state of Tamilnadu. Recently there has been an explosion of state, national and international interest in, and media coverage of, Tamil male-to-female transgender communities. In the last few years Tamilnadu has become the first state in India to officially recognize a "third

[1] David Valentine argues that "the emergence of transgender is central to the ongoing working-out of what 'gender' and 'sexuality' can mean in contemporary U.S. American activism and social theory" (2007:15). I argue that this term, which is increasingly used in institutionalized contexts all over the world, can also be employed usefully in working out what "gender" and "sexuality" mean outside of the U.S., provided the context of its use is closely examined. I follow Susan Stryker (2008) here in using the term "transgender" "to refer to people who move away from the gender they were assigned at birth, people who cross over (*trans-*) the boundaries constructed by their culture to define and contain that gender" and to highlight "*the movement across a socially imposed boundary away from an unchosen starting place* – rather than any particular destination" (1; emphasis in original). I think that there are in fact multiple destinations that need to be mapped spatially, temporally, and linguistically. "Transgender" signals the shifting terrain of the discourse surrounding gender identity in Tamilnadu in recent years. I rarely heard the word used in self-identification outside of Chennai, but increasingly this term is used by the state government and in news and entertainment media in Tamilnadu, partly reflecting the globalization of the term.

gender,"[2] to grant ration cards in a transgender name, to set up a welfare board specifically for transgenders, to pay for gender reassignment surgery, to grant plots of land, and to offer education loans specifically to transgender individuals. In addition, in 2011, in response to a call from the Tamilnadu Transgenders Association (which is apparently 30,000 strong), Chief Minister Karunanidhi declared that April 15th will now officially be observed as Transgenders Day—(http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-03-02/chennai/28646598_1_trangenders-electoral-rolls-welfare-board, accessed July 12, 2012); April 15th is the date in 2008 when the Chief Minister established the Welfare Board.

The word "hijra" which is commonly used in much of India, is not widely used in Tamilnadu. A few years ago the then-Chief Minister of Tamilnadu, Karunanidhi, gave the name "tirunangais" (*tirunaṅkaikaḷ*) to these individuals who had previously been called "alis," and more recently, "aravanies" (*aravāṇikaḷ*) because of their mythically portrayed marriage to the hero Aravan, the son of Arjuna who agrees to sacrifice himself so that the Pandavas can win the *Mahabharata* war. "Tirunangai" can be glossed as either "auspicious woman" or "half male, half female," which speaks to the complex gender identities these individuals embody. These moves acknowledge and support a marginalized community that falls outside of normative gender and social roles, but also attempt to bring this transgressive community from the margins into the center by constructing the individuals at least partly as women, and most recently by updating government terminology with a globally-recognized label. These governmental changes highlight paradoxes and tensions that have been integral to Tamil transgender communities. Tirunangais are seen in some contexts as auspicious and powerful, but, as individuals who transgress normative binaries, they have historically been economically, socially, and culturally marginalized. Unlike hijras in some other parts of India who historically play important roles in blessing newlywed couples and newborn babies, tirunangais in Tamilnadu do not occupy this kind of regular role in life cycle rituals; many of them have difficulty finding jobs that will support them outside of sex work and begging for alms.

In my ethnographic work in Tamilnadu I build on Gayatri Reddy's (2005) illuminating work on the hijras of Hyderabad in order to understand identity as emerging in a localized web of actions, concepts, and meanings. Tirunangais engage in intersecting activities and identities that locate them on both the margins and in more central arenas of social and cultural life. In this essay I focus on the role of local goddesses in

[2] http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-03-07/chennai/28665271_1_transgender-community-third-gender-transsexuals; http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2008-03-16/india/27778521_1_ration-cards-third-gender-tamil-nadu; http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-04-14/tamil-nadu/29417933_1_third-gender-transgenders-aiadmk. And in the recent state elections two transgenders ran for places on the DMK ticket. http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-03-11/chennai/28679686_1_first-transgender-rose-venkatesan-rights-of-sexual-minorities All sites accessed on July 12, 2012.

the tirunangai community. All hijras in India worship an incarnation of Bahuchara Mata or Bedhraj Mata, the goddess whose vehicle is a rooster; she is worshiped especially at the time of the *nirvān* operation in which the male genitalia is excised and through which individuals become vehicles of the goddess's power. Bahuchara Mata's main temple is in Gujarat; although Mata is worshiped at all important tirunangai life cycle ceremonies, and many if not most of the tirunangais my research assistant and I interviewed kept the image of the Mata in their homes, none of them had been to the temple in Gujarat, knew of any temples to her in Tamilnadu, nor even knew the particular story of this goddess. Therefore Tamil tirunangais, especially those who are diviners and healers, cultivate relationships with local Tamil goddesses.

Myths of Aṅkāḷammaṉ and Mēl Malaiyaṉūr

One of the most popular goddesses among tirunangais is Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari, or Aṅkāḷammaṉ; tirunangais commonly claim that Aṅkāḷammaṉ wants only people who are half male, half female to perform her worship, and although she may possess women, it is only these half male, half female people that she will speak through (*aruḷ vākku*). Some of the ritual diviners develop a substantial clientele, working at temples ranging from small, private ones to large, famous temples. The temple at Mēl Malaiyaṉūr is considered the most important temple to Aṅkāḷammaṉ (Meyer 1986: 103, 157). This temple area provides tirunangais with the physical and cultural space in which to perform multiple roles that are integral aspects of tirunangai identity.

Two of the Aṅkāḷammaṉ myths in the myth cycle collected by Meyer are relevant here; below are synopses of each. The first story is summarized from Meyer (1986:12-15). The second story is a condensed version of several accounts: an oral rendition given by Perumal, a *pampaikkārar* or drummer based in Mēl Malaiyaṉūr in March of 2006, and published versions (Meyer 1986:36-38, 58, 176-184; Nabokov 2000:89-90).

Vallāḷakaṇṭaṉ

The demon king Vallāḷakaṇṭan performed austerities (*tavam/tapas*) and received the boon that Īśvara would be born as his son and Viṣṇu, Brahmā, and Indra would serve him. When Iśvara appeared in the womb of Niśāsinī, Vallāḷakaṇṭan's wife, and the gods were captured and forced to guard the demon king's fort, darkness fell in all the worlds. Nārada went to Īśvara's wife, Ammaṉ, and told her what to do to destroy Vallāḷakaṇṭan and free the gods. Following his instructions, Ammaṉ appeared in Vallāḷakaṇṭan's kingdom as a fortune-teller (*kuṟatti*). She told the demon king that he would have a son, and that he would lose his head and his kingdom would be destroyed, so he threw her in prison. She took another form and escaped from the prison. When Vallāḷakaṇṭan's wife went into labor, Ammaṉ took the form of a midwife and was brought to the fort to assist in the delivery. She asked the king for neem leaves, a long screen, a knife, a vessel, and a winnowing fan. Ammaṉ lay the queen on the screen, ripped open her belly, and garlanded herself with the intestines. She took out the child and put him on the winnowing fan, and offered the blood to the blood-thirsty spirit Kāṭṭēṟi. Through her *tapas* she created her son Vīrabhadra (Vīrapattiraṉ), who cut off

Vallāḷakaṇṭan's head and destroyed the fort. He and Ammaṉ set the gods free, and Īśvara went back to Kailāsa. Īśvara told Ammaṉ to go to a particular place and inhabit a termite hill (*puṟṟu*) so that she would achieve fame.

Śiva's Brahminicide

Once when Ammaṉ returned to Kailāsa, both Śiva and Brahmā were seated there. Since each of them has five heads, she could not tell which one was her husband, and mistakenly bowed down before Brahmā to receive his blessings. When Brahmā laughed because she had lost her faithfulness to her husband, both Ammaṉ and Śiva got very angry. Ammaṉ cursed Brahmā to lose his head, and Śiva cut off one head. Brahmā then cursed Śiva to wander around in the cremation ground begging for alms. Śiva went begging for food, but Brahmā's skull (*kapāla*, the begging bowl) was stuck to his hand and ate all the offerings. Thus unable to eat, Śiva started rolling around in the cremation ground at Malaiyaṉūr. Ammaṉ saw Śiva lying down there, and desiring to obtain his left side,[3] set Vināyaka there to guard him so that he would not leave the cremation ground. Ammaṉ put some of the round sweet *koḻukkaṭṭai* in a basket for Vināyaka to eat; she also scattered some in the cremation ground, along with some rice mixed with sacrificial blood. All the demons in the cremation ground came to eat the food; Brahmā's skull left Śiva's hand and ate the food also. When the skull dropped off his hand, Śiva regained his normal state and ran to Ammaṉ, who took the fearsome form of Kāḷī, of Aṅkāḷammaṉ, trampled Brahmā's skull, and cursed him. Ammaṉ then attained her place of honor at Śiva's left side. In this way Ammaṉ settled in Malaiyaṉūr, where she revealed herself as a termite hill (*puṟṟu*) and the snake inside. She cures people's diseases, solves their problems, and protects them in return for offerings.

The Mēl Malaiyaṉūr temple was constructed next to a cremation ground, on which several temple activities take place.[4] In the main shrine near the anthropomorphic image of the goddess is a large termite mound, pieces of which are given to devotees as gracious divine leavings, called "prasad." The iconography of Aṅkāḷammaṉ shares many features with other Tamil goddesses. She has four arms holding a trident, a skull, a knife, and a *uṭukkai* drum. On her head she wears a crown with flames blazing at the top, behind which a cobra spreads its hood. In the inner sanctum, she sits with her right leg hanging down, her left leg folded under. There is a large image perched on a roof of the temple complex that is similar except she has two arms. In a fenced enclosure outside the temple is a fairly small, similar image, next to a fanged, huge-eyed image with many arms holding multiple weapons and riding a lion. And outside the temple there is a large, terrifying-looking Ammaṉ lying down, Periyāyi, echoing the figures in the cremation ground.

[3] Here Ammaṉ wishes to assume her place as the left half of Śiva's half male, half female Ardhanārīśvara form.

[4] This description is based on several visits to the temple in 2006, 2009, and 2012, as well as Meyer (1986: 58-59, 78-80, 167-168) and Nabokov (2000: 76-77).



Figure 1: Mēl Malaiyaṉūr Images (Photo by author)

The second myth also points to a central connection to the tirunangai community. Ammaṉ desires to obtain the left side of Śiva's body, to participate in his half male, half female form, which is why she engages in the activities that free Śiva from Brahma's head to bring him back to his normal state so that she can become part of him. As we saw above, tirunangais believe that Aṅkāḷammaṉ prefers to possess them because they embody this half male, half female form. Many of them ritually enact this embodiment in their work as ritual healers.

Rituals to Aṅkāḷammaṉ

In addition to narrating how Ammaṉ calmed Śīva and came to Mēl Malaiyaṉūr, these myths highlight significant elements of some of the rituals performed at this and other Aṅkāḷammaṉ temples in Tamilnadu. The end of the second myth refers to a range of activities that take place regularly at many temples, but for which Mēl Malaiyaṉūr is especially renowned. During new moon (*amāvācai*) and full moon (*paurṇami*) days and annual festivals, the central temple area is bustling with many tirunangais, women, and some men performing various rites for throngs of devotees. There are numerous vendors with small shops set up on carts or blankets, selling the items necessary for the rituals. The simplest rites are done to remove negative influences such as the evil eye (*tiruṣṭi*) or pollution (*tīṭṭu*): the tirunangai circles the person's head with a lime before instructing the individual to step on it, then she lights camphor on a pumpkin and again circles the person and smashes the pumpkin. Some tirunangais rub the person's body with the fruit as well. The area is full of smashed limes and pumpkins.

Malaiyaṉūr is also a hub for tirunangais who perform more elaborate rituals such as *kuṟi*, fortunetelling and prediction, and *kaṟippu*, removing negative conditions or

expelling malignant forces. On the new moon night of April 24, 2009, my research assistant and I observed a *kaṟippu* ritual performed by a tirunangai named Kirtana.[5] In an area away from the main temple, Kirtana had set up a *kaṟippu* circle with pots containing coconuts, and leaves with offerings on them, and lots of camphor. Two young men sat inside the circle; they were suffering the effects of Mūtēvi, the goddess of laziness and misfortune, which is why they had come to Kirtana for help. After setting up the circle Kirtana stood very still and prayed; later she told us that she was thinking of Aṅkāḷammaṉ and asking her to make the ritual successful, that Ammaṉ is the one who actually performs the ritual. She then proceeded to circle the two men with many items like limes and pumpkins with lit camphor, moving things along the men's bodies and then throwing them into a fire. She poured out the contents of the pots and smashed them. She sat in front of the men and put several lit camphor pieces into her mouth, straightening her arms into the air and yelling. At the end she circled the two men with a red dough doll on a leaf, then threw it into the fire. She told them to stand up and walk straight ahead without looking back, leaving their problems in the fire.



Figure 2: Kirtana performing *kaṟippu* at Mēl Malaiyaṉūr (Photo by author)

It is common practice in *kaṟippu* rituals to fashion an effigy to embody the malevolent forces that the healer seeks to remove from the client (Nabokov 2000:56-66, Clark-Decès 2007:48-51). Kirtana considered removing the effects of Mūtēvi to be a relatively small endeavor and carried out this *kaṟippu* with only one woman assisting

[5] In addition to my direct observations of Kirtana performing the ritual, this discussion of Kirtana and her life is based on interviews with her on April 11th and May 8th, 2009, and November 19th, 2010, in Malaiayaṉūr and Gingee. I conduct all of my fieldwork with my assistant, Mr. M. Thavamani.

her with lighting the camphor and arranging the many items involved. But for larger problems a more elaborate *kaṟippu* is necessary, for which *pampai-uṭukkai* drummers must be hired. These musicians are able to connect with supernatural beings and incite the ritual participants to enter possession states; they help distinguish who the possessing entity is, then either encourage the Ammaṉ or other deity to speak through the human vehicle (*aruḷ vākku*) and/or work with ritual practitioners like Kirtana to coax a malevolent being to leave the person it is afflicting (Meyer 1986: 3-5; Nabokov 2000:78-80). Kirtana told us that these young men heard about her from some people from Bangalore who had "brought a girl, saying that she is possessed by an evil spirit (*pēy).* I chased the *pēy*. I thought [there was] only one, but there were three *pēys*. I kept *pampai-uṭukkai* and chased the *pēy*, she was cured. And those people sent these boys to me, telling there is an aravāṇi called Kirtana, she is doing good, then they came to me."

Many healers at Mēl Malaiyaṉūr gain an extensive clientele when stories of their successful rituals spread by word of mouth; Malaiyaṉūr is a famous center for Aṅkāḷammaṉ's healing powers and draws those whom the goddess possesses. When asked how she learned to do the rituals she performs, Kirtana responded:

> When I was young, Nākattammaṉ came on me. People in my town said, your son is possessed by a demon (*pēy*). My mother was afraid and took me to a sorcerer (*mantiravāti*). Then he said there is no *pēy* on her, only the swamy has come. From a young age I have great devotion (*pakti*) to god. I have so much devotion to Aṅkāḷammaṉ, Maruvathurammaṉ, Nākattammaṉ. They said when I am 20, she will open her mouth. At that time the god had not opened my mouth. They told me I should hire *pampai-uṭukkai* and have a tongue piercing (*nāvalaku*). In my village there was a firewalking festival. When I went there the boys came and teased me, and Ammaṉ came on me and opened my mouth. Then I had Aṅkāḷammaṉ *nāvalaku* [in Mēl Malaiyaṉūr]. Then I carried the firepot, I brought decorations for Ammaṉ, and I did the whole festival. So when I used to see a woman [tirunangai] like me doing things, I watched and learned. I think of Ammaṉ and do it and it is successful. Now if I do well for them, they will tell you, and you will tell others. If someone is poor I take less than ten rupees, if they have more then I take more. . . Aṅkāḷammaṉ [came on me] after I came to this temple [Malaiyaṉūr]. For the past eight years she is on me. Only after I left home and came here I finished everything. At that time I had only grown this much hair, I didn't pierce my nose or my ears. When I was fully submerged [went the whole way] I came out and joined with the aravāṇies and was with Āyā (grandmother) and the others . . . It is due to Amma's blessings that I am an aravāṇi. Amma, because of you we are earning ten rupees and eating.

Here Kirtana narrates how she adapted to being possessed by Ammaṉ and began to do her healing work through her, learning the rituals by watching the aravāṇi practitioners she saw there. But she also reveals that it was because of working at the Mēl Malaiyaṉūr temple that she was able to "fully submerge" herself, to complete the physical transition from a male to an aravāṇi or tirunangai, and to join the tirunangai kinship network she found there. By "fully submerging," she refers to the *nirvāṉ* operation in which the male genitalia are excised; Kirtana had the surgery performed in the traditional way, by a *tāyamma*, a tirunangai who specializes in this operation and who was the sole practitioner before medical doctors began performing the surgery. Once she had joined the tirunangai network and performed her surgery, she pierced her ears and nose and shifted from wearing pants and shirt to wearing saris all the time. Kirtana's ability to do healing work through the goddess brought her into contact with an extensive network of tirunangais who then enabled her to fulfill her desire to become a woman.

Kirtana lived for many years in Mēl Malaiyaṉūr; many tirunangais populate the town and some organize functions of their own at the temple. A tirunangai named Latha who adopted Kirtana as a daughter also lived near the temple for many years and sponsored a yearly procession and tongue piercing to fulfill the vow she'd made to Aṅkāḷammaṉ. We attended her piercing and procession in March of 2006:

The activities begin at a large tree by the tank, a short distance away from the temple. Several tirunangais as well as people from outside the tirunangai community gather. A troupe of musicians has brought their instruments: the *pampai* and *uṭukkai* drums, and the *cilampu*, large anklets filled with stones that are rhythmically shaken. The musicians decorate the pots, and set up the necessary items for the rite, including a puja plate with coconuts, flowers, incense, camphor, limes, bananas, rosewater, and the trident for Latha. One of the older tirunangais decorates Latha and her *celā* (disciple/daughter) Viji with ash and kumkum after they bathed in the tank; Viji had taken a vow to carry a firepot. Viji and Latha are given neem leaves to hold. One of the musicians waves a puja plate around them and distributes ash to the crowd. Then the musicians begin to drum and sing, praising Aṅkāḷammaṉ, asking her repeatedly to come, telling her that they are happy she is coming, asking her to give them this boon. Soon, Aṅkāḷammaṉ comes on Latha, who says "call *ānantam*!" (i.e., sing about happiness), so the musicians sing about happy Aṅkāḷammaṉ, drumming and singing faster and faster as Latha dances wildly in the circle of the crowd.

> Latha says, "Kōvintā! Kōvintā!" Viji is still quiet, so the lead singer asks, "Why are you quiet? Are you angry? Come! Tell something! Who are you?"
> Viji: "I am Aṅkāḷammaṉ."
> Singer: "Then why are you not saying Kōvintā? . . . Are you a demon? Are you a dog? You have to dance happily and say Kōvintā. Are you happy about our puja?"

Latha: “Yes, I’m happy.”
Singer: “Will you protect us?”
Latha: “Yes, I will protect you.”
Singer: “Can we proceed with this puja?”
Latha: “Yes, you can conduct it.”
Singer (to Viji): “Are you happy about the puja?”
Viji: “Yes, I’m happy. No fault in it.”
Singer: “Can we move? Can we go?”
Viji: “Yes, we can go.”

The singer sings, “The tongue is pierced for you.” The older tirunangai garlands Latha and Viji, then she and the singer pierce Latha’s tongue with the small trident, on which they then stick limes on either end; the crowd yells “Kōvintā! Kōvintā!” They hand the firepots to Latha and to Viji, and the whole crowd follows them in procession towards the temple.

Although the distance from the tank to the temple is short, the procession takes a long time, as more and more tirunangais join the procession and dance joyously to the drumming and singing, stopping the procession’s forward movement for several minutes, many times. When the procession reaches the temple and moves inside, people who were already inside the temple touch Latha’s and Viji’s feet. The procession continues around the temple and stops near the inner sanctum, where the drummer cools the possession by putting neem leaves and ash on Latha and Viji, and removes the trident from Latha’s tongue. Latha and some of the crowd make their way outside the temple and to the edge of the grounds, where Latha oversees the sacrifice of a goat, which she will cook and feed to everyone.



Figure 3: Latha’s tongue-piercing procession at Mēl Malaiyaṉūr (Photo by author)

This ritual includes many formulaic elements, including the musicians interrogating the possessed person to make sure it is really Amman who has come, and cajoling the goddess to talk, making sure she approves of the worship and that there is nothing that needs to be expiated before they can conduct a successful ritual to her. The cry of "Kōvintā!" confirms that the goddess has appeared (Nabokov 2000). The 1950 "Madras Animals and Birds Sacrifices Prohibition Act" forbids animal and bird sacrifices in Hindu temples, including at Mēl Malaiyaṉūr (Meyer 1986 75, 154-155), but the temple still accommodates personal rituals by allowing sacrifices outside the temple precincts.

The Tirunangai Kinship Network

Latha's annual ritual draws tirunangais from all over Tamilnadu, reinforcing their kinship and community ties. The kinship network is integral to tirunangai identity. Most tirunangais leave their natal homes seeking other tirunangais with whom they can live openly, and the kinship network into which they are adopted is voluntarily chosen, unlike one's blood kin. A novice will initially become a *celā* (disciple) to a guru through the ritual of putting *rīt*, or allegiance, on a guru and a house. The *rīt* ritual is performed in a *jamāth*, or large meeting held to conduct many transactions. In addition, mothers adopt daughters, who become sisters to each other, aunts to their sisters' daughters, and so on, so that a tirunangai is increasingly embedded in a vertical lineage and a horizontal web of female kin relations in which everyone has varying degrees of responsibilities and rewards, and which often replaces the birth family. Tirunangais who undergo gender reassignment surgery and attire and conduct themselves according to conventional notions of Tamil womanhood assume the highest status in these networks, although individuals who pass as men in the outside community are also included. The guru-celā relationship is the central axis around which the network operates. The guru is a kind of guardian and elder for the celā, who is like a daughter to her. Gurus can adopt as many celās as they want; because most tirunangais are teenagers or adults when they join the community and are expected to earn money, they enter the network as productive members and enable a household to expand fairly easily. Some gurus are kind and garner a great deal of affection from their celās; other gurus are abusive and their celās leave them to be adopted by another guru. But when a guru dies, she is treated as a husband to the most senior celā who plays the role of a wife and performs conventional rites of widowhood, breaking her bangles and wearing a white sari, and singing lamentation songs. Ensuring that someone will provide for you when you are older and will conduct your funeral rites is a core aspect of the system. This kinship network parallels aspects of non-tirunangai kinship systems, providing a potentially stable community, but it also allows for fluidity in positions and roles.

Kinship obligations such as life cycle ceremonies in common society can require significant time and energy. But I would argue that the nature of tirunangai kinship makes the obligations much more time-intensive. Some functions are small and only involve tirunangai kin most closely related to the celebrant or sponsor. But many

functions draw tirunangais from all over the state, many times a year. Leaders of regional houses and other authoritative figures sponsor large events that draw hundreds of tirunangais. Functions such as the *pāl* ceremony marking the 40th day after the *nirvān* surgery, funeral rites, and the *jamāths* or general meetings to conduct transactions are all occasions in which gurus show respect to each other, give and receive gifts, adopt new celās, and levy fines for transgressions, and everyone can comfortably dress up and socialize and dance. The fluidity of roles allows tirunangais to join the community and to choose who to associate with most closely, but this system built on voluntary associations also requires attentive maintenance. So in addition to the increased fluidity of positions and roles, the kinship network involves a great deal of geographic fluidity. Most tirunangais spend a great deal of time traveling, often to events that last all night long.

This kind of schedule both enables, and is enabled by, the economy of sex work. Not all tirunangais engage in sex work, but most of the younger ones do for at least some period of time.[6] Liaisons with boyfriends and paying customers take place at many gatherings, including at Mēl Malaiyaṉūr. Some tirunangais who are ritual healers avoid any sexual activity when they are engaged in possession rites, but others see no conflict between these two kinds of work. Between the main area of the temple and the closest houses is an open, rocky area with some trees that is used for activities such as sex work. On the night we witnessed Kirtana's *kaṟippu* ritual, Kirtana told us that after midnight at Malaiyaṉūr, many tirunangais go for sex. We spoke to a number of tirunangais who had gathered in this space to dress up, socialize with each other, meet up with boyfriends, and engage in sex work. Some of the tirunangais there dress up in women's attire only at such times, and otherwise live as men in their everyday lives. The Mēl Malaiyaṉūr temple landscape provides physical and social space for a range of activities and layered interactions that help constitute tirunangai identities.

The Mayāṉakkoḷḷai Festival

Aṅkālammaṉ is an ambivalent goddess: she is considered both pure (*cutta*) and vegetarian as well as impure (*acutta*) and non-vegetarian (see Meyer 1986: 75-76, 153-155); and in her myths and rituals, she is identified with Pārvatī, the benevolent wife of Śiva, but also takes on terrifying, weapon-wielding, blood-thirsty forms. Aṅkāḷammaṉ's fearsome form takes center stage during the annual festival of *mayāṉakkoḷḷai* , "pillage in the cremation ground," which takes place in most Aṅkāḷammaṉ temples during the month of Māci (February-March; Meyer 1986:106). It is a ritual enactment of the story

[6] A more detailed discussion of sex work in the tirunangai community is beyond the scope of this essay, but see Soneji 2012 for a nuanced history of prostitution and other non-conjugal sex in Madras State and Tamilnadu; and see Revathi 2010 for a Tamil tirunangai's frank narration of the erotics of sex work.

of Śiva's brahminicide and his coming to the cremation ground, where Aṅkāḷammaṉ takes on a fierce form to rid Śiva of Brahmā's head. This popular festival draws tirunangais and other devotees to temples all over Tamilnadu.

The Festival at Mēl Malaiyaṉūr

Throngs of people come for this event at Mēl Malaiyaṉūr, where I attended the festival on February 21, 2012 (and see Meyer 1986:105-113). That day all kinds of activities were taking place in addition to the core festival rituals, including many tirunangais telling *kuṟi* (fortunetelling and prediction). The temple was extremely crowded; it was difficult to get to the cremation ground area to see the Ammaṉ figure made of earth, lying on the ground, near which devotees were throwing food. In the myth, in order to lure the head off of Śiva's hand, Aṅkāḷammaṉ throws *koḻukkaṭṭai*, the sweet that Vināyaka loves, and blood rice on the ground so the head comes down to the ground to eat it. In the temple ritual, in addition to blood rice and sweets, people bring all kinds of food to throw to feed Śiva in his beggar form, trying to fill up the begging bowl that would never fill. At Mēl Malaiayaṉūr, farmers brought some of their crops, offering them in hopes of having a good harvest, including newly-sprouted grains in pots; some threw money. Many people were fulfilling a vow to dress up as Aṅkāḷammaṉ in the cremation ground, wearing a rag skirt, a flaming crown topped by a cobra, a garland of limes, and fangs painted on their faces. Some of them swung live roosters and threw them towards the chariot taking the goddess around the temple grounds; others bit the heads off of the roosters, and held the bleeding entrails in their mouths, just as Aṅkāḷammaṉ draped herself with the intestines of the demon-king Vallāḷakaṇṭaṉ's wife when she ripped open her belly, linking this myth with Śiva's brahminicide. Some people had draped themselves with "intestines" made of strands of red string. Many people were in states of possession. As the chariot with the goddess and the *pūcāris* (temple priests) made its way past the earthen Ammaṉ figure lying on the ground, people scooped up handfuls of the image to take home as prasad.



Figure 4: Aṅkāḷammaṉ on her chariot in Mēl Malaiyaṉūr during *mayāṉakkoḷḷai* (Photo by author)

The Festival in Gingee

Later the same day I attended the festival at a small Aṅkāḷammaṉ temple in Gingee, not far from Mēl Malaiyaṉūr, in which several tirunangais participated. The temple is in the central part of the town and is not near a cremation ground, so the earthen figure was made in the street in front of the temple. The top part of the figure was covered with a red and orange sari, the bottom part by a yellow *vēṣṭi* (male waist garment). At this festival two of the tirunangais were dressed as *kuṟattis*, the fortune-teller form that Ammaṉ took when she entered Vallāḷakaṇṭaṉ's kingdom. Others were dressed as Aṅkāḷammaṉ. The *pūcāris* decorated the moveable Ammaṉ image inside the temple, then brought her out and placed her on the chariot near the earth figure, where a large crowd had gathered. The two *kuṟattis* emerged from the temple first and circumambulated the earth image several times as the *pampaikkārar* troupe played until they both entered possession states. The sari was lifted from the face of the earthen image to reveal a fierce face with eggshell eyes and a red mouth with fangs and a tongue hanging down, and breasts. Then the two Aṅkāḷammaṉ figures emerged from the temple, holding chicken and goat entrails in their mouths, and holding winnowing fans with neem leaves; one of the fans also held a small dough figure. The Aṅkāḷammaṉ figures circumambulated the earth figure while the drummers played and sang until they became possessed. One of them stopped at the feet of the earthen image; ritual participants lifted the yellow cloth that had covered the bottom part of the image to reveal a scooped-out area, where they placed food offerings and incense, as well as goat intestines; the winnowing fan with the dough figure was placed on the stomach of the image. The human Ammaṉ vehicle was draped with the intestines from

the stomach of the earthen image; then people started throwing the food heaped at the feet of the image, and the crowd surged in to scoop handfuls of earth from the image.



Figure 5: *Kuṟatti* and drummers at Gingee Aṅkāḷammaṉ festival (Photo by author)

The much smaller festival at the Gingee temple includes the same core rituals seen in Mēl Malaiyaṉūr with variations within the paradigmatic range mapped out by Meyer (110-112; 167-171). In particular, the earthen image in Mēl Malaiyaṉūr is usually considered Pārvatī or Aṅkāḷammaṉ, whereas in the Gingee festival, the figure is the demon king Vallāḷakaṇṭaṉ's wife; in an unusually direct correspondence between the ritual and this part of the myth (Meyer 171), Aṅkāḷammaṉ garlands herself with the queen's intestines, rips the baby from the womb and places it on the winnowing fan. This temple in Gingee also draws the participation of a significant number of tirunangais.

A Festival in Vellore

Mēl Malaiyaṉūr is the largest temple drawing devotees, but Aṅkāḷammaṉ's worship is widespread, and her network of tirunangai devotees is extensive. The day after I saw the two festivals in Malaiyaṉūr and Gingee, I saw another *mayāṉakkoḷḷai* festival hosted by Ganga, an influential tirunangai leader in Vellore, at her private Kāḷī temple. This temple is up a hill in a residential neighborhood; at the bottom of the hill stood the Aṅkāḷammaṉ image on her chariot, which Ganga and others were decorating when my research assistant and I arrived. Up at the temple, the crowd consisted of a few neighbors, but mostly of tirunangais from all over Tamilnadu. There was some preliminary dancing, for fun, while Ganga put on Aṅkāḷammaṉ's rag skirt, lime garland, and crown with flames and cobra head over her yellow sari. Then the *pampaikkārar* began drumming and singing, and as in Latha's piercing ritual, the musicians sang to the goddess, urging her to come, and when Ganga got possessed, asked her to confirm

that she was indeed Ammaṉ, and that she was happy and the procession could begin. The crowd walked down the hill to the chariot, in front of which a goat was sacrificed so that Aṅkāḷammaṉ could drink the blood before the crowd moved down the street to the accompaniment of the drums and singing. The procession went around this section of the city before ending up at the nearby cremation ground in which a large image of Periyāyi had been made from earth.



Figure 6: Ganga as Aṅkāḷammaṉ (Photo by author)



Figure 7: Periyāyi figure in a Vellore cremation ground (Photo by author)

Ganga sponsors this festival every year. As opposed to some of the young tirunangais performing ritual healing at temples like Mel Malaiayaṉūr, she is a powerful and well-to-do leader, illustrating the breadth of devotion to Aṅkāḷammaṉ in the tirunangai community. Throughout the year Ganga prepares for this festival, sending out invitations and soliciting donations from within the community, motivating and participating in the flow of financial and social resources that maintain the tirunangai community.

Conclusion

In her insightful analysis of the power relations in a village in the Tirunelveli District of Tamilnadu, Diane P. Mines argues, in part, that "gods are real sources of power for human beings whether they are struggling for or against domination. It is the lowly fierce gods of Yanaimangalam who empower the powerless through possession of their human hosts" (2005:18). Mines' work is an intricate, detailed study of the power relations between inhabitants of a particular place, but I think that this insight applies here as well. Mēl Malaiyaṉūr draws all kinds of people, but it is especially popular among those from lower social and economic strata, and I would argue, also provides a space for the marginalized tirunangai community. We have seen that many tirunangais consider themselves the special vehicles for Aṅkāḷammaṉ; many see Aṅkāḷammaṉ as their *kulatēvam*, their lineage deity, regardless of their natal families' *kulatēvam*. Aṅkāḷammaṉ is a fierce, powerful goddess who can defeat demons like Vallāḷakaṇṭan and release Śiva from his penance for brahminicide, so that he can resume his normal role in the cosmos and she can assume her rightful place as his left side in his Ardhanārīśvara form. Many tirunangais claim that Aṅkāḷammaṉ will only speak through them because they are also half male, half female individuals.

Aṅkāḷammaṉ has the fierce energy necessary to protect her devotees and to cure people's afflictions through her tirunangai vessels, whom she also protects and empowers. Although Bahuchara Mata is integral to tirunangais' life cycle ceremonies, in Tamilnadu Aṅkāḷammaṉ serves as an indigenous goddess whose worship and service connects the tirunangai community spatially and temporally, bestows social and cultural power, and allows tirunangais to more fully embody and enact their identity.

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