South Asian Religions on Display

Religious processions in South Asia
and in the Diaspora

Edited by

Knut A. Jacobsen

SOUTH ASIAN RELIGIONS ON DISPLAY

This book examines religious processions in South Asia and brings together for the first time leading specialists on religious processions and ritualization of public space in South Asia and in the diaspora. Religious procession is a significant dimension of religion in South Asia and is the main occasion for large groups to gather on public streets for a religious purpose. Processions distinguish themselves from the rituals going on inside the temple and in the home in that they are public display events, they are moving in space and they are performed for a larger audience. Processions are not only central in Hinduism, but are also important in Islam, Christianity and Sikhism in South Asia. Recent years have seen an increase in processions and ritualizations of space both in South Asia and in the South Asian diaspora. The book explores how this growth in processions relates to religious pluralism and competition for public space as well as economic prosperity and the revival of religious identities. Processions often bring together religion and politics since they involve public space, domination and contestation. This book provides a comprehensive discussion of these and other aspects of this important phenomenon.

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A NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

There are different systems of transliteration of words from the many languages of South Asia. Some use diacritics and some more simplified systems do not. Quite a few words from the South Asian languages have become part of the English language. The contributors to this book have used different methods of transliteration. The editor has respected the individual authors' decisions and allowed for this pluralism.

INTRODUCTION

Religion on display

Knut A. Jacobsen

The chapters in this book deal with religious processions, a phenomenon of great importance in South Asia and in the South Asian diasporas. South Asia distinguishes itself in terms of the number of religious processions that take place and their sizes. Processions are often cheerful religious occasions that bring people together to celebrate something. They are often characterized by a happy mood. The religious occasion, the unity of the group and its shared identity are reasons for being happy. But not all processions are celebrations: some are occasions of sorrow such as funeral processions, some are displays of power and strength, and they can display hierarchy, competition and conflict.

There are many types of procession in South Asia; only some of them are religious, and they are organized on a variety of occasions. Several types of procession can be distinguished: military parades, national parades, political processions and protest marches, and religious processions. Religious processions include wedding processions, funeral processions, Muslim Muharram processions, Sikh processions in honour of their gurus, Jain processions, Christian processions to venerate saints and the Virgin Mary, Hindu temple processions, festival processions, pilgrimage processions, processions to honour somebody, and so on.

Indian newspapers print information about processions almost daily. During a short stop in Delhi in January 2007, I was amazed that on a single day editions of the main national newspapers (Delhi editions, 22 January 2007) had references to four different processions. The number of references to processions in the Indian newspapers on this one day illustrates the importance and omnipresence of processions in South Asia. The first reference was a one-page advertisement in the newspapers about the rehearsal on the following day for the 26 January Republic Day parade. The advertisement informed readers that streets in part of the parade route through

Delhi would be closed. Accompanying the text was a map of the city, and pictures of tanks, soldiers and jet fighters. There could be no doubt that this procession was about display, public space and domination. Tanks and jet fighters symbolize the strength of the nation and the fact that the citizens are well protected against any aggressive foreign power; and soldiers willing to sacrifice their lives in battle symbolize love for the nation.

Also included that day was an item about one of the most famous processions in India, the Kumbha Melā procession of Hindu ascetics. The newspaper informed readers about academic research on the history of the procession. It reported that in earlier times the Kumbha Melā processions were violent events and that one important function of the procession was to establish rank among the ascetic orders. In the Kumbha Melās Śaivites and Vaiṣṇavites often clashed in conflicts over precedence in the procession. The Kumbha Melā processions function to confirm, establish and display hierarchy, they are sources of prestige and therefore can be expressions of or causes of disputes.

The third reference to processions in the newspapers was about political demonstrations in Bangalore, where a Hindu right-wing nationalist meeting was going on, and flyers had been put up along the streets to promote it. People participating in a Muslim Friday procession protesting the hanging of Saddam Hussain in Iraq had removed the flyers along the route. Two days later, on the following Sunday, the Hindus had a procession protesting this removal of flyers. The anti-Muslim slogans created a violent atmosphere and the result was clashes between the groups and riots with many injured and one person killed. It is these ideologically motivated processions that have received most attention in the research literature. This type of procession mobilizes around religious identities. The institutions of religious processions and pilgrimage processions have often been used for the purpose of social protest and for mobilization around religious identities. Mahatma Gandhi's renowned Salt March in 1930 protesting the British Salt Tax is a most famous and celebrated example. Other well-known political pilgrimage processions are the ill-famed *ratha yātrā*s of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the late 1980s and 1990s. The purpose is often to gain support for political organizations and achieve electoral success.

The fourth reference in the newspapers was to a political procession organized by trade unions. The procession was about challenging power and displaying power in terms of numbers, slogans and aggressive behaviour, and showing the ability to take control of public space, and show unity.

In general, the processions most often mentioned in the newspapers are those that disrupt public life. However, most religious processions are small, local and uneventful. Religious processions are often associated with festivals and, as such, they might receive a small notice in the local pages of the newspapers. Religious processions are usually joyous occasions. They are celebrations. They are often the high point of festivals. But as

display rituals they are about identity, prestige and honour, and about public and sacred space. Therefore they can involve dominance and power. The sacred space that surrounds the procession is moved through public space and through this movement processions might come into conflict with other sacred spaces.

Religious processions

This book is about a certain type of procession, religious processions. Religious processions are important features of religion in South Asia for Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, Buddhists, Jains and Christians. The most famous and celebrated religious processions in South Asia are probably these: in Puri for Jagannāth (Kṛṣṇa), in Madurai those celebrating the marriage of Mīnākṣī and Śiva, the *brahmotsava* processions for Veṅkaṭeśvara in Tirumala, Andhra Pradesh, the Buddhist procession of Buddha's tooth in Kandy, Sri Lanka, and the bathing procession already mentioned at the Kumbha Melās in Prayag (see the chapter by Lochtefeld in this volume) and at the other Kumbha Melā festivals. Some of these, such as the Puri procession, are reduplicated on a smaller scale all over the world (see the chapters by Kumar and Sinha in this volume). The Kumbha Melā in Prayag is the largest gathering of people in one place for a common purpose in the world. The high point of the festival is the procession of ascetics to the sacred place where the rivers Gaṅgā, Yamunā and Sarasvatī meet, where they bathe in the sacred waters. The ascetic organizations in the procession are asserted in order of prestige. During the last Kumbha Melā in Prayag, in 2001, on the day of the procession, which is also the most auspicious day for sacred bathing, almost 30 million people were present.

In South India in particular, processions are part of the annual festivals of many temples. Each temple is supposed to have its own procession ritual to celebrate its main god (see the chapter by Trouillet in this volume). This is reproduced in the diaspora (see the chapters by Jacobsen, Kumar, Luchesi and Sinha). In Sikhism, processions are closely associated with the Gurpurabs, festival days in memory of the birth or death of one of the ten Sikh gurus, the moving of the Guru Granth Sahib and the foundation day of the Khalsa. Processions on these days are not obligatory, but they are organized at the sacred places associated with them (see the chapters by Jacobsen and Myrvold). In the diaspora as well, Sikhs organize processions; if they do not, they still feel that they should. Processions are sources of pride because they put religious traditions and religious identities on display. Muslims in South Asia celebrate the Muharram festival with processions (see the chapters by Madsen and Hassan, Skyhawk and Abou Zahab). In South Asia, processions are part of several life cycle rituals (see the chapters by Booth and Clark-Decès). Marriage processions distinguish themselves as occasions for conspicuous consumption while the impurity of death gives special

features to funeral processions. Processions are so much part of South Indian religious life that many Christian societies there also place strong emphasis on these rituals (see the chapters by Frenz and Raj). The most noteworthy Christian processions are probably those at Velankanni, the famous site in South India of the apparition of the Virgin Mary. The event is notable for its adoption of central features of Hindu rituals such as flag hoisting, haircutting, the offering of coconuts, the saffron dress of the Hindu ascetics, use of garlands and ritual umbrellas, and the procession rituals (see the chapter by Frenz). South Asian Catholics in the diaspora organize processions to celebrate South Asian apparitions of the Virgin Mary and to celebrate particularly popular saints in South Asia (see the chapter by Jacobsen).

Processions as arenas of competition and display of hierarchy

Processions are sources of joy, bringing people together for festive occasions, but as several chapters in this book emphasize, they are also arenas for competition and conspicuous consumption and provide opportunities for the display of hierarchy. Given the hierarchical nature of social life in South Asia and in the South Asian diaspora, the opportunity to exhibit and lay claim to status and prestige is an important aspect of processions. Organizations and people compete to have the best processions. Processions provide opportunities for gaining prestige. The display of ascetic piety also conveys social prestige and arouses admiration. Ascetic rituals offer an opportunity for displaying oneself as a devout Hindu or, in the case of the Muharram procession, as a devout Muslim. The people who sit in the chariots are often relatives of people who have donated money to the procession. The people walking at the front are often more closely associated with the temple than those walking at the back. In the processions, there are prestigious ritual roles, for example carrying the Guru Granth Sahib, performing the roles of the five beloved (*pañj pyare*) and so on. In marriage processions, the status of the family is conveyed by the number of musicians, the mode of transportation, the number of people attending, and so on (see the chapter by Booth). In his chapter on processions in Tamil Nadu, Trouillet notes that each festival or procession is an occasion to show and preserve or improve one's status. Selva J. Raj argues in his chapter that the Catholic processions in Puliampatti provide one of the few opportunities for the rural population to display some of their material possessions. This competitive feature of processions is also found in the diaspora. The size and beauty of the chariots, the number of people attending, and so on are important indicators of success (see the chapters by Jacobsen, Kumar, Luchesi and Sinha).

  In her chapter, Clark-Decès shows how the Dalits in a village in Tamil Nadu, who are the traditional performers in funeral processions, decided

to change from providing a drummer, singers and dancers to providing musicians in military-style uniforms. This dramatic change in the style of funeral processions over a period of less than ten years was due to the Dalits' political ambitions and achievements. In the traditional style, even though the words of the songs were sad, the atmosphere of the procession was quite other. The singers hissed, swore, joked and roared with laughter, while they danced they groped their genitals and they did everything they could to make fun of the idea that life is hard, Clark-Decès writes. By the late 1990s this had changed. A funeral band that modelled itself on Western military marching replaced the traditional funeral singers and drummers. The Dalits no longer wanted to perform in the traditional way. Instead they displayed their new political aspirations and achievements through the sober and clean-looking professionalism of a military band. This exemplifies that processions as public display rituals are arenas of competition and prestige. Processions, argues Frenz in his chapter, may reconstruct, affirm or challenge social structures and identities.

Processions and sacred space

Religious processions are particular displays of religion that lay claim to public space. Some are pilgrimage processions that move towards a sacred space, others make their space sacred as they progress. Transportation of gods through the streets makes these sacred ground, often symbolized by their bring covered with flowers; or chariots signify that the streets belong to the gods. Sacredness has to be created and the musicians who often lead the parades are an important element in this production of sacredness. Through sound, they signal that an area is marked off as sacred. *Kavati* dancers at the front of the Tamil chariot festivals have a similar function.

   Processions can delimit the territory of a temple or expand its sacred space. Matthias Frenz, in his chapter on processions in Velankanni, argues that these rituals are particularly important in defining and altering the status of a religious site in the sacred landscape. By reproducing the rituals at other famous shrines to the Virgin Mary, Velankanni becomes connected to these shrines. Processions of Murugan have made a lake in Oslo sacred (see the chapter by Jacobsen). The status of the lake and its surrounding landscape has been altered and the temple has become incorporated into a larger sacred environment. Likewise, the processions of Our Lady of Madhu by Tamil Catholics in Norway alter the status of the area of their route for the Tamils. For them, Norwegian space has become connected to the sacred geography of Sri Lanka. Processions can also be understood as a spatial display of territories related to identities. Processions can have many functions simultaneously. They can secure territory against evil forces and at the same time deal with the conflicts between groups in a village or display hierarchy (see the chapter by Trouillet).

Processions and History

Processions are subject to innovation and change and their purpose can also change. Several of the chapters give examples of this, a striking one being the above-mentioned funeral processions that were totally transformed in style within a period of only ten years. Whether attempts to make participants in Muharram processions donate blood to hospitals – instead of bleeding from flogging – will succeed remains to be seen (see the chapter by Madsen and Hassan). In the diaspora, after a procession has been institutionalized new elements are often added to it every year. Authority is gained from making processions similar to those in their place of origin but processions themselves, their circumstances and their interpretations are constantly changing. Processions confirm identity and, in a pluralistic context, they can increase in importance, causing the participating group to invest much work in them.

Processions in their present-day form are not always as old as they seem or claim to be. The Kumbha Melā processions are not an ancient phenomenon: Lochtefeld, in this volume, argues that over the years the Kumbha Melā 'have changed from showcasing ascetic might to reflecting government planning'. Booth shows how marriage processions have fundamentally changed under the influence of the cinema. Thus processions, although they are preservers of traditions, are always subject to change.[1]

Processions and conflicts

It was noted several decades ago that studies of popular religious assembly were 'usually tackled only when they involve some violent and spectacular disturbance . . . rather than in terms of their public ritual and ceremonial as such' (Holton 1978: 226). Those religious processions that have been used for political gain or have caused riots have been given particular attention in research (Bayly 1985, Brosius 2006, Davis 2005, Freitag 1989, Freitag 1991, Mines 2005, van der Veer 1996, Yang 1980). However, a typical feature of such politicization is that the religious elements gradually disappear and they are 'converted into demonstrations of strength, pure and simple' (Jaffrelot 2004). In South Asia, this ideologically motivated type of procession may trigger violent clashes between communities. Sudhir Kakar has written that in periods of tension, the Muharram, Daśahrā and Gaṇeśa Caturthī processions 'are almost certain recipes for violence' (1996: 46). This is an exaggeration. However, since processions define community territory, they lay claim to space as they move. To lead a procession into the neighbourhood of a different community might be perceived as a provocation. It might be a cause of violent clashes, but it does not have to be. It is often the leaders who trigger violence (Jaffrelot 2004, Brass 1997). In addition, the police play a role in determining whether violence is allowed and the degree of violence that can be tolerated. Jaffrelot correctly argues that 'the instrumentalization of

religious processions by ideologically minded leaders largely explains the way these rituals have become conducive to communalism' (2004: 61). The processions of Rāma's chariot were the main factor in making the dispute over the site of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya a focus of public debate in India (Davis 2005: 30). Political processions can make space into a symbolic or actual battleground. Politicization of religious processions is a recurring cause of Hindu–Muslim violence in South Asia.[2] Since 2004, Muharram processions in Pakistan have regularly been the target of attacks (see the chapter by Abou Zahab in this volume). However, the chapters in this book demonstrate that most processions in South Asia do not cause violence. A great amount of peacemaking is also invested in them.

Nevertheless, many processions do not create what the anthropologist Victor Turner (1974) called *communitas*, where social difference is diminished. On the contrary, as many of the chapters in this book demonstrate, in the processions rank, prestige and honour are often on show, they create or exhibit boundaries, and they frequently function to display one community to another. Many of the chapters emphasize the role of processions in confirming social structures and their competitive aspect. Processions most often affirm or create boundaries, which distinguish insiders from outsiders and provide structures for the display of prestige and hierarchy. Several chapters also emphasize that processions are shaped by conflicts.

But processions can also bring communities together in rituals that transcend traditions and identities. Hugh van Skyhawk's chapter in this volume describes Shia Muharram processions that have attracted Hindus who understood them in terms of traditional hero worship. Abou Zahab also writes that before partition, Sunnis and Hindus took part in great numbers in Muharram processions (but refrained from self-flagellation). She argues that processions were an important feature of a composite culture. Skyhawk explains the pre-partition widespread participation of Hindu devotees in Muharram processions in Maharashtra and the interaction of popular Shiism with indigenous religious traditions and practices. He argues that the introduction of portable replicas of Husain's grave to the Muharram processions created that composite culture, being assimilated with the indigenous worship of hero stones and *bhakti* worship.

Seeking visibility in the diaspora

Processions are one of the main occasions for large groups to gather on public streets for a religious purpose. Religious procession is a type of 'planned public display event' with clearly defined roles, performed in the streets for an audience. Public display events are occasions for groups to draw attention to themselves; they are 'planned for public occasions . . . in which actions and objects invested with meaning and values are put "on display"' (Bauman and Abrahams 1981: 303). In a procession, a group of people moves

together along a route from one physical location to another, displaying symbols or representations of that which is being celebrated. Moving together gives a shared experience of celebrating, physical space becomes a means to express and display religious and cultural identity. Processions are staged public events and, as such, they have both participants and onlookers. Involving other communities as spectators, they are therefore about otherness and identity. In fact, as public rituals, processions are often typically aimed at the 'Other'.

A procession may display objects in order to achieve something. Often it is an occasion for a group to draw attention to itself, and in procession rituals the audience are participants. They have a role as 'watched watchers' (Jarman 1997). Since processions are rituals moving through public space, an important motivation is to influence these onlookers. The display function and the bringing of attention to the group mean that religious processions often strengthen common beliefs and traditions, and engender feelings of unity and identity, and therefore also difference, making manifest inter-group relations. Processions make the group visible in the public space.

All the relevant chapters in this book agree that there has been an increase in processions in the South Asian diaspora in recent years. This increase has to do with the display function of processions and relates to the minority situation of the diaspora and specific aspects of religious pluralism. It relates to generation and reinforcement of religious identities, to religious rivalry, and to religious boundaries. Processions are often among the most visible of religious activities in public spaces, and to that extent provide the greatest opportunity for contact with the practices of other faiths and secular activities. Processions are therefore directed as much at the insiders as at the outsiders. To draw public attention to the group and gain recognition are important reasons for organizing processions. They enable communities to come together to express their unity and strength and to signal who they are and what is important to them as a group. They signal this not only to themselves but also to other religious communities.

In the diaspora, the speeches of politicians are often important elements of processions. Being about public space and public displaying, processions are often opportunities to attract politicians and other public figures to give speeches (see the chapter by Kumar) whose theme is the importance of the community and its need for public recognition.

Not all processions are transferred or transferable from South Asia to the diaspora. Marriage processions with brass bands or funeral processions taking a corpse to the cremation ground are not easily transferable to contemporary North America and Europe. But as a diaspora group establishes itself, some procession rituals are often organized. All the relevant chapters in this book agree that one reason for organizing processions in the diaspora is that a group wants to establish a presence and visibility in

public space. For Hindus in the diaspora, processions are one of the main ways to display religion, identity and culture, temples and dance performance being other important ways. Annual Hindu processions have become a central part of religious life in many big cities of the world (see the chapters by Jacobsen, Kumar, Luchesi and Sinha).

In the diaspora, some aspects of processions become more important, and the associated rituals acquire new functions. These rituals also gain features typical of a multicultural festival, an event which celebrates and exhibits identity. In the diaspora, religious processions become public displays of religious identity, a way for participants to celebrate their own identity in front of an audience. Processions distinguish themselves from the rituals that take place inside the temple and the home in that they are public display events. They are also performed for the unity of the group and bring people from a large area together. Annual Hindu and Sikh processions have become a central part of religious life in many big cities of the world. Hindus and Sikhs visit temples and gurdwaras most often as individuals and, except in the diaspora, worship is usually not congregational in style. Processions, however, bring together larger groups of the religious communities for a common purpose and in the diaspora, they function to bring together a large percentage of the relevant community. As a public display event of the group, there is also pressure on individuals to take part.

Given the minority situation of diasporas, their processions most often involve other communities as spectators and they are therefore about otherness and identity. Processions are attempts to make a group visible and, as a public ritual, are typically aimed at the 'Other'. Processions therefore reinforce religious boundaries and distinctions. The strengthening of the traditions of processions in recent years may therefore be a function of specific aspects of religious pluralism; it might be related to the generation and reinforcement of religious identities, to religious rivalry, and to religious boundaries, both in South Asia and in the diaspora. Processions are often among the most visible of religious activities in public spaces and therefore provide the best opportunity for contact with religious practices of other faiths and for secular activities. To draw public attention to the group and to gain recognition are important reasons for organizing processions where communities come together to express their unity and strength and to signal who they are and what is important to them as a group.

Conclusion

Processions are among the most striking visual displays of a religion. They reveal important aspects of religions. They are rituals but they are also much more. They display many of the dimensions of religion at the same time: art, sacred narratives, social hierarchies and competition, communities and identities. They are signals of social change. They are preservers of the past.

They are continuously reinvented and may reflect strategies for groups to become visible in order to protect their place in the hierarchy or to compete for resources.

Notes

1 Leslie Orr (2004), on the basis of study of inscriptions in South India, has suggested that the procession of the gods on an annual circumambulation of the temple was not an important part of Tamil festivals until a few hundred years ago. Previously, most processions were 'inside', taking place within the temple compound, or 'back and forth' processions, taking the god to a sacred bathing place or hunting. Annual circumambulation processions have taken shape, she thinks, during the last four hundred years. She writes that the image that appears based on the Chola period inscriptions of the temple processions is one that is 'dominated by the inrushing of pilgrims and devotees, rather than the outward motion of the deity'. The outward processions of today, she believes, are because 'God's identity needs to be defined, and his territory needs to be demarcated and defended'. The significance of the outward processions lies in their definition of the relation of the deity to the territory. She thinks the modern procession performs these demarcations of territory 'through the shape of its route, its representation of the deities in specific roles, and through its military and royal trappings' (2004: 465–466).
2 Violence caused by religious processions in South Asia is not a recent phenomenon. C. A. Bayly (1985) reports violence caused by Durgā Pūjā and Muharram processions in Calcutta in 1789.

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Part I

PROCESSIONS IN SOUTH ASIA

1

THE REINVENTION OF TAMIL FUNERAL PROCESSIONS[1]

Isabelle Clark-Decès

Religious processions in India are not a fixed genre. To begin with, they vary in size and the temporal order in which they occur. In South India where I have conducted fieldwork since 1990, processions associated with the great religious festivals gather thousands (at times millions) of people at regular times of the religious calendar. Because they coincide with the life cycle transitions of a family or lineage, processions held in conjunction with marriage and death involve smaller groups and a temporal order that is not as preordained. As for the processions undertaken for the purpose of fulfilling a vow, they are still smaller and less predictable, occurring whenever an individual, often a woman, is determined to have a child or recover from an illness (Dumont 1986: 428–430). There is no point, however, in reducing Indian processions to categories of constituencies and temporalities. In Hinduism there are as many kinds of procession as there are of cults, rites of passages and religious experiences.

'The comparative study of processions in India is in its infancy', the historian of religions Alf Hiltebeitel claims (1991: 449). That may be true, but over the last few years, anthropologists working in India, particularly South India, have articulated a consistent interpretation of Hindu processions, namely that 'historically, as well as today, processions often instigate clashes' (Mines 2003: 487). According to Diane Mines, just quoted, confrontations erupt in at least three major ways:

> (1) those excluded from a procession may fight for inclusion, leading to skirmishes between communities; (2) those who think they should precede in line may force their way to the front, leading to skirmishes within the community; and (3) those whose territory is being crossed by another community may assert territorial control with violence.
>
> (2003: 487–488)

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A good example of what Mines is talking about is her own ethnography of a village in Tirunelveli District (2005), which shows how the procession routes of deities during calendrical festivals foster disputes over spatial and social parameters. Another example of conflicts occurring at Tamil processions is to be found in Arjun Appadurai's (1981) documentation of the redistributive process associated with an annual temple festival in Chennai. Devotees who follow the processional form (*utsavamūrti*) of the temple deity compete for the right to receive its leavings, usually food leavings, and competition for 'honours' fosters serious disputes, even court cases.

One problem with this body of literature is that it obscures the fact that behind the contentious transactions taking place at processions lies another and more particular drama. Perhaps this is the proper time to recall that the word 'procession' derives from the Latin word *procedere*, which means 'to go forth'. However imperfect this term may be to gloss non-Western religious practices, it is clear that the Indian linear and circular walks that we translate as 'processions' move towards a destination. People go somewhere. Moreover, such going is not ordinary, not like going to the grocer's shop. It requires formality, ceremony, an organized body of people and always a narrative. Each Hindu procession, in fact, has a story line that is associated with the 'myth', as anthropologists used to say, enacted during the given festival or ritual. Thus the procession of the famous goddess Mīnākṣī through the Tamil temple town of Madurai re-enacts her divine marriage in the month of Cittirai (April/May) every year (Hudson 1977). The processions connected to the Tamil 'cult' of the goddess Draupadī are routed back and forth between a temple, a drama stage, a ritual battlefield and a fire walking area to reproduce a particular version of the classical epic, *Mahābhārata* (Hiltebeitel 1988, 1991). And in a coastal town of Andhra Pradesh, the nocturnal procession of the god Vīrabhadra, a terrifying deity born from Śiva's rage, becomes a solemn occasion for the 'disgruntled dead', those who died in infancy or childhood, to temporarily return to life through episodes of spirit possession (Knipe 1989: 125). Such narratives (the goddess's marriage, the *Mahābhārata*, and the return of the dead) are the 'texts', in fact the raisons d'être, of a procession. Unfortunately, it is mostly historians of religion (for example, Hudson, Hiltebeitel and Knipe) who take them seriously. Anthropologists almost exclusively focus on the way the patrons of processions behave, without asking themselves whether, and if so how, the social dramas they record relate to broader cosmological frameworks (but see Herrenschmidt 1982).

Another problem with the anthropological literature is the implication that South Indian processions do not change. Or let me put it this way: the changes usually described have to do with detours, deviations and delays from a normative processional route (Mines 2005). But if significant developments are currently taking place in the ways Tamil temple priests perform their

religious functions (Fuller 2003), it may not be farfetched to assume that the communities that typically lead ceremonial walks are changing as well and that the dramas (be they social or religious) enacted at processions are likewise evolving. This chapter is concerned largely with the documentation of such change.

Whenever a death occurred among caste Hindus residing in the Viluppuram[2] village of Tamilnadu where I first conducted fieldwork in 1990 and 1991, it was the duty of the local Dalit (or untouchable) men to lead the all-male funeral procession through the main streets to the cremation grounds. Dressed simply, with towels wrapped around their heads and in long waistcloths tucked to fall like short skirts, these men would dance and sing along the village's main street to the accompaniment of drums. It was impossible to ignore or simply not hear their pounding. The first round of drumbeats was an assault on the auditory sense. The even rolls of metallic strokes were so loud and incessant that, I was once told, 'they follow you everywhere'. Evidently, 'you follow the beats too', for people had flocked to the procession by the second round of drumming. By 'people', I mean men and children, for the women did not gather on the side of the road to watch the cortège go by. Instead, they rushed to the bereaved household to 'share the grief' with the deceased's widow, daughters and sisters.

At each village crossroad the procession stopped, the singer (*pāṭuvar*), who was usually drunk, stepped forward, and a joyful excitement seized the assembly of men and youngsters. Bowing, smiling, shuffling his feet to the drumbeats and wiggling his hips, the singer did everything he could to entertain and make everyone laugh. After the third round of drumming he would sing four lines of a high-pitched tune, although the verb 'sing' is not entirely accurate, for there was no obvious melody to the lyrics that he shouted 'piece by piece' (*tuṇtu tuṇṭa*) or four lines at a time, with unpredictable crescendos, always followed by a round of drums. Although his lyrics were argumentative, ominous and even tragic, the singer took them lightly, mocking them with a racking, inconsolable sob that was unmistakably exaggerated. This prompted the drummers to whistle and laugh. A growing sense of jubilation was reinforced when a couple of bold dancers with bells on their ankles brushed against each other in a sexually explicit, even obscene, choreography. The men and children who were either following the procession or watching it go by made no attempt to conceal their amusement. The men kept giving the Dalits money to hear their favourite 'death songs', leaving the walk only to drink arrack (locally produced alcohol). Here the procession enacted the second meaning of the English verb 'proceed'. The men not only moved forward in space but they also advanced, or as least tried to, socially, if only for the duration of the walk to the burial grounds. Their attempts to move up gave rise to intense dynamics of rivalry.

When I returned to Tamilnadu nine years later in 1999, the Dalits were engaged in a campaign to free themselves from the stigma of untouchability. This was especially apparent in the Viluppuram district of Tamilnadu where the more self-conscious and assertive young men retaliated against those who insisted on calling them by their old caste name of 'Paṟaiyar'. Wanting 'respect' (*matippu*), these young men began to reject their long-established caste occupations. This has also been noted of the Ramnad district by Robert Deliege, who writes:

> the Paṟaiyars have freed themselves from most of their obligations. They no longer perform tasks of scavenging and knackery which were incumbent on them in the past. They no longer play drums at funerals nor do they dig the graves of the high castes.
>
> (1997: 165; see also Racine 1996: 200, 212)

Indeed, the young Dalits I met in 1999 vehemently refused to carry on their elders' chores. As one of them told me then,

> 'The name "Paṟaiyan" means one who beats the drum, carries the funeral bier, sings death songs and obeys his master, but we don't like this name any more. We don't want to beat the drums, nor do we want to lead funeral processions in exchange for "mouth rice" [the raw rice offered to the deceased]. Nowadays, we tell the mourning family, "Dump the rice in the river or take it home, we don't want it." We are equal to the other castes, we deserve better than the food of the dead.'

This young man, who happened to be the son of a funeral singer, added,

> 'When my father sings at a funeral, people say, "He is just a Paṟaiyan!" Well, I don't like people to think we are cheap [English word was used]. I hate death songs. My father should not sing them. I go to school. People should respect me. How can my friends respect me if my father sings and dances at funerals?'

It is not exactly true, however, to say that in 1999 all young Dalits (as all untouchables then liked to call themselves) of the Viluppuram district had defected from funerals. A few were beginning to replace the old funeral troupe (*mēḷam*) with what they called the 'band', which was strictly instrumental. In this chapter I explore the ritual and emotional impact of this switch. I suggest that in suppressing the songs from the funeral procession, the 'band' radically transformed the meaning and experience of death for Tamil men. Instead of a burlesque act and an opportunity to show off, even outdo others, death became a serious and homogenizing business, a levelling force, we might say.

Bidding for praise

Among all the elements that contributed to a 'successful' funeral procession in the early 1990s, my consultants placed strongest emphasis on the songs. Death songs, they would say, enhance the drums, draw people to the procession and keep them there. Death songs, they would also emphasize, praise (*poṟṟu*) the dead and exonerate them from the sins committed during their lifetime. I should underscore, however, that most of the songs I recorded during my first stint of fieldwork in Tamilnadu did not actually eulogize or, for that matter, even refer to characteristics of the deceased.[3] But whether they actually celebrated the dead or not, death songs were said to 'honour' them and as such had a kind of absolving value. Thus their being commissioned by the men following the procession was not simply a show of appreciation for the Dalit singer. Rather it was an offering, one that was made out of personal or social consideration for the dead and their living families.

These findings substantiate the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai's (1990) essay on the linguistic and public expressions of praise (*stotra* in Sanskrit) in India.[4] Noting that 'in the Hindu world the paradigmatic or prototypic act of praise is the praise of the divine' (1990: 95), Appadurai lists four aspects of the Hindu construction of praise.

> First, it makes praise a ritual offering. Second, it puts praise into a formulaic and an aesthetic framework. Third, its main device is description (often through hyperbole) of the positive qualities of the god or goddess in question. Fourth, praise . . . is associated with the public expression of the emotional bonds of devotee and deity.
>
> (1990: 94)

At the Tamil funerals I recorded in the early 1990s, praise also functioned as a 'ritual offering' that employed a 'formulaic and aesthetic framework' (in the form of song) expressing 'emotional bonds' (sympathy and respect). It made no difference that in this context the recipient of praise was a dead person rather than a deity, since South Indian Hinduism postulates no absolute distinction between deities and human beings (Blackburn 1988; Fuller 1992: 30; Nabokov 2000). In praise there was a logical conflation of attitudes to the dead and to the gods.

I would add one major qualification to Appadurai's formulation. In the context of the funeral processions I am discussing here, the descriptive element of Tamil praise was focused less on its recipients – the dead – than on its dispensers: the men who actually commissioned the death songs. It is well known to scholars of Tamil culture (including Appadurai himself) that the patrons (*yajamānas*) of ritual and performance (dance, theatre, etc.) are lavishly praised for their support. There is evidence that such profuse

acknowledgements borrow from the old records of royal acts of generosity (Appadurai 1990: 95; Blackburn 1988: 145–147). In the past Tamil kings were the model patrons of temple festivals and the arts. Their endowment was honoured in an extended opening portion of inscriptions or 'praise prefaces' whose central objective was to 'identify and glorify' these benefactors (Appadurai 1990: 95). The same objective continues to infuse contemporary forms of patronage. In his study of a Tamil expressive genre called 'bow song' (*vil pāṭṭu*), for example, Stuart Blackburn notes that when the singer receives individual gifts of a few rupees during a performance, 'he interrupts the narrative and announces the donor's name, village and the amount given' (1988: 145–146). His acknowledgement is always flattering as he multiplies the amount given 'by a factor of one thousand' (1988: 146).

It is much the same for the death songs I recorded. The men who commissioned them were identified and commended. For example, if the donor of a song was a man named Elumalai who was the deceased's uterine nephew, the singer would announce, 'Elumalai gave money so that his maternal uncle (*māmā*) might reach heaven.' The same inflationary strategy observed by Blackburn at bow song performances was also apparent in these public acknowledgements. The singer always exaggerated the donor's contribution by doubling or tripling it. If Elumalai paid two rupees for a song, the singer would announce that the man gave him four, six or more. I observed that such proclamations increased in number and intensity very quickly. As soon as one man's name and donation were honoured, another would offer more money for a song. Before long men were participating in what one singer called a 'competition'. He explained why men would rush to outbid each other:

> 'Men can't stand that I compliment someone else. That immediately makes them think, "Hey, I am not lower than him. I am just as good. In fact, I am better." Then they give me more money so that I praise them more.'

Another singer offered a similar assessment, 'Men resent the fact that others get honoured before them. They compete because they are proud and jealous of each other.' This man believed that drinking only intensified these dynamics. In his words, 'As soon as they drink, men forcefully request songs without taking into consideration kinship or social relations. They just want to outdo each other; they just want to be better than everyone else.'

The Dalit singers too vied for praise. In fact, many singers admitted to me that the opportunity to earn acclamation had led them to join the *mēḷam* in the first place. As one untouchable man recounted his first funeral singing experience,

> 'When I was twenty a death occurred in our village but no one was available to sing. Since I had already acted in two village plays and

drummed at many funerals I was asked to try. I sang in rhythm to the drumbeat and everybody thought that I had a good voice. That evaluation made me feel so good that I wanted to sing more.'

Another man told me the same thing. 'I first sang at my aunt's funeral. I was complimented for it and this gave me the incentive to sing again.'

I should point out that it is not easy to enthral a South Indian audience. In my experience Tamil people can be particularly tough critics. One Dalit woman exemplified the Tamil people's penchant for sarcasm when she remarked, 'Around here if the singer is no good, even the dogs don't listen.' The singers I met told me that they were willing to work very hard to meet their audience's expectations, because once they had tasted the rewards of approval they could no longer live without them. 'I crave praise,' one performer told me. 'That is why I sing.' When I tried to understand the basis for his craving he replied, 'When I sing well, I am the centre of attention. I feel strong. People's applause energizes me.' When I pointed out that he did not seem to need much positive reinforcement since he appeared to have a high opinion of his voice, he immediately countered, 'It is not enough to have pride for one's self (*taṛperumai*). It is better if other people praise (*puhaḻ*) you.'

Apparently it is also better if people praise *you exclusively*, for the singers I knew did not like to share audience approval. I came to this realization when I observed how local singers reacted to 'outside' singers – men from nearby Dalit colonies who happened to be visiting and willing to sing at an on-going funeral procession in exchange for arrack. Suddenly the air grew tense as inside singers attempted to outdo the outsiders, and vice versa. As one singer complained, 'It is worse than a match of cricket or football. We'll do anything to be the sole focus of attention and admiration.' Perhaps unsure that I had understood him, he added, 'If people happen to praise another singer, I want them to praise me more. I want to be better than him.' The same singer told me that if he could not outshine his rivals he would leave the funeral, offering as an excuse that he was not feeling well.

It is just such pervasive dynamics of competition and display, operating on multiple levels at once, that leads me to suggest that the Tamil funeral processions I documented in the early 1990s were no simple demonstrations of mourning. Instead these mortuary pageants were venues for social recognition. Both Dalits and caste Hindus strove to be publicly acknowledged as more giving, more talented, and thus worthier or 'better', as they put it, than their peers. Caste Hindus and untouchables did not merely play out their aspirations side by side, as if they only shared time and physical space; they incited one another to engage in the dynamics just described. The Dalits exploited their patrons' proclivity for rivalry by deliberately commending a man who had not even requested a song. Patrons, for their part, induced

resentment and jealousy among the Dalits by encouraging outside singers to chant. Each side was quite skilled at bringing out both the best and the worst of the other. Each side was focused on turning the procession into a 'match' of social distinctions.

The drama of death and the comedy of men

The songs, then, were the medium through which the men watching or following the funeral procession in the early 1990s inflated their social identities. I need to stress, however, that the songs' *lyrics* were in contrast to the strategies of self-importance unleashed by the competitive bids associated with their *delivery*. In the dynamics of performance, I have just suggested, the self was on prominent display. Most death songs, however, depicted a social world in which the self (its pride, vanity and pretension) was not a desired category.

Rather than commemorate the life of the deceased, many death songs recounted the lives and often the deaths of characters drawn from pan-Hindu or Tamil epic, Purāṇic and devotional narratives. What all these characters had in common – often in excess – was profound integrity or devotion. They usually were men who had committed themselves to living moral lives, to telling nothing but the truth, for example, or to serving God. In fact their commitment to virtue went well beyond the norms of moral, or *dharmic*, conduct. It bordered on the 'archetypal', as George Hart (1995) writes of fanaticism and Indian literature in general. These characters were so reliable that they never questioned or abandoned their sense of right and wrong, even when those principles conflicted with personal commitments. In fact, when the gods wished to test their integrity, these moral men almost 'eagerly', as the songs sometimes put it, sacrificed kingdom, wives, children and even their own lives to *dharma* ('duty'). A good example is the song that narrates the story of Ariccantiraṉ, a legendary king who never told a lie in his life, not even to spare himself and his loved ones tremendous suffering.

A high school teacher from the market town of Gingee once told me, 'Death songs are popular because they teach us a lesson.' He explained,

> 'Notions such as "I", "me" and "mine" prevent us from reaching God. In order to free ourselves from the cycle of rebirth, we must forsake worldly concerns and surrender possessions. We must purge ourselves of every desire. We should not be concerned about relationships (*contam*). This is what death songs teach us. They teach us to give up everything without fussing or crying, because God wants us to give to him happily.'

The teacher concluded, 'At death people are receptive to this message because they can see clearly that a life has ended and that the dead cannot

take anything with them. It is a pivotal time, one in which mourners can appreciate the value of renunciation.'

But most people I talked to in the early 1990s emphasized that they liked death songs because they found them sad. A singer told me that it was because these songs were tragic that they were popular. As he said, 'People like to hear sad stories, especially in this context. Mourners empathize with the characters' trials and sufferings, for they too are unable to prevent the loss of their husbands, wives and children and they too feel anguish in grief.' Another singer agreed but argued that 'death songs should be sad' regardless of people's preferences. This was why, he added, the funeral is not the proper venue for cinema songs: 'cinema is for happiness, not for death.'

Comments like these never failed to confuse me. I understood that people yearned for sad songs, for tragic situations often make for captivating denouements. I also understood why dramatic scenarios were in order in unhappy circumstances like funerals. But if death songs were meant 'to make people cry for both the characters and themselves', as the Dalits would contend, why were they delivered in an entertaining and even comical fashion? Recall that the performance of these chants was so undeniably humorous that the men and children who attended them laughed their hearts out.[5] 'People love us,' funeral singers would often tell me, 'because we are fun.' But why did people 'love' the *mēḷam*'s caricature of sad scenarios, and how did they manage to enjoy themselves under such morbid circumstances? An answer comes up once we examine Bruce Kapferer's analysis of what he calls the 'comic drama' of Sinhalese exorcism (1983: 207).

Kapferer notes that in nearby Sri Lanka possessing demons are ultimate masters of illusion. These low beings listed at the bottom of the Sinhalese cosmic hierarchy manage to persuade victims that they are frightful and powerful. When mocked into their proper place within the framework of exorcist rituals, demons become ridiculous and eventually lose their terrorizing grip on their victims. From Kapferer's perspective, then, the puns, jokes, profanities and sexual innuendo that pepper dialogues between possessing demons and drummer-exorcists are therapeutic: they expose demons for who they really are. Kapferer, however, specifies how in the context of Sinhalese exorcism demons must be presented as controlling, polluting and potentially terrifying *before* they are made fun of. As he writes, 'For major exorcisms to achieve their curative purpose, the nature of the cosmic order and the position of gods, human beings and demons within it must be revealed *both* in the truth of their experiencing and as objective truth' (1983: 209, his emphasis). It is the dramatic forms of the exorcism, Kapferer explains, the colloquial dialogues staged by exorcists, in particular, which first objectify the demons to the patient. Comedy is the genre through which the 'normal' hierarchical order or accepted truths of the Sinhalese world are then restored to 'reality' (1983: vi). But while 'comedy implicitly restores order',

Kapferer warns, it does so in a way which overthrows any limiting, 'over-determined' or restricted perspective possible in the cultural and social world of meaning and experience. The demonic is just such 'a limiting perspective and [therefore] . . . an ideal target for comedy' (1983: 207).

I find Kapferer's analysis of the role of mockery in Sinhalese exorcisms very useful for understanding the comic mood of the Tamil funeral processions I observed in the early 1990s. My feeling is that the Dalits' jocular skits were meant to attack the 'limiting' message imparted by death songs. Not that these songs fully broke the depressing news that life is a painful ordeal that culminates in the loss of material possessions, social status, intimate relationships and death itself. For example, the song about Ariccantiraṉ, mentioned on p. 22, was never sung from beginning to end. Rather than being a perfected text, it was delivered with constant pauses and interruptions caused by the complex dynamics at play in the live performance process.

Because they sang to meet demand, and because demand was high, the Dalits often skipped lyrics in order to fulfil as many song requests as possible (naturally they wanted all the money they could get). Because they wanted praise, they did not hesitate to discontinue a chant that failed to captivate. At times they took breaks to drink and smoke. Then, there was the matter of distance. As one singer remarked to me, 'From our village to the graveyard there is a mile – not enough time to sing a whole song.' He then admitted, 'I have never sung a song in its entirety.'

From my perspective there was no need to do so. Context filled in the gaps and voids of the singers' delivery. The deceased lay on a bier visible to all throughout the procession. The women were at home swaying, moaning, weeping, beating their breasts and intoning sounds of separation and loss. Death (and women's laments) completed the Dalits' fragmented presentation, staging mourners who – much like the songs' protagonists – had no choice but to give up on life and relinquish loved ones.

The men who followed the procession, however, seldom had a chance to assimilate the 'limiting' meanings of this tragic context (or of the tragic text of death songs for that matter). This was not merely because the singer's performance remained sketchy and incomplete but because the singer and the drummers took every opportunity to ridicule the dilemmas faced by the characters in death songs. The entire ad hoc space where the Dalits danced and sang seemed bathed in a giddy stream of delight. They grinned and grimaced at their audiences of men and children whom they saluted with far-fetched deference. They leaped, their hands thrown up in the air with abandon as they told some new gag and then, in the same breath, let out a shriek. They hissed, swore and joked, always roaring with laughter. They danced groping their genitals, in the highest of spirits winking derisively at everyone. In short, the drummers and singers did everything to make fun of the proposition that life is hard and requires sacrifices, and this derision worked to undermine any power this hard moral exerted.

The reinvention of Tamil funeral processions

When I returned to the Viluppuram district in January 1999, the few *mēḷams* still leading funeral processions were made up almost exclusively of elderly men. Young Dalits were unwilling to perform the old 'untouchable' services, which they regarded as shameful and dishonourable. Without successors to ageing drummers, singers and dancers, the *mēḷam* became a thing of the past. In its place emerged an unlikely ensemble, the so-called 'band' that soon became the only acceptable context in which local younger Dalits would play music at funerals.

The funeral 'band' of the late 1990s modelled itself on Western military marching bands of the sort that one could still hear on Sunday afternoons on the main pier of the nearby town of Pondicherry, a former French *comptoir*. Save for two hand-held rattles that were clearly 'home-made', band members played the same clarinets, big brass drums and barrel drums, and were likewise dressed in white uniforms. And in that outfit the 'masters', as bandleaders called themselves, and 'drum masters' (a word that referred not only to percussionists but to all instrumentalists) would lead the funeral procession, performing their new 'touchable' experience and identity.

Sober and clean looking, these men posted an attitude of formal expertise that the old drummers with their tattered clothes, drunken clamour and burlesque routines had never had. The 'masters' neither sang nor danced nor joked; they just played their instruments with an air of prim professionalism. What resulted was not the old, rhythmic and yet unmelodious pitch of death songs but the tune of famous tragic Tamil films. There were no lyrics, no dialogues, no voices. Gone were the loud, racy repartees of the old drummers and gone were the vociferous bids for songs, for few mourners commissioned the 'master' to play sad cinema music.

No longer acting out their 'untouchability', the Dalits now displayed their aspirations and recent achievements. They were the 'masters', cloning the foreign forms of leadership that had once dominated their caste-Hindu superiors. And so they ruled not by amusing or flattering but by tiring people out. For with the disappearance of comedy sketches and barbed humour what remained was the stark reality or 'limiting perspective' of death and grief. One indication that the elimination of fun and strife from men's confrontation with life's finality was upsetting was that, as everyone agreed, male mourners drank much more than in the past.

But men were under a different kind of influence. In the past when inebriated, men behaved in 'jolly' ways, as one of my English-speaking assistants put it. Now they looked subdued, cheerless. I, in fact, felt a pang of regret for them. Because even though I believed that the men's newly found uniformity would not last very long, by losing the *mēḷam* they had had to embrace an uncongenial mode of sociality. They had to march without the means – the songs – to distinguish themselves from others, as if they

were all alike. In doing so men were risking an extremely vital urge – possibly their most important one, the one they had made good use of in the past to beat death and overcome grief. This was the urge to challenge the finality of death by proclaiming to themselves and to others that they were alive and therefore unwilling to think of life itself as a thing other than a struggle for appreciation and the greatest distinction.

In this chapter I have tried to show that the Tamil funeral processions I documented in 1990 had specific temporal modalities (death), leaders (untouchable drummers), music (percussive and vocal), lyrics (about selfless and resolute parting from loved ones), spectacle (showy and funny displays) and followers (mourners who did nothing but move forward in a way that set up relations of hierarchy or precedence). In so far as these men competed intensely for the honour to praise the dead and receive prime recognition in exchange, the ceremonial walk to the burial ground was full of the tensions noted by anthropologists at other Tamil processions. Yet, as I have suggested here, the men who walked behind the Dalit drummers and singers were not as divided as it would appear. They rejoiced while the dead were carried on their last tour through the village. They laughed while the songs 'talked about' characters who eagerly surrender to loss. They obsessed about praise and precedence while the lyrics glorified virtue and selflessness. In short, men were unified in their collective stance against the particular drama of death that was then staged for them. I say 'then', for, as I have also shown, that drama had practically disappeared ten years later when I went back to the Viluppuram district. For reasons that had to do with changing social and political circumstances, the Dalits did not want to play it any more. And so the Tamil funeral procession changed.

Notes

1 The field research for this chapter began in August 1990 when, thanks to a generous grant from the American Institute of Indian Studies, I spent fourteen months in a village located in what was then called the South Arcot District of Tamilnadu. The American Council of Learned Societies sponsored eight months of fieldwork in 2000, and a Bicentennial Fellowship from Princeton University in 2001 gave me the freedom to write my book, *No One Cries for the Dead* (2005), from which this chapter is drawn. I am very grateful to M. Savarana Kumar of Madurai and M. Thavamani of Gingee for their assistance during my research. I first presented this essay at the Nineteenth European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies jointly organized by the European Association of South Asian Studies and the International Institute for Asian Studies Leiden, the Netherlands, on 27–30 June 2006. I thank Knut A. Jacobsen for inviting me to contribute to his panel on Processions in South Asia and the Diaspora and to this volume.

2 At the time of my fieldwork this village was still located in the South Arcot district, which did not split into the Cuddalore and Villupuram districts until 30 September 1993.

3 Only when the mourning family's in-laws bring their gifts of water, garlands of flowers, and cloth do the Dalits sing the deceased's 'life history' (*varalaru* or *carittiram*), commemorating and commending his or her qualities. The word 'commemorate' actually requires some qualification, for what is acknowledged in these biographical songs is not a full personality, or even a character sketch, but an idealizing social identity. The singer essentially gives a synoptic and superlative account of the individual's lifetime public achievements.

4 For an excellent discussion of the poetics and politics of praise in Tamil culture, see Ramaswamy (1998: 80–85).

5 For another example of juxtaposition of grief and comedy in a South Indian performance, see Stuart Blackburn's study of shadow puppeteers in the state of Kerala. Blackburn notes that, 'Nearly every major scene of mourning in the puppet play is similarly hedged with comedy, as an antidote, I think to the intense sorrow that underlies the puppet play' (1996: 236).

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2

GETTING IN LINE

The Kumbha Mela festival processions

James G. Lochtefeld

Introduction

In most places, a festival procession led by several thousand heavily armed, ash-smeared naked men would bring immediate concern, if not alarm and terror. Yet such processions are the climactic moment at the Kumbha Mela, a Hindu bathing festival drawing a pan-Indian and increasingly global audience. Widely regarded as the world's largest religious gathering, the Kumbha Mela is celebrated at four Hindu pilgrimage sites – Hardwar, Prayag[1] (near Allahabad), Ujjain, and Nasik – and usually returns to a site after twelve years.[2] Each site's festival time is primarily determined by the position of Jupiter, which takes about twelve years to move through the zodiac. Each festival lasts over a month, during which pilgrims come to bathe in the sacred rivers, and each site also has three major bathing days, marked by these dramatic festival processions.[3] The Hardwar and Prayag Melas have historically been the most important – with Prayag drawing the largest crowds – and these sites also have an Ardha ('Half') Kumbha Mela between the 'full' Kumbha Melas.[4]

The men in these processions – of whom only the first groups are naked – belong to the *akharas*, a word that literally means a 'wrestling-ground', but more broadly denotes warrior ascetic bands. The Kumbha Mela's thirteen *akharas* span the sectarian spectrum: seven are Shaiva *sanyasis*, three are Vaishnava *bairagis*, two are Udasis (who worship multiple Hindu deities), and the Nirmalas are Sikhs.[5] The historical roots of both the *sanyasi* and *bairagi akharas* lie in warrior monks known as *nagas*, who in earlier centuries were mercenary soldiers, traders, landowners, and petty kings. The soldier-monk is a well-entrenched figure in Indian society, however odd it may seem to outsiders (Lochtefeld 1994).

29

These *akharas* are the Kumbha Mela's central ritual figures. Their presence attracts ordinary Hindus, to whom these ascetics give *darshan*, guidance, and blessings. The Mela's formal organization also clearly reflects the *akharas'* pre-eminence. They arrive largely according to seniority, with the more important *akharas* arriving first. Each *akhara's* arrival is marked by a formal ceremonial welcome (*peshvai*) by the Mela authorities and the leaders of previously arrived *akharas*.[6] The clearest ritual primacy comes on each Mela's holiest days, known as *shahi snans* ('royal baths'), when the *akharas* have exclusive access to the most important bathing places, and process to them with their leaders seated on golden and silver thrones. As the name indicates, these processions constituted claims to royal authority, as an 1840 observer clearly perceived:

> When they go out on public days, etc., the principal men of the Nirvani sect go paraded on seven large and splendidly caparisoned elephants. . . . Others are mounted on the finest horses and camels, some of them armed. *The whole is preceded by mace-bearers carrying enormous silver sticks, and much of the insignia of royalty.*
>
> (Sarkar n.d.: 105; emphasis added)[7]

These processions currently run on a timed schedule, in which every group has a well-established place. Yet before 1800 each *akhara's* position in the bathing order reflected its actual status *vis-à-vis* the others; bathing at the holiest moment was thus a visible sign of that *akhara's* primacy, enacted by its procession to the bathing place. This shift from armed dominance to a scripted, government-organized performance clearly shows how the Kumbha Mela has changed in the past 200 years. Yet despite the *akharas'* diminished temporal power, the Kumbha Mela remains a stage to contest and enact religious authority, as continuing attempts to influence or change the 'established' bathing order clearly show. Such efforts plainly reveal the Kumbha Mela's importance as a status marker for ascetics – with regard to each other and the larger society – and the authorities expend considerable effort to uphold and protect this entitlement.

Yet despite government deference to the *akharas* – whose right to the most sacred times has never been seriously contested – the government's power potentially sows the seeds of future conflict, based on divergent understandings. The *akharas* have never forgotten their earlier status and, for them, these processions are not mere theatre, but enact their status as the Kumbha Mela's kings.[8] For the government, the Kumbha Mela is a high-profile platform to promote domestic social goals such as literacy, family planning, or AIDS awareness, and to promote religious tourism for economic gain. Promoting the Kumbha Mela as a global tourist festival potentially transforms the *akharas* into a tourist attraction – 'eye candy' like a beautiful temple or exotic wildlife. Given the *akharas'* martial history and the ascetics'

Figure 2.1 Vaishnava Akharas in procession to Har-ki-Pairi on Vaishakh Amavasya
in Hardwar in 1998. Photo: K. K. Budhkar.

own sense of status, it is virtually certain that these diverging perspectives
will bring future conflict.

Historical context: the *naga sanyasi akharas*

The Kumbha Mela's contemporary importance is belied by surprisingly scarce
historical data, much of which points to a relatively recent formation – at

least as a single festival celebrated in four places (Lochtefeld 2004).[9] Yet historical records clearly reveal large, well-established bathing festivals. Some were annual, such as Hardwar's Baisakhi Mela and Prayag's Magh Mela. Others were determined by Jupiter's twelve-year cycle – Hardwar's Kumbha Mela and Nasik's Sinhastha Mela, whose differing charter myths clearly point to independent origins (Lochtefeld 2004: 106).[10] Such festivals would have attracted ascetics as important religious occasions, but also as opportunities to display status, seek patronage, and conduct trade.[11]

The most important ascetic groups were bands of warrior-monks known as *akharas*. Many of these warrior-monks are *naga* ('naked') ascetics, whose name came from their habit of going into battle without clothes. The *naga akharas* – both Shaiva *sanyasis* and Vaishnava *bairagis* – were wealthy and powerful in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century North India, particularly in areas where central authority had declined (Lorenzen 1978: 66–69). These groups may have originally taken up arms to defend their own lands and resources, but during the chaos following the Moghul decline their military power brought them both influence and substantial income as mercenary soldiers. Their military might also gave them a decided advantage for long-distance trade, as did their institutional wealth and organization. By the late 1700s many ascetics had used these advantages to become major property owners, kingmakers, and even kings (Lochtefeld 1994: 591–592).

As the *akharas* grew stronger their economic and political interests would have naturally pulled them towards further sources of wealth and power. One such source was royal patronage, and one text cites this as the origin for Ujjain's Kumbha Mela. According to the *Vikrama-smrti-granth*, the Ujjain Mela began late in the eighteenth century when Ranoji Shinde, the founder of the Shinde dynasty, invited the *akharas* up from Nasik to Ujjain for a religious festival. Here Ranoji was emulating earlier kings such as Ashoka and Harsha, both of whom had convened religious assemblies. Such patronage reinforced his image as a pious Hindu king, and provided religious validation for his reign (*Vikrama-smrti-granth* 1944/45: 555–556).[12]

Another important patronage source was pilgrims' gifts at large festivals such as the Kumbha Mela, Magh Mela, or Simhastha Mela, where the dominant group would have taken the lion's share.[13] *Sanyasi* control over the Kumbha Mela is attested by Captain Thomas Hardwicke, who visited Hardwar in 1796. He reports that the *sanyasis* not only ran the police, settled disputes, and dispensed justice, but also levied taxes on pilgrims, animals, and merchandise, in addition to their own commercial activities (1979: 6.314–315). Hardwicke's account also indicates that *sanyasi* control over this fair stemmed solely from their power to impose it. They were able to enforce an edict prohibiting other ascetics from carrying weapons, and the latter had to be content with bamboo sticks, while the *sanyasis* carried swords and shields (Hardwicke 1979: 6.314). Since Hardwar's spring bathing festival was also North India's largest and most lucrative market – the entry point for trade

goods from the north and west – many of these ascetics were very wealthy and powerful men.[14]

Controlling such festivals would have been lucrative, and several stories describe bloody battles as groups competed for primacy and the riches that this would bring. The bloodiest encounter reportedly took place on the final bathing day of Hardwar's 1760 Kumbha Mela, when *sanyasis* killed 18,000 *bairagis*. Raper attributes this dispute to the enmity of two brothers, one of whom was a *sanyasi*, the other a *bairagi*, who 'happened to meet at Haridwara, and mutual recriminations took place, regarding the tenets which they had individually embraced. From a private, it became a general cause; and it was agreed, that the sword should prove the superiority' (1979: 11.455).

This story suggests that the Kumbha Mela's charged atmosphere could transform a minor conflict into a major battle. This actually happened in 1796, when Sikhs killed 500 *sanyasis* to avenge an insult to some Udasi ascetics (Hardwicke 1979: 6.318).[15] Others have suggested that bathing order conflicts had deeper symbolic implications than simply having to wait one's turn, such as asserting a particular deity's pre-eminence (Burghart 1983: 373), or the desire to impress actual or potential devotees (van der Veer 1989: 134). Yet none of these explanations account for Raper's report of the Hardwar battle's ultimate consequence – that *bairagis* were banned from Hardwar, and thus excluded from its patronage and lucrative trade.[16] Raper's account reflects the intense competition for resources between *sanyasis* and *bairagis*, competition attested by other reported conflicts. Muhsin Fani reports a battle in Hardwar in 1640, in which the *bairagis* were completely routed (Fani 1843: 2.196–197). Such competition undoubtedly underlay the *sanyasi–bairagi* battle at the 1789 Nasik Mela – whose crowds made it a significant patronage opportunity – in which 12,000 *bairagis* were reported killed (Burghart 1983: 374). When an ascetic group's position in the bathing order reflects its actual status *vis-à-vis* the others, and this position has significant economic implications, one can better understand the historical significance of these processions. They were not mere theatre, but displays of sovereignty over the Kumbha Mela, with the status and material advantages such status would bring.

Control and contestation

These violent battles provoked a strong response from the ruling powers. The initial response came from the Marathas, who controlled both Nasik and Ujjain. After the 1789 Nasik battle, the ruling Peshwa shifted the *bairagis'* bathing-place from Tryambakeshvar to Ram Kund in Nasik (Burghart 1983: 374), and this segregated bathing is still practised there (Lal Puri 1971: 12).[17] This defused the threat of violence by removing the *bairagis* from the main festival venue, and thus away from the major sources of patronage.

An external authority is also visible in the bathing order for the Ujjain Kumbha Mela, in which all ascetics bathe at the same time – *sanyasis* on one side of the river, and *bairagis* on the other (Lal Puri 1971: 17–18). Since at all other sites an *akhara*'s bathing place indicates its relative status, Ujjain's simultaneous bathing suggests that an outside authority (i.e. the Maratha ruler) enforced these arrangements.

The British were acutely aware of the Kumbha Mela's bloody history, and of these processions' potential dangers. In his report on the 1855 Kumbha Mela, the Magistrate of Saharanpur noted:

> the ordinary risks . . . at every annual fair at Hardwar are greatly increased on the occasion of the Komb on the Purbee or great bathing day, by the crowded procession of the various sects of excited and fanatic devotees or faqueers who proceed to the bathing ghat headed by their Mahants with trumpets sounding and banners flying.
>
> (NWPJP 1855: 13)

To keep order on these occasions, the first modest step (beginning in 1808) was requiring people to leave their weapons outside the bathing area.[18] The other strategy to ensure tranquillity was to uphold the 'customary' bathing order – an order originally formed through sanguinary struggle between the contesting groups. The 'customary' order at both Hardwar and Prayag reflected this eighteenth-century struggle for dominance: in both places the *sanyasi akharas* were first, then the *bairagis*, and finally the Udasis. This order reflected these groups' relative importance and seniority. The *sanyasis* and *bairagi*s were the two most sharply contesting groups, and their first and second position indicates their relative strength and status. The Udasis trailed the *bairagis* not only because they were founded more recently – by Guru Nanak's son Sri Chand – but also because they were never as numerous and powerful.

Of course, there were still subtler status differentiations, particularly among the *sanyasis* themselves. The Niranjani and the Mahanirvani have traditionally been the two most important *akharas*, and are the only ones mentioned in early sources.[19] The Niranjanis bathe first in Hardwar, and the Mahanirvanis in Prayag, and their precedence clearly reflects local dominance.[20] Each of these *akharas* has other *akharas* marching with them as subordinate groups: the Atal *akhara* with the Mahanirvani, and the Juna and Ananda *akhara* with the Niranjanis. Furthermore, the Juna *akhara* also has subsidiary *akharas* – the Agan and Avahan *akharas*.[21]

British control changed the bathing order from a privilege claimed by force of arms to a right that could be demanded. Yet the *akharas* themselves needed some time to adjust to this change, as events at Hardwar in 1844 clearly show. During that Kumbha Mela the Udasis somehow managed to take the *bairagis'* place in the bathing procession, and the *bairagis* – described by

the District Commissioner as 'the most turbulent and disorderly class as lowest in repute' (NWPJP 1844: 6) – were understandably angry. The two groups exchanged a few blows before a cavalry unit separated them, and the damage was confined to a few bruises, but one wonders whether the Udasis' move was a status claim based on their local prominence in Hardwar, where they were (and still are) wealthy landowners, unlike the *bairagis*. After all, this was exactly how the bathing order had been determined prior to British control.

Of course, British control had changed the ground rules, and as the ruling power the British took on the obligation not only to uphold the 'customary' order but also to settle any disputes. Twelve years later the Magistrate of Saharanpur, A. Roofs, observed that 'these faqueers . . . are very jealous of each other and . . . most particular in preserving post of precedence which either mutual agreement or long standing custom has assigned them', and that 'the general opinion has been that [in 1844] the third rank was . . . usurped by the Oodasees.' Based on these considerations he convened a meeting of the *akhara* leaders (*mahants*), who eventually awarded the *bairagis* third place (NWPJP 1855: 14). The dispute was settled amicably, and recorded in an *ikrar-nama* (legal agreement) witnessed by the *mahants* and the local Brahmin leaders (NWPJP 1855: 15).

Mr Roofs's solution set a precedent, as shown by an *ikrar-nama* for the 1879 Kumbha Mela. It opens by naming all the parties – the *mahants* representing the Niranjanis, Nirvanis, *bairagis*, the two Udasi *akharas*, and the newest addition, the Nirmalas. It next states that all parties agree to adhere to the bathing order established at the 1867 Kumbha Mela, and then lists each group's place in the bathing order, as given above. The representatives further pledged to obey any orders given by the Mela officers, and to honour the promises in the document (Lal Puri 1971: 26–27).

This document shows broad acceptance that the British were in charge of settling questions of order and precedence, presumably after consulting with the *akharas*, who were willing to agree to this because it guaranteed their 'customary' rights. In doing so, the British could cast themselves as public servants, who were simply 'doing their bit' to help things run smoothly – a theme continued by the current Mela administration, which has preserved the colonial model.[22]

To fulfil this responsibility, the administrations (colonial and post-colonial) have faced two major sorts of challenges. The simpler, less frequent challenge has been how to integrate new groups into the bathing order, for which the guiding principle has been that new groups bathe last. The Nirmalas probably joined in 1867, and have held last place since then. This same principle was applied in 1891 and 1903 to a group of Sikhs calling themselves Akalis, who seem to have been mainstream Sikhs, since they 'entertained a special enmity . . . [for the Nirmalas as] dissenters from the true Sikh faith', and the authorities noted considerable tension between them (HMI 1892: 45). The

authorities gave the Akalis the option of bathing last, and being allowed to carry objects identifying them as *akharas* – banners and musical instruments – or bathing first without these. In both cases the Akalis chose the latter, after which they disappear from the Kumbha Mela.[23]

The more vexing challenges have been the attempts to change the established bathing order. Such attempts have primarily come from groups trying to upgrade their status by gaining a higher position, and reflect the customary order's original criterion – namely, a group's real power. These attempts show how the Kumbha Mela remains a place where ascetics contest for status, even under the government's benevolent eye. At Hardwar in 1998, the Atal *akhara* sought an independent procession, rather than marching with the Mahanirvanis as usual, and boycotted the bathing days when this was refused.[24] The authorities were equally strict with the *bairagis* at the 1962 Kumbha Mela, which saw demands for separate processions both by the three *bairagi akharas* (Digambar, Nirvani, and Nirmohi), and also by their subsidiary Khalsas – recognition some Khalsas had sought since 1938. These demands were flatly denied, and the report notes that such requests 'in future also should not be entertained', since doing so would push the other *akharas* to a lower rank in the bathing order (Charlu 1962: 53). To prevent such displacement, Charlu's report emphasizes that all three *bairagi akharas* constitute but one single procession. It also noted that some of the Khalsas boycotted the bathing procession to protest this decision (Charlu 1962: 53–54).

More recently, the Mela authorities have delegated certain issues to the *akharas*, enabling the government to seem aloof from their affairs. In 2001, the Juna *akhara* clashed with one of its subsidiaries, the Avahan *akhara*, over the appointment of four *maha-mandaleshwars* (heads of *akhara* groups), and the right to fly giant flags in camp and in the bathing processions. The affair was resolved before the major bathing day, and described as 'a game of one-upmanship' – a sign that the Kumbha Mela is still an important theatre for sadhu status (Tewari 2001). A more serious rift came at Ujjain in 2004, when the All-India Akhara Parishad banned the Agni and Avahan *akharas* from the *shahi snan*. These two *akharas* have traditionally been Juna subsidiaries, and the dispute reportedly arose when they broke tradition by setting up separate camps – suggesting an effort to establish a separate institutional identity (PTI 2004b).[25]

To date, the only successful challenge has been by the Juna *akhara*, and this with the Mela administration's reluctant blessing. As mentioned in Note 19, the Junas first appear in the 1891 records as a subsidiary of the Niranjanis. Attempts to gain greater autonomy first surfaced in 1903, when the authorities noted that the Junas were 'a much more numerous body than the Niranjanis, and . . . no longer satisfied with their position of subordination'. Their strategy that year was to request a processional route that would have

no longer required them to pass through the Niranjani *akhara* grounds, and thus 'would have given them a status as an independent *akhara*'. This was foiled by a savvy British administrator, whose compromise route still took the Junas through the Niranjani *akhara* grounds before they set off to bathe (HMI 1903: 17).

Despite this setback, the Junas' superior numbers, and the importance this inevitably brings, have compelled the authorities to grant them recognition. By 1962, the Junas had equal status with the Niranjanis, since that year's report notes that

> The Niranjni [*sic*] and Juna *akharas* used to go side by side for their ceremonial bath which causes great inconvenience to them as well as the administration because of the time . . . wasted in preventing one *akhara* advancing even one step ahead of the other.

When technical problems precluded building a double-lane bridge, the authorities called a meeting at which the *akharas* 'agreed to give up that age old practice and take out their processions behind one another' (Charlu 1962: 53).

The compromise was that the Junas would lead the procession on Shivaratri, and the Niranjanis on the two later bathing days; the authorities further emphasized that both groups were one single procession – even though one was 50 yards behind the other – so that the Mahanirvanis would retain second place in the bathing order (Charlu 1962: 53). This solution reflected the Junas' growing power but also their historical subordination, since it put them in second place on the more important days. Given the Juna *akhara*'s numerical strength, and the Kumbha Mela's history as a venue to compete for status, it was only a matter of time before they sought recognition as Hardwar's primary *akhara*.

The *Indian Express* reported one such incident in 1986, when the Juna *akhara* came to the bathing place before the Niranjanis had finished, and one of the Junas hit a Niranjani *akhara mahant* on the head. In the confusion that followed both groups stoned the traffic control room, but this disturbance was completely overshadowed by a tragic accident that same day, when almost fifty people died in a stampede. The conflict resurfaced twelve years later, in 1998. On the second major bathing day, Chaitra Purnima, the Juna *akhara* seized first place in the bathing order from the Niranjanis, and converted their numerical superiority into ritual primacy. This was followed by a riot that caused property damage and serious injuries, but no reported deaths.

The following days saw frantic meetings of the *akharas*' governing body, the Akhara Parishad, seeking to avert a similar conflict on the main bathing day. The Mela administration actively facilitated these meetings, in keeping

with its image as serving the *akharas* and the public. When these efforts failed, the Mela administration dropped the mask of deference. On the day before the final *shahi snan*, the Mela authorities banned all *akhara* processions on public safety grounds, and deployed armed troops to the *akhara* head-quarters to discourage any violent response. This show of force brought the parties back to the table, and the ban was ultimately rescinded.

Yet despite this, the Juna *akhara* was conspicuously absent from the next day's processions. Juna spokesmen claimed that the eleventh-hour agreement left them insufficient time to organize a procession, but many suspected the real reason was to avoid showing subordination to the Mela authorities, who had planned to surround the Junas with police – as one official hyper-bolically stated, one policeman for every sadhu. If the Kumbha Mela is a theatre in which to compete for status, processing to the bath under armed guard would have been deeply humiliating, and would have publicly belied the Junas' claim to be the 'kings' of the Kumbha Mela.[26]

The 1998 Kumbha Mela demonstrated the real power differential between the *akharas* and the government, and highlighted the government's increasing control over all aspects of the Mela. Of course, the authorities would prefer not to exercise such control openly, and are happier portray-ing themselves as servants to the *akharas* and the public – as at Ujjain in 2004, when they pointedly avoided the 'internal controversy' between the Juna, Agan, and Avahan *akharas*. Yet the 1998 decision – backed up by armed troops – to ban the *akhara* processions clearly showed where the real power lay. The *akharas* have religious authority, and process according to their customary rights, but these rights are ultimately given (and protected) by the authorities. This is a far cry from the days when the *sanyasis* ran the festival.

One development that clearly recognizes this power differential is bathing-day boycotts to exert pressure on the government. Some boycotts have reflected anger at being refused recognition as a separate procession, as with the *bairagi* Khalsas in 1962 and the Atal *akhara* in 1998. In other cases threatened or actual boycotts have been driven by other issues: in 1995 to protest restrictions on processions and unsatisfactory infrastructure (Mallik 1995: 2), in 2004 to protest government moves to acquire temples (PTI 2003), and at Prayag in 2007 to protest the abysmal water quality at the bathing places (Pradhan 2007).

One might wonder why a boycott threat would carry much weight, since the government's efforts so clearly benefit the sadhus, yet several factors make this credible. The Kumbha Mela is still an important theatre in which to validate political authority, and state governments derive considerable status from running the Kumbha Mela – as did Ranoji Shinde before them.[27] The Mela exhibits help the government to further its 'political' agenda, both by generating favourable publicity and by promoting social goals. Yet to ensure the Mela's smooth operation the government needs the *akharas'*

cooperation, which they are free to give or withhold. If the *akharas* refused to cooperate the government would not only lose prestige, but would find it difficult to run the Mela at all.

More recent changes have created even further stress between the *akharas*, the government, and traditional Hindus. The Kumbha Mela has always had multiple dimensions – in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the religious emphasis was mixed with trade, and in the twentieth century with politics. The most recent development has been promoting the Kumbha Mela as a global tourism event, to boost tourism as an economic force, and to reap the benefits of India's history, piety, and photogenic grandeur. Yet promoting the Kumbha Mela as a 'tourist' experience creates continuing tensions. Many foreigners drawn to such 'alternative' tourist experiences are less interested in honouring traditional boundaries than in constructing their own private experience – such as the two foreign women who bathed naked at Prayag in 2001, and justified this by pointing to the *nagas*. A similar complaint was lodged against the BBC's Channel Four news team, which was accused of violating bans on alcohol and non-vegetarian food in the Mela area, and ordered to vacate the Mela grounds. However, an appeal stayed the order until after the festival ended, when the point was moot (McLachlan n.d.: 1–2). Many traditional Hindus see these incidents as signs of something amiss. They object to transforming the Kumbha Mela into a voyeuristic tourist experience, and think that promoting it as such diminishes and shows disrespect for their religious life.[28]

Finally, the global tourism market transforms the *akharas* themselves into a tourist attraction, an attitude so radically divergent from their own self-perception that it makes conflict inevitable. One clear source of conflict has been photography. 'Tourists' at the Kumbha Mela want photographs of their experiences, but this desire for 'the shot' conflicts with the *akharas'* sense of status, and in 2001 and 2007 they assaulted photographers and journalists (McLachlan n.d.: 3; IBNlive.com 2007).[29] In 2001 the government tried to manage this by banning photography of *naga* sadhus, and within 500 yards of the bathing area, but this was an uneasy attempt to balance competing goals – promoting the Mela and appeasing traditional constituencies.

Ritual displays at the Kumbha Mela clearly reflect the power of its constituent groups, and the Mela's changes clearly reflect the changing power equations. This is especially true for the bathing processions, which have changed from showcasing ascetic might to reflecting government planning. All of these things point to the dynamic fluidity lying under the surface of established 'custom', and illustrate how 'public ritual performances are an especially powerful means for creating (and sometimes undermining) selves, relationships, and communities' (Sax 2002: 12). Control over the Mela's ritual space clearly reveals the true nature of these relationships.

Appendix A: Processional days at the Kumbha Mela sites

Site and season	First bathing day	Second day	Third day
Hardwar (Spring)	Shivaratri 25 February 1998*	Chaitra Amavasya (new moon in Chaitra) 28 March 1998	*Mesh Sankranti*[†] (Sun's transition into Aries, in mid-April) 14 April 1998
Prayag (Winter)	Makar Sankranti (sun's transition into Capricorn, in mid-January) 14 January 2001	*Magh Amavasya* (new moon in Magh), when both sun and moon are in Capricorn 24 January 2001	Vasant Panchami (the 5th day of Phalgun) 29 January 2001
Ujjain (Spring)	Chaitra Purnima (full moon in Chaitra) 5 April 2004	Vaisakh Amavasya (new moon in Vaisakh) 19 April 2004	*Vaisakh Purnima* (full moon in Vaisakh) 16 May 1992
Nasik (Summer)	Simha Sankranti (Sun's transition into Leo) 17 August 2003	*Bhadrapada Amavasya* (new moon in Bhadrapada) 27 August 2003	Devotthayan Ekadashi 4 November 2003

Notes

* Dates indicate the most recent celebration.

† Italics indicate each site's holiest day.

1 The twelve lunar months are Chaitra (which usually begins some time in March), Vaisakh, Jyesth, Asadh, Shravan, Bhadrapada, Ashvin, Kartik, Margashirsha, Paush, Magh, and Phalgun.

2 These dates are drawn from Lal Puri (1971: 4–7). Dubey (2001: 132) notes 'alternative astronomical conjunctions' for celebrating the Kumbha Mela at Prayag (when Jupiter is in Aries), Nasik (when Jupiter is in Cancer), and Ujjain (when Jupiter is in Libra).

3 The bathing dates for the 2003 Nasik Mela at http://kumbhamela.net/ were very different from those above. The two primary bathing days were Shravan Purnima (12 August 2003) and Bhadrapada Amavasya (27 August 2003).

Notes

1 Prayag is the pilgrimage site at the confluence of the Yamuna and Ganges rivers, whereas Allahabad is the nearby city.

2 An estimated 30 million people bathed on one day at the 2001 Prayag Kumbha Mela; if this number is remotely accurate then overall attendance probably topped 100 million.

3 Jupiter is in Aquarius for Hardwar's Kumbha Mela, in Taurus for Prayag's and in Leo for Ujjain and Nasik's. About once a century the Kumbha Mela returns to a site after eleven years. Jupiter's orbit is actually 11.86 years, so after each twelve-year cycle it moves a little further into the sign, which the eleventh year celebration corrects. Appendix A lists the bathing days at each site.

4 The 'Kumbha Mela Consultancy Bureau' – a commercial tourism website – lists 'full' and 'half' Kumbha Melas for all four sites. Earlier sources mention 'half' Melas only for Hardwar and Prayag, but history reveals other efforts to standardize practice at all four sites (Lochtefeld 2004: 113–114).

5 Cole and Sambhi (1990: 121) report that 'the group originates from five men sent by Guru Gobind Singh to study at the great Hindu centre of learning, Varanasi. They then set up schools for the instruction of Sikhs, but had themselves become affected by their own contacts with Hindu thought.'

6 The Bairagi *akharas* reportedly have no *peshvai* tradition (PT India 2007).

7 This account may not describe a Kumbha Mela, but the royal symbolism is clear – including the elephants, which are now banned on major bathing days because of public safety worries.

8 This concern for status is pivotal to understanding ascetic behaviour. Many ascetics remain highly status-conscious, despite having ostensibly left the world and its concerns behind.

9 A pattern of evidence points to Hardwar as the original 'Kumbha Mela'. It is the only site for which Aquarius (Kumbha) determines the festival's timing, and the only site with no 'alternative astronomical conjunctions' for celebrating it (Dubey 2001: 132). The earliest texts to use the name 'Kumbha Mela', the *Khulasatu-t-Tawarikh* (*c*. 1695) and the *Chahar Gulshan* (1789), use this name only for Hardwar, even though they mention festivals now part of the Kumbha Mela cycle: Prayag's Magh Mela and Nasik's Simhastha Mela (see Sarkar 1901: 27, 51, 144).

10 Many *puranas* mention the Magh Mela, which probably dates from the early centuries CE. Hardwar's spring bathing dates at least from the early 1600s: the English traveller Tom Coryat estimated a crowd of 400,000 people there in 1617.

11 The *Khulasatu* mentions alms-giving as a religious practice at Hardwar, and the *Chahar Gulshan* reports that 'Lacs of laymen, Faqirs, and Sanyasis assemble here' (Sarkar 1901: 19.124).

12 This story would explain why the Ujjain and Nasik Kumbha Melas both occur when Jupiter is in Leo. Ranoji invited the sadhus to Ujjain when they were already 'in the neighbourhood' for Nasik's Simhastha fair. The two festivals' relative timing depends on when Jupiter enters Leo: Ujjain is first if it enters before spring, and Nasik if between spring and late summer.

13 Nizamuddin Bakshi (1964: 5.318), Al-Badaoni (1976: 2.94–95), and Abul Fazl Allami's *Akbar-Nama* (1972: 2.422–424) all record a sixteenth-century battle between Hindu ascetics at Thanesar, a pilgrimage place north of Delhi. They identify the parties differently, but agree that the battle was over the right to collect alms from pilgrims.

14 In 1808, Raper noted that many *sanyasis* were 'men of considerable property, who assume only the garments of the devotee, being in other respects well provided with all the comforts and conveniences of life' (1979: 11.456).

15 The *sanyasis* had assaulted some Udasis, whose order was founded by Guru Nanak's son Sri Chand, and thus had historical connections with the Sikhs.

16 The *Chahar Gulshan* (*c*. 1789) notes that 'If any Faqirs of Prag . . . [which Sarkar understands as *bairagis*] come here, they are attacked by the Sanyasis' (Sarkar 1901: 124).

17 Lal Puri reports that the Junas lead the bathing procession at Nasik, followed by the Niranjanis and the Nirvanis (1971: 18). Since the bathing order reflects local influence at both Hardwar and Prayag, I suspect that this is also true here.

18 A similar arrangement is described in 1855 (NWPJP 1855: 2).

19 The *Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register* describes the Kumbh's four *akharas* as 'Niranjunee and Nirbannee Naga goesaees', 'oodasees', and 'Jogees' (1832: 121). A Christian missionary who visited Allahabad in 1840 also mentioned only the Niranjanis and Nirbanis (Sarkar n.d.: 103). The Junas are first mentioned in 1891, when 'the Niranjanis and Junas' appear in the day's bathing order (HMI 1892: 14).

20 The Niranjani *akhara* still controls many of Hardwar's important pilgrimage sites, and its leaders are influential landowners and businessmen. Conversely, the Mahanirvanis are the most important *akhara* in Prayag, where they have considerable property and banking interests.

21 Since Sarkar mentions all of these *akhara*s (n.d.: 82–90), and they have established institutional histories, it seems that they must have existed, even though the British were unaware of them.

22 As Prior notes, claims to govern for the people's benefit helped to justify the colonial enterprise (1993: 38–39).

23 See HMI (1892: 45–46, 1903: 17–18). Their disappearance probably reflects the growing sentiment that Sikhs were not Hindus, and thus had no place at a Hindu festival.

24 This boycott seems to have been temporary, since news reports from Allahabad in 2007 mention the Atal bathing with the Mahanirvani (PTI 2007b).

25 A Mela administration spokesman described this incident as an internal *akhara* matter (PTI 2004a).

26 The administration was caught unprepared on the second bathing day, when the Junas stormed Har-ki-Pairi to usurp the Niranjanis' bathing place. The few police that day were barefoot and armed with bamboo sticks – enough to control the crowds, but not the Juna *akhara*.

27 This status brings heavy responsibility, since it also carries blame for any mishaps, which the Kumbha Mela's sheer size makes it difficult to avoid.

28 See Ghose (2001). Many Hindus in Britain were angered by what they perceived as Channel Four's focus on the festival's liminal qualities, such as sadhu nakedness and drug use.

29 One man who described sitting for days with sadhus before taking photos expressed their annoyance at people who would walk into their compounds, snap pictures, and leave without a word (Giboux 2007).

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3

MAPPING THE MANAGEMENT OF THREATENING GODS AND SOCIAL CONFLICT

A territorial approach to processions in a South Indian village (Tamil Nadu)

Pierre-Yves Trouillet[1]

Every year during the Tamil month of Māci (February‑March), the village of Mailam is entirely given over to a religious festival which involves the main social elements among the inhabitants. This festival lasts nine days. First of all, it is an opportunity to celebrate Mailiyamman, the village goddess (*krāma devadai*), staging processions to appease her and marrying her in her temple. She can represent a potential danger for the villagers by the power of her anger because, like almost all Hindu village goddesses, she is a form of *śakti* ('power', female 'energy') which can be dangerous (e.g. Beck 1972, Brubaker 1979, Moffatt 1979, Reiniche 1979, Moreno and Marriot 1989, Biardeau 1995, Fuller 2004).

Moreover, according to the villagers, certain 'spirits', 'ghosts', 'demons' and other 'giants' living beyond the boundaries of the village threaten Mailam with possible incursions. The festival is also an opportunity to chase them out of the village, notably by processions, and thus to safeguard it.

Besides these types of threats, the village is subject to a recurrent conflict between two castes, the Vanniyars and the Paraiyars, the two communities which happen to be precisely the main parties in the village festival and its processions.

A religious festival is by definition linked to the fields of belief, of religion and its representations. Very often, it reveals deep-rooted symbolic structures which fix it in a transcendence and a territory, while conveying a certain number of social values and collective rules. The processions are the most spatially oriented manifestations of religious festivals generating, by their route,

sacred and socio-communal spaces collectively travelled, defined and experienced. They are the occasion to display a socio-symbolic message in the public space, which can lead to spatial unity as well as territorial division. According to Daniel Dory, 'Taking into consideration religious occasions is indispensable to the understanding of the territorialisation processes . . . which constitute the specific objects of geographic knowledge' (Dory and Vincent 1995: 376). Thus, the study of this festival and its processions is necessary to understand the territorial issues and the processes of territorialization involved in the village of Mailam.

In this chapter, I will show, first, how, through processions that sacralize the territory of the locality, villagers negotiate with the goddess and the evil forces threatening their village, and second, how the two castes manage their conflict for the welfare of the village. Both these topics will be analysed through an ethno-geographical approach, mapping the geographical configurations and the territorial meanings of the processions of this religious festival.

First, I will present the socio-spatial issues of the processions. I will start with a description of the divine threats hovering over the village, as they are portrayed by the villagers; then I will describe the socio-religious nature of the conflict between the Vanniyars and the Paraiyars. I will then analyse the socio-spatial configurations of the processions through the role of all the actors of the festival in order to understand how the conflict with the gods and the social conflict are managed during the processions. I will then show how the sacred geography of the processions contributes to the preservation and reproduction of the village's territory. Nevertheless, if these processions can be a factor of socio-territorial unity for the village, they are also spatially oriented means to display identity for the main antagonistic groups participating in them and other rituals. Finally, I will propose a spatial model explaining the territorial configurations of the processions of this festival in Mailam village.

The socio-spatial issues of the processions: territorial protection and social conflict

The emic point of view on territorial threats

According to the inhabitants, the most important festival for the village of Mailam is the one at the Mailiyamman temple, located near the lake which divides the village in two along a north/south axis (see Figure 3.1): Mel Mailam ('high' and 'west') uphill, and Keezh Mailam ('low' and 'east') downhill. This festival of the village goddess has as its primary social function to renew the protection of its territory (Brubaker 1979, Moffatt 1979, Reiniche 1979, Biardeau 1995, Fuller 2004) against the many elements that continuously threaten it. And so, every year the inhabitants have to perform a certain number of rituals and stage several types of procession to protect their territory from these potential external aggressions.

North

Keezh Mailam

Mel Mailam

Murukan temple

Houses of Brahmins

Mailiyamman temple

M C
M
M

VS

VS

VS Viraśaivas (liṅgāyat)
M Houses of Mudaliyars
C House of the Chettiar
Mixed settlement
Vanniyars
Yadavars (milkmen, herdsmen)
Kuyavars (potters)
Navidars (barbers)
Irulars (Scheduled Tribe) (ST)
Paraiyars (Scheduled Caste)
Seasonal settlement of ST migrants

Main road
Small roads
Streets and paths

0   250 m

Figure 3.1 Caste and settlement in Mailam village.
Source: Pierre-Yves Trouillet.

Information on the nature of the divine threats can vary according to the individuals questioned, but a non-human danger (*ābaṭu*) hovers over Mailam and necessitates the annual festival during the Tamil month of Māci, between the religious festivals of Māci Magam and Panguni Uṭṭiram, in order to protect the village.

The threats are numerous and varied. They come, in general (according to the villagers interviewed), from 'ghosts' (*pēi-pisasu*), 'giants' or monstrous gods (*būdam*), and 'demons' (*asuras, arakan,* or *aṭarma devadai*).[2] The village deity (*krāma devadai*) herself can also represent a threat on account of her potential anger that the villagers associate with Kālī, the terrible Hindu goddess. Some of these beings, like the *pēi-pisasu*, live in certain trees (*maram*) in the village, mainly tamarind trees. The goddess can be present in neem trees. She can also move around the whole village, but she stays mainly in her temple. Finally, other evil forces (notice the plural) live beyond the village boundary (*ellai*). Nevertheless, they repeatedly threaten to make incursions into the domestic space of the village to attack humans as *pēi-pisasu* do, mainly through possession or illnesses (like sterility or madness). These attacks are all the more likely to occur if the inhabitants do not respect the interdictions concerning the evil forces, and do not nurture or feed them enough. They are totally impure and to appease them, the villagers feed them once a year with rice mixed with the sacrificial blood of a goat.

One thing is therefore certain: there are threats. However, the villagers must avoid direct conflict because they would, of course, lose immediately, given the power (*śakti*) of the goddess and the tricks of the demons and other spirits. So the villagers, who have to avert the danger hovering over their village, must not enter into conflict with their aggressors, but must negotiate to appease them, even if only for a year.

First of all, the villagers negotiate with Mailiyamman, the goddess of the village, by honouring her in a nine-day festival, marrying her on the eighth day in her temple, and taking her out every day in processions –always following the same route (see Figure 3.2) –so as to protect the territory from demons and spirits, because she alone possesses enough power (*śakti*) to repel incursions and protect the villagers from illnesses like sterility.

The desired outcomes of the negotiation with the goddess do not stop here because the people hope for two forms of fertility: first, to obtain good harvests through copious rain; second, to find a divine remedy against the sterility of some of the village women. Thus, the conservation and reproduction of the village and its inhabitants remain the objectives of the negotiation between the *śakti* of the goddess and the villagers. The villagers and the goddess are negotiating to establish cooperation. The former attend to the latter in various ways, appeasing her moods and honouring her with processions; she, on the other hand, exercises her main function as goddess of the village, which is to protect its territory from external invasions. Thus, more than the idea of negotiation, that of cooperation should be stressed
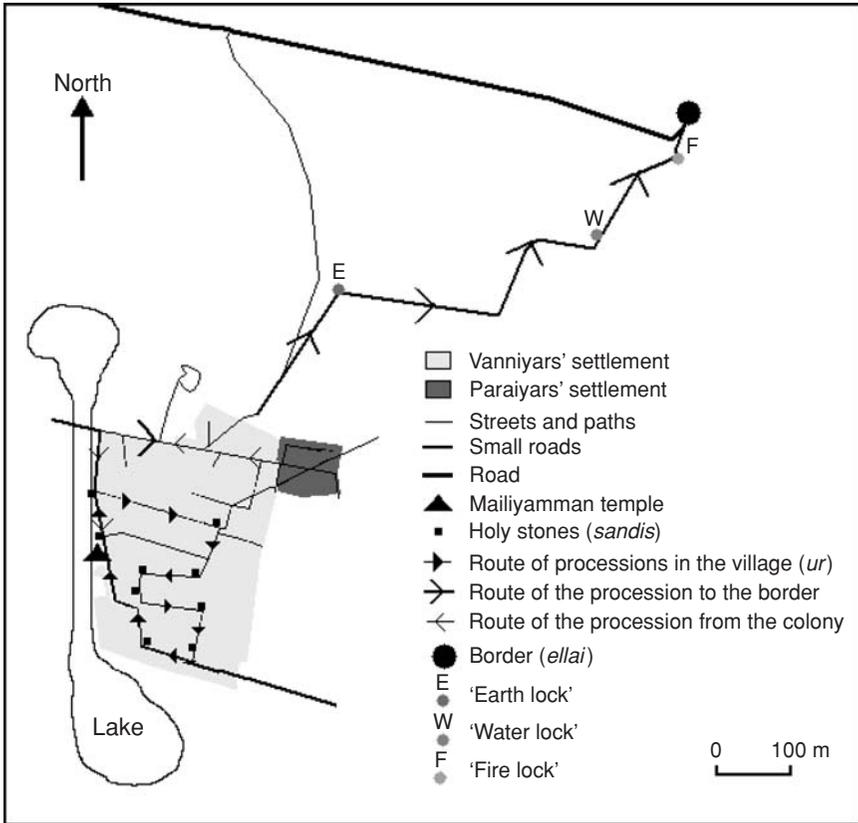
Figure 3.2 Processions in Keezh Mailam during the festival of Mailiyamman.
Source: Pierre-Yves Trouillet.

because the two parties, village and goddess, each have their own demands and needs that only the other can satisfy.

Let us now consider the other protagonists: the demons. To cure female sterility and ensure the security of their territory, the villagers also negotiate with this other category of beings threatening the village. Immediately after the marriage of the goddess, on the eighth day of the festival, villagers must go to the northeast border (*ellai*) of the village,[3] at midnight exactly, taking boiled rice mixed with the blood of a goat sacrificed in front of the temple of Mailiyamman. The villagers regard the mixture as an offering to the various demons and gigantic monsters, appeasing them by feeding them. The remaining mixture of rice and blood will then be brought back to the temple of Mailiyamman so that childless women can eat it in the hope that their sterility will be cured. By the sacrifice and offering at the border, the security of the village and the fertility of its women are sought once again, while

the threats and voracity of the demons are appeased. One has therefore to negotiate with these beings who are very likely to threaten the village territory, and not enter into conflict with them.

Thus, the relationship between the goddess, the demons and the people is directly linked to the renewal and protection of the territory from threats due to illness caused by the demons, through the opposition between the fecundity brought by the goddess and the sterility caused by the demons.

The two rites, here briefly described, therefore both have the same social and territorial aims. But in contrast to cooperation with the goddess, the idea of negotiation seems more pertinent to the relationship between villagers and demons, because the villagers want nothing more than a non-aggression pact. Indeed, although the same sacrificial mixture is offered to the demons and the sterile women of the village, these women do not go to the border. Indeed, they remain in the temple to pray to the goddess because their cure depends solely on the good will of her fertilizing power. So, this nuance shows us that the cooperation between the villagers and the goddess has no parallel in the relationship with the demons which involves, rather, negotiation of a potential conflict.

Apart from this type of threat, a clearly antagonistic situation is crystallized around the temple of Mailiyamman, this time a conflict between men, a caste conflict.

The temple of the goddess and the social conflict in the village

Except for the temple of Mailiyamman, recognized as the seat of the goddess of the whole village (*krāma devadai*), no other temple there is connected to a conflict around caste; not even the prominent temple of Murukan, though this is the only divinity in the village to have Brahman priests.

The temple of Mailiyamman is under the patronage of members of the Vanniyar caste, an agricultural caste of middle rank, the most populous in the village of Mailam, as in the rest of north Tamil Nadu. Vanniyars belong to the category of 'dominant caste' defined by M. N. Srinivas (1987), this dominance being based not on notions of ritual purity but on numerical superiority, land ownership and political power, notably at the Panchayat[4] level. All the organizers and donors (*ūbayakar*, from the verb *ūbayam*, 'to give') of the festival belong to this caste. Members of all castes are, however, allowed to enter the temple and its *sanctum sanctorum* (*mūlasthānam*), except for the Paraiyars,[5] a caste of 'untouchables', who are relegated to the outskirts of the village (*ūr*), where they live in two colonies (*cēri*), in accordance with ideas of ritual purity well known in Hindu villages (e.g. Reiniche 1979, Daniel 1984, Deliege 2004, Fuller 2004). Conflicts between Vanniyars and Paraiyars are very frequent in the village, particularly over political or religious questions.

I will take only one example, the temple of the village goddess –Mailiyamman –to illustrate this conflict.

Following twenty years of demands, the Paraiyars have the right (only established about ten years ago) to enter the temple. The president of the Panchayat at that time, who was himself a Vanniyar, gave them this right, but access to the *sanctum sanctorum* remains forbidden to them. However, some Paraiyars, politically sensitized by 'Dalitism', sometimes enter to demand what they see as their full Hindu and human rights. This does not fail to arouse anger, sometimes violent, on the part of the Vanniyars. Conflicts between members of the two castes are very frequent. After each conflict, and whatever the cause,[6] the Paraiyars, on the advice of the elders, avoid going to the temple of Mailiyamman for a time in order to let the social tensions die down. This temple is therefore a place with a strong symbolic power on the sacred as well as the social level.

The myth of the goddess reinforces this notion. According to the Paraiyars,

> 'the goddess Mailiyamman looked for a husband, but not appreciating those that were presented to her, she came one day, in the disguise of a young woman, to help a Paraiyar man who had to plant rice on seven acres of land. In one night she planted all the rice. A love story between the Paraiyar and Mailiyamman followed.'

Today, the festival of the goddess is not only an appropriate moment to chase away demons, ensure fertility for the village and protect its territory, but also the occasion to marry the goddess. But for the Paraiyars, this marriage is a re-enactment of the love story between the goddess and their ancestor, while for the Vanniyars, the goddess marries Śiva, or even the Brahman priest who attaches the *tāli* (marriage necklace) to the neck of the goddess on the eighth day, but she certainly does not marry a Paraiyar. In the interviews, the Vanniyars never said that the marriage was with a Paraiyar, but if they stay close to the goddess, it is because they are her bodyguards.

These two versions of the myth show that there is disagreement between these two communities regarding the goddess. In a sense, the Paraiyars want to enter the temple symbolically by entering the myth, but the Vanniyars refuse them access to the myth as they refuse them access to the sacred space (*sanctum sanctorum*) of the temple.

Nevertheless, in spite of their conflict –notably in regard to the temple of the goddess –these two communities paradoxically constitute the two most important socio-cultural elements of the festival of Mailiyamman. So how is this caste conflict negotiated during the festival to protect the village from the threat of the demons and from the anger of the goddess Mailiyamman? And what spatial forms do these negotiations take? To answer these questions, and keeping in mind the question of how the territorial negotiations with the gods are carried on, it is useful to consider all the social actors taking part in the festival and the spatial configurations of the rites.

The spatial configurations of the processions through the role of the actors

The Vērasaivas and the Brahman

The first evening, the organizers (Vanniyars) take the portable form of the divinity (*urcavar*) from the Murukan temple located in Mel Mailam (the west half of the village, uphill), where it stays the rest of the year, to the temple of the goddess located in Keezh Mailam (the east half of the village, downhill, see Figure 3.1). This is the occasion of the first *pūjā*[7] by the *Swamiji*[8] of the temple, a member of the Vīraśaiva (*liṅgāyat*) caste to which the temple belongs. This is a caste with a high ritual status in the village, just below the Brahmans. Every evening, one of the Brahman priests of the Murukan temple is sent to the temple of the Mailiyamman to perform the daily procession (*ūrvalam*) of the portable divinity in Keezh Mailam and on the eighth day for the marriage of the goddess in the temple. These are the major events of the festival. But this Brahman does not take part in the rites concerning the other divinities and demons.

The Vanniyar priests

The other rituals are performed by two priests belonging to the Vanniyar caste. The first is the usual *pūcāri* of the temple of Mailiyamman; the other comes from the village of Rettani, ten kilometers from Mailam, where he officiates in a temple dedicated to another goddess.[9] He performs the sacrifice of the goat and the offering of blood and rice to the demons on the eighth night. For generations, he and his ancestors have been the only ones who know how to perform the sacrifice and all the rites of territorial protection perceived as dangerous. He alone knows where and how to secure the route of the men going to throw the rice to the demons of the northeast border (*ellai*). He knows where to make them stop and where to draw ritualistic diagrams (*yantra*) on the ground in front of them in order to chase away the malevolent forces attracted by the blood mixed with rice. There are four stops on the route of the procession (see Figure 3.2). As this priest explains, the first stop is for appeasing demons associated with earth, the second for demons linked with water, the third for fire, and the last is at the place where he throws the mixture of rice and blood to the demons.[10] It is therefore necessary first to negotiate with the elements so as to be able to negotiate with the demons later. According to the participants in this ritual, these places are like 'locks' (*pūṭṭu*) that must be opened and secured before going to the border.

But before offering the rice to the demons at the border, this priest leads processions for the protection of the village by performing *pūjās* to the nine sacred stones (*sandi*) which surround and delimit the territory thus sacralized (where only Vanniyars live). Only then can the procession with the portable

divinity led by the Brahman take the same route (see Figure 3.2). His function is therefore to protect the territory for the goddess so that the demons and *pēi-pisasus* do not come and arouse her anger during the offerings in front of each Vanniyar house.

From the third to the eighth day, the same priest also performs the ritual of the 'sound' (*ōsai*), a word from which his title (*ōsakār*, 'maker of sounds') is derived. This is the ritual most imbued with fear in the collective descriptions of the villagers, because anyone in front of the sound during the procession is considered to be in mortal danger by all the villagers questioned. At this most dreaded moment, no villager comes out of his house. Together with the offering of the rice, it constitutes one of the most intense moments in terms of conflict with the demons. This rite evokes a collective representation and special experience of space in which, a dangerous zone in front of the sound of the procession is contrasted with a secure space behind it.

The Paraiyars

However, it is not the priest who makes the sound, but two Paraiyars. The relationship between the Paraiyars and the sound is well known, since their name is derived from the word for the drum (*parai*) which is traditionally and ritually assigned to them (particularly during funerals). These two Paraiyars are major actors in the festival because they are unanimously recognized as guardians of the goddess. It is they who chase away the demons and the *pēi-pisasus* from the village during their processions around the territory sacralized by the sacred stones (see Figure 3.2) by making the dangerous sound (*ōsai*) with their drum. They are thus the main protectors of the goddess and the village. Moreover, while being denied access to the *sanctum sanctorum*, they have to spend the entire festival in the temple sanctuary with the goddess whose protectors and guardians they are. During this time, they wear a protective bracelet (*kāpu*), the sacred thread (*pōnul*) usually reserved for the Brahmans, and therefore have to remain chaste and vegetarian. Thus they have to behave like members of a ritually higher caste than their own, even higher than the Vanniyars, the dominant caste of the village.

On the eighth evening, just before the sacrifice of the goat, a procession of a hundred Paraiyars, with the two guardians at its head, comes from the colony to bring sacred flames and vegetarian offerings[11] to the temple of the goddess Mailiyamman (see Figure 3.2). Once the flame and the offerings have been given to the *ōsakār*, the procession returns to the colony without a single Paraiyar having entered the temple. According to Subrahmani, one of the two Paraiyar guardians of the divinity, the purpose of this procession is to bring the flame for the rice which will be given at the border, because, he says, 'The power given to this rice comes from the colony.'

Thus, the Paraiyars are of fundamental importance to the festival, but the spatial interdiction on access to the *mūlasthānam* is displayed and staged in order to be acknowledged and validated collectively by all the villagers.

The Vanniyars

The Vanniyar caste is, of course, one of the most important social components of this festival: first, because the territory of Kheezh Mailam (the east half of the village, downhill), which is sacralized by the *sandis* and by the procession of the divinity, is only inhabited by families of this caste;[12] second, because the temple of Mailiyamman belongs to this community and they are the main organizers of the festival.

The temple was built about 150 years ago by the Vanniyars, who are organized into eight hereditary groups. Even today, these eight groups of Vanniyars take it in turn to be responsible for organizing, the rituals and processions of the eight-day festival. Each of the eight groups (which include all the Vanniyars of the village) is the organizer for one day. So there is clearly cooperation between these eight groups so that the festival proceeds in the best possible manner. Moreover, since they are the only organizers, the temple of the goddess is the socio-symbolic centre of the territory of the Vanniyars.

Nevertheless, the festival and the procession are also occasions for a competition for prestige and a public display of social status within the caste itself. Every evening, concerts and other popular shows have to be impressive, like the beauty of the bulls used to pull the cart of the divinity. Every evening, the main organizer of the day is the first to receive the ashes from the priest of the temple –a privilege of the powerful –while the other villagers wait their turn. The same is true during the offering ceremonies, or when the procession of the goddess starts. Thus, as Gilles Tarabout reminds us, in the Hindu villages 'the temple is at the centre of important power issues' (Tarabout 1997: 137), and thus each festival or procession is an occasion to show, preserve and improve one's status, even within the caste itself.

By contrast, the ninth day of the festival is organized by the Paraiyars following an agreement with the Panchayat president in 1995. But all the highlights of the festival (like the sacrifice, the procession to the border and the marriage of the goddess) take place on the eighth day. The Paraiyars are therefore relegated outside the festival time, just as they are outside the space of the temple and the myth, and this is to the benefit of the Vanniyars.

The others

Since the early 1990s, some members of the village's other castes (mainly Mudaliyārs and Yadavars) have also been entitled to make donations

towards the organization of the festival, in addition to the right they have always had, to come to the temple when they wish or to participate in the festival. They remain, nevertheless, in the minority in the organization, as they are in the village.

Some other actors of the festival come from outside the village, like the musicians in the processions who belong to a barber caste (*ambaṭṭan*), or like the man whose task is to prepare and decorate the divinity differently every day. He also belongs to the Vanniyar caste. Finally, every evening, troupes of artists come to give concerts, dance and perform popular plays.

The symbolic geography of the processions: territorial unity or fragmentation?

We have seen that the processions of this festival are part of a system of religious protection of the village, in which antagonistic social groups are made to collaborate, each with its prerogative and social demands. I will present here what the route of the processions tells us about the conceptions of the sacred territory of this village and what it implies in terms of socio-territorial meanings between the groups. I will come back to these different elements in a final explanatory model on the territorial configurations and meanings of these processions (see Figure 3.3).

In the public space, the processions follow routes with strong symbolic markers and put into play the concepts of place, border, space and territory.

Lines and points

Figure 3.2 shows that the processions (*ūrvalam*) of the goddess through the village follow a route delimited by nine sacred stones (*sandi*). These stones are the religious markers of a symbolic space. Indeed, they sacralize a territory which is the only space travelled by the village goddess and by the processions ensured protection by the 'sound' of the Paraiyars (see Figure 3.2). But, as Brubaker wrote about the relationship of the goddess with the locality: 'The village topocosm is her domain, its destiny is in her hands, and its inhabitants are her people' (Brubaker 1979: 129). In the same way, Mailiyamman is considered the goddess of the whole village (*krāma devadai*). Thus, according to a synecdoche between microcosm and macrocosm which is very common in Hinduism, by crossing this marked space, the processions grant the whole village the protection of the goddess and of the 'sound' of the Paraiyars. This space, defined by the *sandis*, therefore creates a symbolic replica of the whole territory of Mailam. This fact is of primary importance because only members of the Vanniyar caste, which is precisely the dominant caste of the whole village, live in this territory (see Figure 3.2). Also, by inhabiting the territory created by the sacred stones and the processions, the Vanniyars symbolically display their hold not only
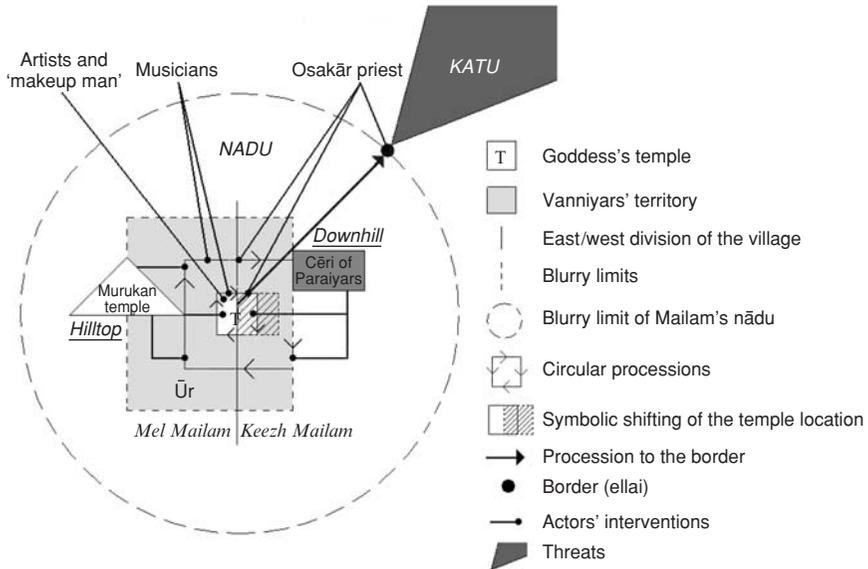
Figure 3.3 Processional routes in Mailam during the festival of Mailiyamman.
Source: Pierre-Yves Trouillet.

Note: The word *cēri* has been chosen instead of colony because of its stronger connotation which is important to our explanation because it determines the construction, the descriptions and the practices of the village space.

over the temple of the village goddess in the public space, but also, and as a consequence, over the whole village space.

Figure 3.2, which also indicates the route of the men towards the border (*ellai*), shows that the procession does not circle the village (as it follows the line of the sacred stones), but takes a linear route towards a particular spot where the sacrificial mixture is thrown to the demons. The sacred border is then expressed ritually not by a line but by a point, or better, by a boundary stone. Indeed, if the word *ellai* corresponds to notions of 'limit' or 'border', it also refers to a place, to a 'specific locality' or to the 'extremity', even to 'death' (*Tamil Lexicon* 1982: vol. 1, 535). We should bear in mind the danger-ous connotation of the term *ellai*, which conveys the threatening nature of the demons located there.

It should not be surprising that the religious border is conceived as a point and not as a line because, as Valentine E. Daniel has noticed, 'an *ūr* [local-ity]' does not have, in Tamil cultural terms, a clearly delineated boundary line . . . , the *ūr ellai* is depicted most accurately by shrines and intersecting roads that mark the vulnerable points along the village frontier' (Daniel 1984: 78). Indeed, as Figure 3.2 shows, it is precisely at the intersection of two roads that the boundary stone is located. In this village, the religious borders are

represented more by points than by lines. It is the case for this intersection, as well as for the other highly symbolic places like the Murukan temple and the Paraiyar colony.

Thus, the cartography of the processions and the etymology of the term *ellai* allow us to observe that in this village the border corresponds not to a space considered and experienced as a line, but to a point. But if this point is the place where the villagers offer the sacrificial mixture, it is also the place where the demons can enter the village. It remains to be explained why this (weak) point is located northeast of the village, and how the negotiation between men and demons is represented spatially. To answer these two questions it is necessary to take a closer look at the anthropology of the village spaces.

Anthropology of space and altitude

When they speak of the village border during the festival, the inhabitants always draw a clear opposition between an inside, the *ūr* which is a domesticated space that must be protected, and an outside, associated with danger (*ābaṭu*), located beyond the border (*ellai*), where the malevolent forces live. So the route of the processions (*ūrvalam*) revives, for the villagers, this perception and experience of space. To understand the nature of the emic perception of this opposition between inside and outside, one must look at how Tamil vocabulary indicates space through the opposition between *nāḍu* and *kāṭu* (Headley 2006) and between *ūr* and *cēri*.

The term *nāḍu* means 'country', 'district', 'province', 'locality', 'site', 'earth', 'kingdom', 'rural space' (*Tamil Lexicon* 1982: vol. 4, 2210). The word *kāṭu* corresponds to 'forest', 'jungle', 'desert', 'dry land' and also to 'cremation place (burning ghat)' (*Tamil Lexicon* 1982: vol. 2, 855). One can see that *nāḍu* refers to a civilized, domesticated space, built by men and their activities. *Kāṭu* refers to a wild and hostile space. These two notions together correspond to the Mailam villagers' conception of space during the procession at the border separating the village and the demons; also during the processional ritual when the domesticated space protected by the 'sound' produced by the Paraiyars contrasts with the dangerous space where the malevolent forces are. The festival and the offering at the border are necessary because the *kāṭu* threatens to encroach on the *nāḍu*. But the noisy procession of the Paraiyars and the priest *ōsakār* ensures that the *nāḍu* space prevails over the *kāṭu* space.

Following Valentine E. Daniel's proof that in Tamil Nadu space and its inhabitants have the same 'substance' (Daniel 1984), we must turn to the space associated with the Paraiyars to find out why it is they who fulfil the most dangerous rituals associated with the *kāṭu*. Figures 3.1 and 3.2 show that their homes are outside the *ūr* (village) and are confined in two colonies or *cēri*. Studying the notions of *ūr* and *cēri* reveals a division similar to that between *nāḍu* and *kāṭu*. Indeed, the *ūr* is the village or town, but this term is mostly associated with a space where the 'ex-untouchables' are forbidden

to live. The *cēri* is a dwelling space and corresponds to the notions of 'town', 'village' or 'hamlet', but is mostly associated with the quarters of the 'ex-untouchables'. The term is not much used today because it is considered pejorative: 'colony' is preferred. In this manner, and as we can see in Figure 3.2, the dwelling place of the Paraiyars is localized in an intermediary space between the *ūr* (domesticated and safe space, associated with *nādu*) and the dangerous border (associated with *kāṭu*). Let us recall that one of the colonies located in the north of the village was built by the Tamil Nadu government only very recently (since 1990) because the first colony had become too small to accommodate all the Paraiyars of the village. Its location follows the same logic of religious construction of the village territory because, while it is located in the north of Mailam, it is most significantly located in the northeast corner of Mel Mailam (the west part of the village) (see Figure 3.1).

In addition, the 'ex-untouchables', whose trade is traditionally polluting, generally have the ritual function of ridding the locality and its inhabitants of polluting materials (Brubaker 1979), for example the bodies of the deceased during funerals. Consequently, the Paraiyars have the ability and the duty to purify the village space during the festival processions. So ritualistic functions involving malevolent and polluting forces are attributed to the Paraiyars during the processions because they are closely associated with wild space, dangerous and polluting, first by their traditional trades, and second by the location of their homes, and thus by their nature (or 'substance' according to Daniel's term) as determined by the first two factors.

We understand then why the dangerous border (*ellai*) is located at the northeast point. Indeed, one might wonder why this direction is associated with the malevolent forces, because the north and the east are traditionally considered auspicious in Hinduism (Gaboriau 1993). In fact, it seems that it is the spatial configuration of the dwelling places which determined this location. Because the *cēri* are located at the northeast point of the village (cf. Figures 3.1 and 3.2) it is, by extension, the weak point by which the demons can enter the village. And if the Paraiyars live here it is because they are relegated to the physically lowest point in the village (32 metres or 106 feet) because of their social status.[13] By contrast, the highest point of the village is the location of the very auspicious Murukan temple (112 metres or 369 feet), near which Brahmans live (Figure 3.1). And as the spaces, notably religious, are associated with the populations who live there (and *vice versa*), the territory of the demons is located behind the living space of the Paraiyars. Also, altitude determines the organization of the village and consequently the construction and religious conception of the territory.

The social geography of the processions

We have seen that from the Vērasaiva (*lingāyat*) caste –which provides a Brahman priest from the Murukan temple for the processions –to the

Paraiyars, and including the Vanniyars and some other castes, almost all the castes of Mailam village are mobilized to contribute to this festival. Therefore, while the temple of the goddess is located in Keezh Mailam (the eastern half of the village), Mailiyamman is, from a sociological point of view, the goddess of the whole village of Mailam. And as we have seen, this temple being a major centre for the Vanniyars, their territory, reflecting the importance of their presence in the village, spreads over the two halves of Mailam.

Furthermore, by having recourse to service providers like the *ōsakār*, the musicians, the dresser of the divinity and the performers, the festival of the village goddess embraces a social network which extends beyond the village.

Let us also state that through these rites, the two castes in permanent conflict –the Paraiyars and the Vanniyars –collaborate perfectly even if the ban on access to the *mūlasthānam* is maintained and symbolically displayed in the public space by the fact that the procession of Paraiyars carrying the flames does not enter the temple of the goddess on the eighth day. The Paraiyars seem thus to accept their socio-ritual subordination and their spatial exclusion from the temple. The two castes play the most important ritualistic roles (organization and two forms of priesthood by the Vanniyars, protection of the goddess and the village by the Paraiyars), and both keep themselves to these ritualistic functions while cooperating to ensure the protection of the village territory (see Figure 3.3).

Nevertheless, a fact of primary importance has to be remembered: it seems that a certain number of Paraiyars entered the *sanctum sanctorum* during the 2006 festival, braving the interdiction, while the Vanniyars and the two guardian Paraiyars went to the border to give the rice to the demons. When one of the Vanniyar organizers, very active politically in the village, learned of this, he said that the Paraiyars 'really didn't know how to behave' and that 'a solution must be found'.

Thus, in spite of the façade of cooperation, the conflict remains alive even during the festival and its processions. According to the Vanniyars, the Paraiyars must stay in their place, which means not entering into the sacred centre of Vanniyar territory which is forbidden to them, and staying in the colony, a territory reserved for them. This example also shows us that some Paraiyars want to renegotiate their rights with the Vanniyars even if it means entering into conflict with them, and this in the socio-symbolic centre of the Vanniyar territory which is the temple of the goddess. This temple is therefore, symbolically, very powerful for displaying social status as well as renegotiating it.

Conclusion

Apparently, this festival and its processions celebrate a perfect idea of the territory of the Hindu village, organized, unified and with a cohesion protecting it not only from non-human dangers, but also from the fragmentations

which make it a site of social struggle. Indeed, the unity and protection of the territory and its capacity to bring men together to cooperate and thus ensure the prosperity of the village depend on the aptitude of its inhabitants to manage the permanent conflict which undermines relations between two caste communities, distinct socio-territorial entities which delineate the main territorial divide of the village.

The importance of the Paraiyars in the festival and their wearing of the sacred thread throughout the ritual demonstrate the capacity of this festival and its processions to give time and space a symbolic dimension, investing them with a particular social sense capable of reversing some hierarchies. On the other hand, this situation cannot last for ever because, as Guy Di Meo suggests: 'by lasting too long this festival would carry the risk of profoundly transforming the society, even destroying the social order' (Di Meo 2005: 241). In the same way, the fact that the Paraiyars organize the ninth day of the festival, once all the important rituals have been performed, clearly shows that they have been relegated outside the time of the festival just as they are relegated from the village territory and the temple's *sanctum sanctorum*. The festival is therefore a spatio-temporal 'interstice' (Di Meo 2005) which can work in a double sense, but it nevertheless remains necessary for the social order and protection of the territory.

The geography of the processions of this village thus reveals its unified territorial construction as well as the fragmented organization of its territories. On the one hand, we see that these processions contribute to the protection of the village in its entirety because Mailiyamman is the goddess of the whole village. They also contribute to the consecration of a protected religious territory corresponding to the whole village according to the logic of synecdoche. But the omnipresence of the Vanniyars in the space delimited by the sacred stones, the fact that the temple of the goddess are under their patronage, and the demand of the Paraiyars to enter it, show that the processions also contribute to the display, within the village itself, of territories related to identities and thus to the fragmentation of the village territory. This territorial fragmentation is made necessary by the nature of the spaces and the ritualistic functions of the populations associated with them. Without this territorial fragmentation brought about by the ritualistic specialization and segregation of the social groups, the rituals and the processions would lose their coherence and thus their efficiency in terms of territorial protection even at the cost of keeping alive the main caste conflict of the village.

Notes

1 This chapter is the result of a study I conducted in March 2006 on the worship of Murukan in a village of Tamil Nadu (Villupuram District), a rural setting.

I chose this village as a field of study for my social geography thesis on the geographical and territorial meanings of this Hindu divinity in India and in the Tamil diaspora.

2 For the sake of convenience, the terms 'demons' and 'spirits' will be used.

3 The border of Nallamur village.

4 Elected village council.

5 There are about 400 houses for Scheduled Castes in Mailam village. All are occupied by Paraiyars, except for seven houses inhabited by Arundhadiyars (or Chakkiliyars), whose traditional trade is shoemaking.

6 Like those concerning politics. For instance, in December 2006, posters of the Dalit Panthers of India (DPI) were put up by the Paraiyars at the bus stop, a particularly visible place in the public space of the village, directly in front of the three main tea shops. The Vanniyars immediately took down the posters. The Paraiyars registered a complaint and reinstalled their posters. Violent conflict between the two communities followed, of a type very frequent in the village.

7 Ritual Hindu ceremony.

8 Spiritual authority.

9 Muniyamman.

10 This place is located at the edge of a field.

11 Some *pongal* (sweet preparation based on rice), bananas and one or two coconuts.

12 They are also the only ones allowed to bring *pongal* to the temple on the eighth day.

13 The centre of Mailam village, at the intersection of the two main roads (see Figure 3.1), is located at an altitude of 60 metres (195 feet) above sea level.

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4

SPACE, SOUND, AUSPICIOUSNESS, AND PERFORMANCE IN NORTH INDIAN WEDDING PROCESSIONS

Gregory D. Booth

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the role of music and musicians in the wedding processions (*baraat*) of northern India. I am concerned specifically with the contemporary dominant processional ensemble, the brass band, and with the ways the ensembles, musicians, and repertoire contribute to these processions. Muslim, Sikh, and Jain families often 'take out' baraats (as the process is described in Indian English); some of the fundamental ideologies and practices of baraats, however, have a fundamentally Hindu orientation, especially with regard to the use of sound and the production of auspiciousness. In the conclusion, I will suggest that changes in the meaning of processions are evidenced in contemporary processional performance practice.

This study occupies a position of multifaceted liminality in a volume focused on religious processions in South Asia. Wedding processions are liminal, public components of private rituals; they are explicitly rituals of passage in which 'the protagonists are members of the community' (Freed and Freed 1998: 3). They ritualize the physical movement and transitions that come as part of the patrilocality of traditional Indian marriages. As the externalized component of the wedding, the baraat is a ritualized journey that maps out the new relationships between the two families involved and in which various emotions and social identities are explicitly acted out. As he leaves his family home, a groom is in one sense incomplete or not fully adult. His behaviour is an example of Turner's (1969) liminal figure: of all the performers

in a baraat, the groom is the most passive. He sits quietly in his carriage or on his horse; he rarely smiles or interacts with the excitement going on around him. Once the marriage ritual and accompanying festivities are completed at the bride's family's home, the groom embarks on a second procession, returning to his home with his bride, for whom he is now responsible. At this point he is, at least in theory, the head of a new household; when his bride finally enters her new home, she too is transformed, into an adult daughter (in colloquial usage) of that house.

Processional musicians' socio-professional lives also show signs of liminality; their work begins and ends at the borders between the inner, private world of family homes and the public world of the streets; their performances help construct the ritual process of transition between those worlds. Although participants sometimes make those transitions by literally walking through a human gateway of musicians, the bandsmen themselves never cross those boundaries, especially not in Hindu weddings (Booth 2005). The marginal class and caste status that most bandsmen occupy exacerbates the impact of their exclusion from the inner, ritually pure space. Bandsmen's liminality often takes on a professional aspect as well in that most are seasonal or part-time workers, located only partially in the world of the musical profession. Before considering baraats specifically, however, some general consideration of music and musicians in the context of South Asian religions and processional practice is necessary.

Religious variables

Making sense of processions is especially challenging, as Kratz (1994) suggests, because of the multi-dimensional aspects of the procession as event and as practice. Limiting my focus to the role of music and musicians in processions narrows the field of enquiry; but these roles may change significantly depending on which kind of procession is considered and in response to the variety of ways in which South Asia's various religions conceptualize music. Although my focus is on Hindu processions, bandsmen will play for anyone who hires them (as did many pre-brass processional musicians as well); bandsmen participate in Sikh and Muslim (as well as Hindu) wedding processions, and in Sikh, Jain, and Hindu religious processions as well. The interaction of religious ideologies and processional practices produces a wide spectrum of musical-processional results.

At one extreme is Islam's well-known problematization of music in any terms: 'in the Islamic tradition music is associated with worldly pleasures and sanctioned as dangerous and unlawful.' In contrast, 'religious music is conceived of as vocal adornment of a religious text and thus escapes theological censure' (Qureshi 1972: 15). South Asian Muslims respond to the traditional sanctions in a range of ways that combine individual attitudes with local and pan-Islamic ideologies. Wolf (2000), for example, describes

the importance of drumming in the processional rituals associated with Muharram in South Asia. He simultaneously demonstrates the complexities of interpretation in notions of music found among South Asian Muslims.

In organizing their wedding processions, most Muslim families respond to local community understandings of what is appropriate. Many do include processional music in their rituals; others choose to abjure music for religious reasons. As a general rule, more flexible and musical interpretations of permissibility are found in southern and sometimes central India and in the more marginal sects. In some northern cities, a predominantly Muslim local population may represent a weakened market for processional musicians, as in the famous (in the band world) instance of Rampur, in Uttar Pradesh state, a city whose high population of relatively strict Muslim families (local residents estimate between 70 and 80 per cent of the population is Muslim) forces entire bands of processional musicians to travel considerable distances to work in other cities that have larger non-Muslim populations.

Sikh religious practice is intensely musical in both ritual and didactic ways, although this topic has yet to be studied in depth. Sikh processional behaviour revolves around commemoration of the birth and sometimes the death of the Sikh Gurus. Following, perhaps, Sikh theology that privileges the community of the faithful or the pure (the Khalsa Panth), Sikh processions are often mass movements, expressions of community devotion enacted on city streets. Large numbers of brass bands and other musical ensembles are dispersed throughout the length of what can be very long processional formations; they help define the even larger numbers of processional devotees. 'Music, order, and movement draw individuals together, transforming a huge throng into an ensemble' (Brown and Regaldo 2001: 131).

Hindu and Jain processions are extremely musical events. Bands may sometimes help ritualize the appearance and procession of an important *murti* (image/idol) outside the confines of the temple; they may also be part of rituals of intensification, such as those that are sometimes part of Ram Lila, Shiva Ratri, or other calendric festivals. In contrast to these explicitly devotional processions, baraats occupy a more ambiguous place. They are pan-religious in practice and marginally religious in cultural understanding. Nevertheless, historical pre-eminence, together with demographic preponderance, allows me to suggest that music's fundamental ritual importance in the wedding procession derives from a Hindu understanding of music and of processional ritual. From this perspective at least, the three elements that begin the title of this chapter define the Indian procession.

Processions are by definition movements through space; musicians as physical beings and producers of sound play a crucial role in mapping out physical space in social or cultural ways and in the construction of specifically processional space. Sound, in addition to its alliterative properties in the context of my title, is more appropriate than music in this context. In a baraat,

however, music may take on a set of meanings that are somewhat distinct from the sometimes specifically devotional meanings that songs may express in religious processions. Their contribution, as sound, is aligned with the pragmatic and celebratory goals of processional behaviour by means of its intensity and volume and by appropriate instrumentation; that contribution can also be understood in terms of the specific songs (or types of songs) that bandsmen may perform at specific transitional points in the processional ritual. Finally, auspiciousness is the concept that specifically, if tenuously, connects notions of processional music practice to the broader concept of religion. These will be the focus of the rest of this chapter.

Space

When a baraat proceeds down a road from one village to the next, or from one urban neighbourhood to the next, the procession frames and marks out space. The procession may actually traverse the entire space between two family homes. In response to the difficulties imposed by extreme distances or by traffic and so forth in large modern cities, however, the traversal may be more symbolic: a baraat might begin on foot, transfer itself to a bus and, after a ride of minutes or hours across a large city or region, arrive at a different neighbourhood or city where the foot procession is resumed.

Space takes on ritual meaning at specific significant transitional points, but also as a pathway connecting those points. In the first of these senses, the particular points of transition, from private/inside to public/outside, are the most important.

> Starts and finishes can be 'dangerous' places for the groups involved in a procession, since assembly and dispersion points are liminal. They represent borders between the law of 'normal' everyday spaces and places and the law of the parade and its route. They can also be thought of as passages from one law to another; they are themselves outside either law and are therefore dangerous.
>
> (Ashley 2001: 17)

In baraats, music and musicians mark these points of transition, which are specifically the entry and exit points to and from public space: the appearance of the groom outside his home and the entry of the baraat into the bride's home. The performances at these points, and sometimes the repertoires as well, are often distinct from the music performed during the actual procession. Usually it is its text (although not sung) that makes a song appropriate.

The two family doors are boundary points that also enclose a particular geography. Just as governmental and civic processions in Imperial British Indian cities 'demarcated a šacred geography"of the city, a set of holy spaces that connected [the city] with the larger history of the Raj and its

transcendent values' (Haynes 1990: 503), the music of the baraat and its movement through space marks out the pathway, the road between two houses and the families who live in them. Traditionally, these new pathways were blazed, in effect, by the musicians who led the processions. In contrast to some rites of intensification, in which the same space is marked repeatedly by annual or cyclical processional behaviour, however, wedding processions are always mapping new ritual space as they trace the paths between the new pair of households that are being joined through marriage. Baraats and wedding bands are processual and musical signs of the new relationships being established through marriage.

It is important to emphasize here that wedding processions in much of India were originally circular; once the procession reached the bride's family home and the wedding itself was completed, the procession (although sometimes with fewer participants and less ritual) retraced its steps to the groom's home, carrying with it the new bride. Again, the transitional points (the departure from the bride's family home and her arrival at her new home) were marked by musical performance (e.g. Henry 1988). It is not clear, however, whether the return procession was also accompanied by music. Generally, it appears that in many regions there was less pomp and excitement in this return event until the procession reached the place from which it had started. These questions are largely historical because the return procession appears to have been completely de-ritualized. In contemporary urban India neither the return procession itself (if there is one) nor the bride's arrival is commonly marked by band music. Although this effectively reduces the symbolic importance of baraats and wedding musicians as framing factors in these spatial rituals, the historically circular structure of the processional ritual helps explain its role in marking family space and spatial relationships.

Processional space

In addition to the framing and mapping of local or regional space that takes place in the context of a baraat, processions also frame processional space, the constantly moving ten, twenty, or thirty metres of the space that the procession occupies on the street. Pre-brass processional ensembles and early brass bands as well did literally lead from the front, at the head of the procession, followed by the groom and his male relatives and friends, who were in turn followed by his female relatives. In contemporary practice, however, processional space is physically shaped by bandsmen, who routinely form themselves into two long columns that enclose the groom and his family and friends. Bandsmen are configured as bodies to define processional space. The size of processional space can change radically, as can the ability of a band to actually encompass that space. Brass band parties are usually hired in standard sizes. The smallest usually numbers twelve men; but more 'standard'

sizes are twenty-four and fifty-one men. The largest commonly found formation is 101 men. The addition of an extra unit is common practice in India and is considered lucky or auspicious.

Although baraats are never completely organized events, there are conventionally three somewhat distinct areas of processional space in many of them. Ironically, in contemporary practice, the front end of a baraat, so to speak, is often the least prepossessing and the least musical. A band's banner or other signage and the first few files of the double column of bandsmen begin a procession. This is often the quietest section of the procession; it is a space for day workers and for younger, less experienced band masters. This phenomenon is observable across a range of regions and social groups; it challenges the notion of a band as 'leading the way'. It is a change that overtook the ritual use of music in wedding processions over the span of the twentieth century, and largely the result of bandsmen's collective responses to changes in processional practice. These changes are observable in the middle section of the processional space.

Behind the somewhat unspectacular first section, and sometimes literally separated from it by crowd and noise, is the main processional space, which –in contemporary baraats –is also performative space. Contemporary participants express the happiness that a baraat is understood to represent through dancing and other ecstatic gestures. The groom's unmarried friends and relatives reflect the impact of the cinema in their attention to their dress and their enthusiasm for exhibitionist and individual dancing. In the procession, they are more or less followed by the elder males of the family, although the separation of these 'groups' should not be understood as consistent, expected, or consistently discernible. The elders dance as well, but I have often had the impression that their dancing was something they considered an expectation or duty rather than something in which they engaged by choice.

This portion of the baraat is predominantly male and is encompassed by the double column of bandsmen. The double column usually disintegrates into a line or cluster of bandsmen at the rear that totally or partially closes off this section of the processional space. If the band is using an amplified sound cart (as many do), it usually comes in this enclosing rear portion of the formation, surrounded or immediately preceded by the band's drummers. It is thus the rear of this middle section of the procession that is the loudest and the most exciting musically.

The groom himself, theoretically the centre of the procession, is sometimes enclosed within the band, but may also be found following behind, almost an apparent afterthought. Following him often come the women of the family, who are thus frequently outside the encompassing columns. In contemporary practice at least, women often also choose to dance, usually with each other and usually in the style of women's group folk dance. If they do choose to dance, they move up into the enclosed, most musical space.

The physical and sonic importance of brass bandsmen in this context is central to their ritual role in these processions as markers and controllers of space. Not only does a baraat frame the space between the two family homes, it constitutes an actual moving physical and ritual frame –structured by the files of bandsmen (and lights if the procession is at night), and by the sound of the band –as the procession moves through space and time.

The behaviours of baraat participants are sometimes at the edges of social acceptability. Liminal rituals, after all, are 'betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, and convention' (Turner 1969: 9596). In many baraats the men of the family are well intoxicated before the procession begins. While the groom's friends may dance simply out of happiness, their elders often require a bit more encouragement.

The notion of women dancing in the streets is, of course, antithetical to normal behaviour, as is public intoxication for middle-class, middle-aged males. Hence the importance of music as an amplifier of the unusual ritual nature of the baraat. Turner argues that much standard social structure is weakened in liminal rites and that such events produce a sense of 'relatively undifferentiated *comitatus*, community' (Turner 1969: 96). This sense of unity, and specifically family unity in this situation, is enacted through such collective public dancing by family members who would normally not engage in any of these behaviours. The processional space is ritualized by the physical organization of the band and by the sound. The nature of the event, reinforced by the physical presence, sound, and music of the band, authorizes this behaviour.

Sound

In general, the sophistication of Hinduism's theological conceptualization of musical sound, which 'arose and developed in the midst of an aura of cultural symbolism' (Rowell 1992: 38), and the historical and cultural depth of the links between music, sound, and the divine, exceeds those of other religions in India. Sound is the subject of considerable attention in the scriptures of Hinduism from the *Rig-Veda* onwards; it is 'a continuum of vital force and latent energy' (Rowell 1992: 35). Hinduism conceptualizes sound, music, and performance itself as manifestations of, entertainment for, and expressions of devotion towards Hinduism's deities. Some ritual music is specifically meant for 'divine, rather than human consumption' (Tingey 1994: 2).

On another pragmatic level, and in direct opposition to Islam's concerns for music's power to distract worshippers from devotional behaviour, in Hindu processions music is a tool that drowns out distractions and that channels worshippers' thoughts toward the divine, as Babb (1975) implies. In what might be seen as an extension of the language of classical Hindu ideology, volume and intensity of sound do help construct an alternative reality

within the processional space. They do help drown out the sounds of traffic and of everyday life, making possible the performances of baraat participants that would be so unusual in other circumstances. Many contemporary bands offer various portable amplification systems that are conveyed on large carts or wagons and usually called *teli* or *teliya*. These help them more completely to dominate the processional space, and are located at the rear of the band columns just before the groom.

Sound can mean music; but music, in the context of a procession, can sometimes be reduced to its component elements with no deleterious effect on the procession or the efficacy of the music as sound. It is the *sound* of the *shahanai* (the conical double-reed oboe traditionally part of processional music in the north) and more recently of the brass band itself that is meaningfully associated with weddings. The importance and desirability of sound, large quantities of it, are routinely demonstrated when a procession involves more than one ensemble; both often perform at the same time (in completely different musical tonalities, styles, melodies, and so forth) and in such proximity as to make comprehensibility difficult at best. Because sound, as physical vibration, is a structural component of processional ritual, such apparent difficulties are not, in fact, problematic. It is sound more than music that marks out processional space. In modern India space for processional ritual is also marked out by means of loudspeakers and recorded music (see Greene 1999) or by combinations of recorded and live music.

Bandsmen organize the sounds of the baraats in response to the needs of their customers, as I have noted above. The two columns of the standard formation are composed of rank and file bandsmen playing trumpets, euphoniums, and valve trombones, and less commonly saxophones and clarinets. They play in unison sections, and act as the 'response' section in call and response passages. They provide the musical unity, in other words. Soloists, usually bandmasters, move up and down within the two columns; but as noted, they and the drummers tend to cluster together around the dancers and the amplified sound system at the rear. Bandsmen often work quite hard to ensure their music is suitable and likely to encourage their customers to dance. Some bands attempt to extend their sonic control of space and improve the integration of amplified and acoustic sound by adding a secondary speaker tower. While the teliya itself remains at the rear of the band, the speaker tower –connected by a long electrical wire –is placed at or near the front of the procession.

Auspiciousness

'Auspiciousness is a divine blessing –the general state of well-being, encompassing health and happiness, peace and prosperity –that Hindu householders hope to be blessed with during this life' (Tingey 1994: 3). In at least one understanding of baraats, auspiciousness is the purpose for which sound and space

are manipulated in baraat practice. The Hindi term *lagan*, which means 'an auspicious occasion', is often used by bandsmen and their customers to mean wedding or even baraat.

In linguistic terms, the Hindi/Sanskrit word *mangli* means 'auspiciousness'; but many Indians use the word 'happiness', rather than 'auspiciousness', when speaking in English. In their ethnography of village festivals, Freed and Freed appear to replace both 'mangli' and 'auspiciousness' (a term they do not use at all) by the English word 'well-being': 'a major festival theme concerns the general well being of the individual and family' (1993: 3). The English term 'happiness', which I have heard most frequently, acts as a junction point, so to speak, between two different religious concepts of music. This is because any family from any religious background can suggest music is a producer or symbol of happiness, without implicating themselves in a specific religious construct. Hindu families appear to be translating 'mangli' in this context since most use that term when speaking in Hindi. In the admittedly few instances in which Muslim families have explained their use of music in Hindi (or Urdu), the term they have used has been *khushi*, which does indeed mean 'happiness' (and perhaps even 'auspiciousness'), with many of the connotations that Tingey suggests above. 'Mangli' and 'khushi' imply linguistic associations with Hinduism and Islam respectively, but both are explanations for the importance of music in processions.

Loud music, performed on processional instruments, not only helps define public space, but is also understood as a positive (and sometimes ritually necessary) processional element. It is clear, however, that auspiciousness exists ambiguously on the borders of religion. In one sense, the notion is a lesser colleague, so to speak, to the more fundamental, if explicitly Hindu, concept of ritual purity. Although purity is, in part, a matter of heredity in Hindu terms (with a range of mitigating factors), anyone has the potential to be in an auspicious state some of the time. Purity's hereditary components make it a potentially permanent state, unlike auspiciousness, which is inherently transitory in humans and must be regenerated. Finally, ritual purity is, within the bounds of cultural logic, empirically demonstrable. Demonstrations of auspiciousness, on the other hand, often bear a difficult resemblance to material or personal success.

The distinction between things that are auspicious in religious, ritual terms and things that are prestigious in purely socio-economic terms is not only difficult; it interacts directly with processional practice. If music as sound has auspicious qualities, as it may sometimes do, then more bandsmen and/or amplification equate with more sound, which means more auspiciousness. Nevertheless, having a large band and sound-amplification cart is also a sign of wealth, and hence socio-economic prestige.

Processional musicians are thus at the heart of the ambiguity surrounding the matter of auspiciousness. Tingey, who has studied processional music and musicians in Nepal, notes the important and diverse distinctions

between processional musicians (who belong to the 'untouchable' Damai/tailor caste) and processional music: 'the Damai themselves are sometimes referred to as being saguni, "auspicious signs." Their music in general is mangal, "auspicious"' (1994: 4). Thus, both processional musicians and their music may be signs; but only music itself can be said to actually *be* auspicious. The musicians may make the music; but the music is auspicious, it is that which produces auspiciousness in others. Tingey notes that this is the case despite the non-sacred or non-ritual nature of the music that is played (Hindi film tunes, in most Nepali and Indian baraats). And, while music is permanently auspicious, individuals and family need to rely on auspicious things, such as music, if they wish to also be (temporarily) auspicious.

The management of three interacting factors –space, sound, and auspiciousness –are at the heart of traditional South Asian processional practice and music's role in that practice. I have already intimated, however, that traditional explanations are not entirely satisfactory in contemporary terms. Those changes are most clearly expressed by changes in processional performance. I conclude this chapter with a brief examination of this issue.

Performance

Baraats are performances by processional musicians, family members, friends, the groom, and a range of helpers. Brass bandsmen, who are formally recognized (and paid) as performers, belong to the same kinds of low-status social groups that produced the music Tingey discusses for Nepal. As performers, bandsmen's traditional role was the production of auspiciousness, which was understood to result from their performance of processional music. Contemporary discourse by baraat participants and bandsmen concerning matters of auspiciousness and processional music has changed, however, especially in India's central and northern cities. Notions of ritual economies, purity and impurity –matters at the heart of Hinduism as a religious and a social system –have merged into notions of prestige, class, and economics. Ironically, perhaps, I have recently spoken to a few northern bandsmen (Muslims themselves) who argue that global politics are driving an increasing awareness of music's problematic role in fundamentalist Islam that is actually discouraging Muslim families from including music in their baraats.

Despite this possible (and probably limited) trend, processional practice, baraats, and music/musicians' roles therein are all viewed from an increasingly secular perspective by both participants and bandsmen. Because the size of the band and the volume of sound being produced are already located at the intersection of notions of auspiciousness and prestige that I describe above, the distinction that Tingey makes (above), between musicians as a sign of auspiciousness and music as actually being auspicious, is no longer

made by most families. Music itself has become the sign of a remarkable secular notion called family happiness; the musicians are simply the hired servants whose performances produce that sign.

Bandsmen's performances, however, also provide the musical and spatial contexts for more explicit performances of this new notion of auspiciousness (called family happiness), performances undertaken by family members. It is these performances that represent the clearest change in the processional practice of baraats. Instead of being producers of auspiciousness, wedding processions have become, in more secular terms, 'an expression of the interaction between personal [in this case family] aspiration and assessment by others' in which the family publicly 'burnishes the image of self for the consumption of others' (Pitkin 1993: 98). The production of these images of the self has come to focus on the reappearance of dancing in baraats. Historical accounts of seventeenth-nineteenth-century baraats sometimes mention dancing by courtesans, or other women whose socio-professional identities included public dance performance (e.g. de Thevenot 1976). The employment of courtesans to dance in baraats was still relatively common at the beginning of the twentieth century; but in contemporary practice, instead of being undertaken by paid public dancing women, dancing is now undertaken by family and friends of the groom. Oral accounts suggest that this practice developed from roughly the middle of the twentieth century. The baraat, with its built-in motivators for family happiness and/or the production or enactment of auspiciousness, gradually has come to be a public stage whereon families often choose to act out the happiness and unity they possess (or are expected to possess).

The changed meaning of dance performance and dancer identity has been enabled, in my view, by the unprecedented rise to cultural dominance of the Hindi cinema, which took place during the period in which families began dancing at baraats. Bands had played popular songs from all sources (recordings, musical theatre, folk songs) before the advent of sound films and their songs; but film songs were more popular and much more widely disseminated than any previous repertoire. Film songs represent nearly 100 per cent of most contemporary bands' repertoires.

The songs that bands played were songs to which the cinema's heroes and heroines danced. I have no doubt that baraat dancing interacts with issues of masculinity as constructed by actors who were routinely shown dancing in cinematic streets (e.g. Shammi Kapoor, Kishore Kumar, and so forth), whose dancing constructed a suitably modern and ecstatic masculinity. Since it appears that baraat dancing was a masculine performance practice when it first began among families, I cannot help but wonder whether a gendered, imitative process was what initially led to the custom of dancing in wedding processions. Images in the cinema did more than provide a model for masculine dancing in public; they also developed an idealized

image of the family and family relations. Kakar (1989) and Mishra (2002) are among the many film scholars and commentators who have examined aspects of family relationships among the conventions of the Hindi cinema. Speaking of one (admittedly extreme) cinematic family, Kazmi writes, 'in this world every individual occupies his/her assigned position, performs his duties and lives his role in accordance with the station he occupies within the hierarchical social order' (1999: 139–140). More generally, I argue that the Hindi cinema was a hegemonic purveyor of idealized images of happy extended families, solid family relationships, and obedient children (see also Rao 2006, for a more contemporary reflection of the importance of cinematic images of gender, family, and marriage). In other words, an idealized image of family, constructed or perpetuated by the Hindi cinema, encouraged dancing by family members: men first, perhaps, in concert with cinema-inflected performances of masculinity, but eventually children and women as well. Baraat dancing became an expression of happiness, instead of a producer of auspiciousness, and an idealized public performance of the riotous happiness and collective unity that is appropriate to the occasion and to their views of how they see themselves and wish others to see them.

For bandsmen, this new 'purpose' for their music (the accompaniment of family dancing) has been somewhat problematic (as it can be in any event, see Booth 1993). In the accompaniment of dance and the production of a mood of ecstatic happiness, their performances must now demonstrate 'the bedrock techniques in the musical generation of intensity –the increase in tempo and increase in volume' –that so many Indian folk and devotional forms share (Henry 2002: 36). This is a rational strategy for the support of explicitly ecstatic dancing but requires a suitably intended or reasonably flexible repertoire.

The rather odd processional formation I described above, in which the core of the band and its sound is found at the rear of the band columns, is part of this transformation of meaning. Unlike the historical practice, in which sound led the way, the front end of a contemporary baraat, as I have described it, is a kind of vestigial growth, a hangover from an earlier time. At many baraats that I have attended, the front of the ensemble has been literally cut off from the main section by the cluster of family, friends, and onlookers participating in or watching the dancing going on in the middle section.

Change is ongoing, of course; but these particular changes appear to move processional practice in baraats further from its tentative connection to religion via auspiciousness. Contemporary wedding processions are rituals indeed; but the connection to religion is now clearly severed in practice and in the minds of most participants. They are now purely secular ritual representations of family unity and happiness.

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PUBLIC DISPLAY, COMMUNAL DEVOTION

Procession at a South Indian Catholic festival*

Selva J. Raj

Introduction

The religious landscape of the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu is dotted with numerous temples and shrines dedicated to various Hindu deities, Muslim Sufi saints (*pirs*), and Catholic saints. Some have limited local and regional fame, while others like the majestic multi-towered Hindu temple in Madurai dedicated to goddess Meenakshi and the famed pan-Indian Catholic shrine of Our Lady of Good Health at Velankanni in northern Tamil Nadu command wider national spiritual appeal attracting devotees from diverse religious, caste, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds. These various temples and shrines that dominate the pluralistic religious landscape of Tamil Nadu claim a long and celebrated religious history, specific foundational myths, unique architecture, distinctive worship patterns, and a loyal –frequently multi-religious and multi-ethnic –cultic constituency. What unites these otherwise doctrinally and theologically disparate –often incompatible –religious traditions is their common, shared devotional tradition of annual festivals that acts as a powerful spiritual magnet attracting throngs of devotees from far and near for a public profession of their shared faith as well as for a public display of their communal devotion.

Of the numerous Catholic shrines that are focal points of lay devotional activity, those dedicated to St Anthony of Padua –a European saint who is the object of popular devotion and veneration –enjoy special spiritual appeal throughout Tamil Nadu. Most notable among the shrines dedicated to this European saint, the shrine of St Anthony at Puliampatti near Tirunelveli is

unparalleled by virtue of the special powers and miracles attributed to this site and its patron saint, the large number of devotees it attracts throughout the year but especially during its annual festival, and the wide array of rituals executed by its pluralistic, multi-religious clientele. Observed with much fanfare and much anticipated by clergy and laity alike –although for entirely different reasons, as it will become evident shortly, the annual festivals mark an important and auspicious day in the religious calendar. While church authorities value the festival as an occasion for a wide array of institutionally endorsed devotional exercises aimed at deepening and strengthening devotees' interior, 'adult' faith as well as for the sizeable revenue the festival generates for church coffers, the religious masses, especially the marginalized, value it for the opportunity it affords to manifest their deeply felt concerns and mundane needs as well as to display their personal economic wealth, enhance their social status –even if only temporarily –and gain public validation for their religious devotion.

Most important and prominent among the various annual festival events at Catholic shrines –particularly for the religious masses –is the public procession when patron saints of these shrines, enthroned in colourful chariots and/or palanquins, are paraded through public squares once a year. While some might involve elaborate and spectacular chariot processions, others might involve the ceremonial procession of statues of saints carried in colourfully decorated palanquins. Tens of thousands of pilgrims flock to these shrines to perform a wide array of devotional rituals, often in the hope of gaining such earthly blessings as fertility, health, healing, and wealth. So central and vital a role do they play in the religious life of the laity that these shrines might be considered the spiritual nerve-centres of lay devotional activities and ritual performances. In this chapter, I describe the dynamic of Catholic processions in Tamil Nadu illustrated in the annual festival celebrations at a specific, widely popular Catholic shrine in South India that serves as a micro case-study, the intense competition for the public display of economic wealth and religious devotion characteristic of this festival, its logic and grammar, and the social and religious themes embedded in it. I argue that these public processions provide for the religious masses a public arena and context for the spectacular display of religious devotion, economic wealth, and social status that is otherwise unavailable in the rigidly stratified and hierarchized social and religious system in South India.

I The shrine of St Anthony at Puliampatti

Fifteen miles southwest of Tirunelveli, a mid-size commercial town in southeast Tamil Nadu, the shrine of St Anthony at Puliampatti is a popular, regional pilgrimage site. Though a steady stream of pilgrims flock to the shrine throughout the year seeking healing for various illnesses, tens of thousands of pilgrims of diverse creeds and castes from as far as Karnataka, Kerala,

Pondicherry, and northern Tamil Nadu brave arduous journeys and severe physical discomfort to attend the shrine's thirteen-day annual festival in February, which, according to one conservative estimate, draws over 100,000 pilgrims. Situated four kilometres southwest of Naraikinaru railway station and one kilometre north of Shivalaperi village on the Palayamkottai–Aruppukottai highway, Puliampatti is a sleepy, nondescript, economically depressed village. As I made my way along a narrow bumpy road, for miles and miles I saw nothing but thorn trees, tamarind trees, and palmyra trees. The land is parched, arid, and dead. Having been to this village twice before, I was aware that Puliampatti and its vicinity are among the most backward and depressed regions of southeast Tamil Nadu. But the thirteen-day February festival transforms this otherwise sleepy, nondescript village into a site of intense ritual activity, social interaction, monetary exchange, and competition for display of economic wealth and religious devotion. Apart from religious considerations, it is a much anticipated festival as it brings a needed –albeit only temporary –economic boost to an otherwise depressed village. As part of my sabbatical field research, I attended this festival in January 2003.

While an imposing twin-towered Gothic structure dominates the otherwise dull and dry local landscape, demographically Puliampatti has a mixed religious population of sixty-five households or 350 residents with an overwhelming Hindu majority and a negligible Catholic minority of thirteen households. Nadars, Pallars, and Dalits constitute the three principal caste groups in the village with the Nadars forming a distinct majority. Until a decade ago there were also a few Thevar families who left the village following a bloody inter-caste conflict with the Dalits. Of the thirteen Catholic families in the village, ten belong to the Nadar caste, one to the Thevar caste, and two to the Dalit group. Agriculture is the primary occupation of the inhabitants, though a handful of villagers run small shops and restaurants. Only a tiny group has had college education: three men and four women. After completing their education, the men moved to urban areas in search of better employment, while the women stayed in the village as housewives. None of the women has a professional career. One Hindu girl who finished a BA course converted to Christianity and eventually became a nun.

Local legends and oral history trace the origins of the shrine to Anthony Nadar, a Hindu convert, and his Hindu in-laws Raman Nadar and Lakshman Nadar, who settled in Puliampatti nearly three centuries ago in search of better economic pastures. The shrine's foundation myth alludes to the saint's apparition to the devout convert and his Hindu landlord, and his instruction to build a shrine in his honour. Local residents say that certain supernatural signs helped determine the actual site. Confirmed by these supernatural signs and with financial assistance from his Hindu landlord, Anthony Nadar built a small thatched shrine at the site and installed the statue of St Anthony from the Shivalaperi wayside shrine (*kurusadi*). Soon

after, stories of miracles and healing spread, attracting devotees of all castes and creeds. For many years, Anthony Nadar and his Hindu relatives took care of this modest shrine whose growing fame prompted church authorities to schedule regular Masses there. The archival records of the Madurai Jesuit Province suggest that by the middle of the nineteenth century a small brick structure had replaced the original thatched hut. By then, the pastoral and temporal administration of the shrine rested firmly in the hands of the local diocese. The transfer of power was not without conflict or tension, however. Michael Nadar, a descendant of Anthony Nadar, filed a civil law suit against the local bishop, claiming full ownership of the shrine (Gnanaprakasam 1988: 78). After a long legal battle, in 1903 the court ruled in favour of the diocese, paving the way for the eventual establishment of Puliampatti as a full-fledged parish in 1954. The present twin-towered Gothic shrine was blessed in 1961 by the archbishop of Madurai.[1] From its modest beginnings, the shrine has grown into a famed regional pilgrimage centre in South India with several educational, medical, religious, and social welfare institutions as well as a meditation hall and two modest guest houses for pilgrims donated by Hindu devotees.

Two major festivals, much anticipated by local residents, clergy, and visiting pilgrims, mark Puliampatti's religious calendar: a modest celebration in mid-June on the saint's titular feast, sponsored by local Nadar Catholics, and an elaborate, colourful celebration in February, sponsored by visiting Parava Catholic devotees from Tuticorin, fifty miles south of Puliampatti. Celebrated on the last Tuesday in the Tamil month of Thai (January–February), as noted above, the February festival is by far the most important of the two annual festivals when judged by the number of pilgrims and the various rituals observed. As customary in South Indian temple festivals, a flag-hoisting ceremony sets the thirteen-day festival season in motion. The entire village wears a festive look. Special liturgical, para-liturgical, and secular events are scheduled for the season. Daily devotional activities at the shrine include, among others, morning and evening Masses, a lengthy sermon by a gifted guest preacher, evening vespers, Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, and a healing service, with an additional noon Mass on the last three days. On the Sunday preceding the penultimate day of the festival, there is a Pontifical Mass presided by the local bishop Jude Paul Raj. Following the Mass, pilgrims participate in a solemn Eucharistic procession led by the bishop who carries a richly ornamented Monstrance under a colourful canopy. As the procession makes its way through the dusty and dirty village streets, church attendants lay out white cloth for the bishop and his assistants to walk on. This solemn but sparsely attended procession in which the clergy and nuns play a prominent role is in sharp contrast to the religious fervour, intensity, ecstasy, and enthusiasm characteristic of the chariot procession the next day. On Tuesday, the actual day of the festival, Masses are celebrated continuously until mid-day when the bishop celebrates

a Pontifical Mass. The festival celebrations conclude the next day, the thirteenth day, with the ceremonial lowering of the flag.

A continuous stream of pilgrims flock to the shrine during the festival. Typically, those making vows in the hope of obtaining specific favours from St Anthony and those offering thanksgiving rituals for favours already received tend to stay for the entire festival, while others come only for the last three days. The vast majority, however, attend only the final-day celebrations that include the colourful *chaparam* procession. Depending on their financial situation, these pilgrims either rent rooms in the two guest houses operated by the shrine or set up temporary camps on school grounds and rice fields. A single room in the guest house for the festival period costs between Rs 2,000 and Rs 4,000 (US$50–100). In addition to the rooms available in the shrine, local villagers offer accommodation to visiting pilgrims for fees that range from Rs 2,000 to Rs 4,000 for thirteen days.

A salient feature of the Puliampatti festival is the *mandakapadi* tradition –to which I will turn shortly –whereby a particular individual, family, neighbourhood, or village gains the right and honour of hosting various festival events. The practice/custom of bestowing special devotional privileges and ritual honours based on various religious and social factors including, though not limited to, religious position, socio-economic status, and family heritage/lineage is a widespread and long-standing tradition in South Indian Hindu temples (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1976). As Meibohm has demonstrated in her study of Catholic religious festivals at the shrine of Our Lady of Good Health at Velankanni, this is also a common practice among South Indian Catholics. She writes:

> At Velankanni, the donation or *upayam* for a procession is a traditional service that brings along with it the duty and privilege of raising that day's flag. The procession sponsors closest to the geographical centre are the Velankanni Arya Nattu Chettiars, accepted as the original clients of the church. In recognition of their historical claim, they hold the right (*urimai*) to raise the flag on August twenty-ninth [auspicious festival day], they have the right to give the *upayam* on the sixth of September, and members of their community prepare the statue for the processions.
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> (Meibohm 2002: 70)

This system of devotional privileges and ritual honours is also discernible at Puliampatti festival. I was told that several months prior to the festival, at an informal public gathering interested individuals, families, and neighbourhoods –Catholic and Hindu –put in their bids for these honours, often at considerable financial strain. Although I have not personally witnessed or participated in such a meeting, my informants told me that the bidding scene is characterized by fierce inter-family and inter-village competition

and conflict as well as by faithful adherence to the special ritual rights and privileges invested in certain families and groups. The more spectacular the event, the stiffer the competition. The two most spectacular, hence most coveted, events are the flag-hoisting ceremony at the start of the festival season and the colourful *chaparam* procession that marks its culmination. Although in theory anyone can bid for these rights, for the past twenty plus years these have rested with two different wealthy Parava Catholic families of Tuticorin. While the flag-hoisting ceremony is reserved for the Dasan family, the *chaparam* procession is reserved for the Ranjit family from Tuticorin who underwrite the total cost of these celebrations. Twenty-five years ago Ranjit's grandfather began this family tradition in thanksgiving for a child he received through St Anthony's favours. Until now, no one has seriously contested this tradition mainly because these two events – particularly the *chaparam* procession –are cost-prohibitive for the average devotee. According to the senior pastor of the shrine, the total cost for the *chaparam* procession ranges anywhere from Rs 500,000 to Rs 600,000 (in US currency, $1,250 to $1,500). Consequently, the public meeting typically focuses on other aspects of the festival such as illumination of the shrine's imposing towers, ritual hospitality to St Anthony during the procession, free meals and snacks for visiting pilgrims, evening devotions, the bishop's Pontifical Mass and festival celebrations. Apart from these structured and institutionally sanctioned displays of wealth by the affluent, there is also abundant spontaneous display of riches by poor devotees. These rural poor who ordinarily struggle for their survival tend to be overly extravagant and ostentatious in parading whatever riches they possess. In particular, the women wear fine silk saris, are decked in expensive gold jewellery, and spend enormous amounts of money on merchandise of various kinds. An average rural pilgrim spends about Rs 700 in three days –the equivalent of a month's earnings. For many, besides providing a holiday that they otherwise cannot afford, the festival provides a forum to display their possessions since rural life has limited social outlets.

II The public display of devotion: the *chaparam* procession

For the average devotee, the centrepiece and climax of the thirteen-day festival is the *chaparam* procession observed on the penultimate day. All day there is a continuous flow of pilgrims arriving in trucks, minibuses, cars, taxis, two-wheelers, bullock-carts, public buses, and on foot. Over 500 minibuses, countless cars, and taxis are parked in rice fields. The spacious church compound teems with pilgrims. Outside the church, vendors who have set up scores of temporary stalls make brisk business. By nightfall, the pilgrim community has swollen greatly. The air is charged with palpable religious fervour and spiritual energy reaching fever pitch. Throngs of devotees, some dressed in St Anthony's signature monastic habit, gather in front of two brightly

illuminated and richly ornamented *chaparams* (palanquins) readied for procession. Two drummers and two pipers play religious music as lay leaders put final touches on the *chaparams*, one containing the statue of St Anthony and the other a statue of Mary. Of the two, St Anthony's *chaparam* gains special attention and prominence in terms of decoration and illumination. Standing on either side of the processional route are young boys and girls with baskets of salt mixed with black pepper and bright orange marigold petals known locally as *uppu malai* (literally, 'salt garland'), the common votive offering of the very poor.

In sharp contrast to the previous day's sombre yet solemn Eucharistic procession presided by the local bishop, the *chaparam* procession is loud and boisterous. Priests and nuns who were prominently visible at the Eucharistic procession are now conspicuously absent. It is the people's turn to enjoy the devotional limelight. A lone cleric is hustled through the milling crowds before the *chaparams* to offer a few prayers and a quick blessing. His inaudible prayers get drowned in the din and bustle. After he sprinkles the holy water on the *chaparams*, the priest is whisked away to his residence. At this time, Mr Ranjit, the patron of the procession, places garlands and gold chains on the statues, officially setting it in motion. The festival is now totally under lay control and leadership. A sudden burst of energy fills the crowd that surges towards the *chaparams* yearning to touch them. The hundred plus police officers deployed on crowd control appear baffled and helpless. The mood among devotees is at once electric, festive, feverish, and frantic, bordering on the chaotic.

As the *chaparams* are lifted skyward to the accompaniment of fervent cries and loud chanting of Anthony's name, dozens of boys and girls throw baskets of salt, pepper, and marigold petals at his statue. Caught totally off guard by the sudden downpour of devotion, I was completely drenched in the 'shower of salt and pepper'. As the procession inches its way through worshipping crowds, there are periodic and designated stops along the route, predetermined by the parish council and secured as a ritual privilege on the basis of convention, competition, status, and rank. At each stop, devotees, who secured this right at the public meeting, offer garlands, gold chains, and other votive offerings to the saints. Each time the *chaparam* is lifted above the ground, the 'salt shower' is repeated with abandon as cries of 'uppu malai' reverberate.

The procession slowly moves past the shrine as drummers and pipers play devotional music. Standing right behind the *chaparams* is a select group of over a hundred devotees. Walking five abreast, these devotees fully prostrate themselves on the gravel streets for a few seconds –totally unmindful of the filth on the streets –stand up and walk about ten yards, and prostrate themselves again, repeating this ritual every five minutes. This pattern continues for the entire four-hour procession. Some leave the processional line feeling physically exhausted but religiously invigorated, and make space for new devotees, while others endure this arduous ritual for the

entire distance, a religious feat considered especially meritorious. Leading this prostration ritual known as *kumpitusevai* are female devotees suffering from various types of mental illness including demonic possession and psychosomatic disorders. They scream St Anthony's name as they prostrate themselves on the ground. Next in line are *pada-yatris* (those who have made the pilgrimage to the shrine on foot) wearing Anthony's signature brown habit, followed by children, and other male and female devotees. Devotees assert that the *kumpitusevai* is one of the most auspicious ways of demonstrating the urgency of their petition and the earnestness of their devotion to St Anthony.[2] Unlike other events, the *kumpitusevai* is accessible to people of all economic and social status. It is almost always a spontaneous display of piety, requiring no prior bid or approval. Thus, while the wealthy compete for institutionally sanctioned ritual honours, humbler devotees compete for the spontaneous public display of personal piety, penance, and devotion.

III Material exchange during the festival

Using one's body as a site and vehicle of religious devotion and piety is an enduring pattern in popular village Hinduism. While *kumpitusevai* is not as spectacular or colourful as the *kavati* or hook-swinging ritual popular in village Hinduism, it too reflects the pervasive Hindu –indeed South Asian –religious assumption that the body can serve –with proper training, motivation, and preparation –as a medium and platform for expressing devotees' religious devotion, resolve, and fervour. Devotees highlight the religious significance –however temporary –of their bodies by decorating them with certain material objects like sandal paste, neem leaves, garlands, medals, and specific clothing. Thus their bodies serve simultaneously as sacred terrain and devotional vehicle. The *kumpitusevai* ritual where devotees subject themselves both before and during the festival procession to a series of bodily deprivations and humiliations is one compelling instance of the use of the body to attain mundane and spiritual rewards.

Apart from this spectacular physical display of religious devotion during the *chaparam* procession, the Puliampatti festival tradition also encompasses a wide assortment of devotional rituals and votive offerings including –though not limited to –ritual tonsure, sacrifices of goats or chickens, the offering of coconut saplings, and circumambulation of the shrine. The material objects used during the festival include various votive objects like coconuts, fruits, sandal paste, salt, pepper, neem leaves, and body facsimiles in silver, aluminium, and gold. Even a cursory look at these material objects reveals their striking uniformity and family resemblance with those used by other South Asian religious practitioners, whether Hindu, Muslim, or Buddhist. Of special significance in St Anthony's cult and festival at Puliampatti are salt and neem leaves, two popular ritual items in

the cult of Mariyamman, the Hindu goddess of disease and healing. While salt mixed with marigold petals is thrown at the processing statue of St Anthony by all Catholic devotees, neem leaves and neem paste are used especially by those devotees who are said to be suffering from various psychological afflictions and demonic possession. In addition to the medicinal qualities attributed to neem leaves by the indigenous curative system, in Tamil Nadu neem leaves have a special religious significance as they are believed to be particularly efficacious in warding off the ill-effects of black magic and sorcery, and the psychological distress caused by wrathful malevolent spirits. Devotees suffering from these maladies either apply neem paste to their heads or consume balls of it to protect themselves. Additionally, it is not uncommon to find scores of Catholic devotees in other reputed, popular pilgrimage sites like Velankanni and Uvari applying neem paste to their heads. Another material element used by this particular cultic constituency is the blessed oil locally known as *Anthoniar puthumai ennai* (literally, the miraculous oil of St Anthony). Though in this instance blessed by a Catholic priest, oil is used pervasively as a curative instrument in popular Hindu religious practice.

What is notable about the Puliampatti festival tradition –indeed Tamil Catholic festival tradition in general –is that in addition to these obvious South Asian votive items drawn from the indigenous ritual repertoire, Tamil Catholics also use traditional Catholic votive ritual objects like candles, holy water, rosaries, saint's medals, scapulars, and St Anthony's monastic habit. As such, these devotional objects also act as identity markers in that the specific accessories adopted by Catholic devotees help to affirm their cultural affinity with Hindu religious material culture while simultaneously differentiating them from their Hindu counterparts. Thus, the ritual objects and religious symbols used by Tamil Catholic devotees are drawn from two distinct religious sources –Hindu and Catholic –making way not merely for the juxtaposition but for the organic blending or synthesis of two ritual traditions. Elsewhere I have discussed the complex negotiations and complicated identities (Raj 2004), or what Julius Lipner might call 'the ambivalent minority status' of Tamil Catholics, that inform their periodic excursions into the religious culture and ritual terrain of their religious others, especially their Hindu neighbours. More concretely, this suggests that Tamil Hindus and Catholics not only share a common physical and cultural geography but draw from or share common religious assumptions, a worldview, conceptual framework, ritual sources, and material culture. The festival tradition at Puliampatti offers an illustrative micro case-study for the multiple exchanges occurring at the grassroots level that accounts for the family resemblances and striking uniformity in the festivals and processional traditions of Hindu and Catholic devotees. This phenomenon of shared systems serves as a metaphor for the culture of dialogue that defines South Indian religious praxis.

IV Old wine in new wine skin: the Catholic
mandakapadi tradition

Commonly known as the *mandakapadi* tradition, the system of leasing ritual honour to select individuals or families is a derivative of a long-held tradition in South Indian Hindu temple festival religion. It refers to the practice of extending ritual hospitality to a sacred image taken in procession from its principal residence to another site. Devotees receive the image in a temporary, semi-permanent, or permanent structure (*mandapam*) and lavish ritual attention on it. The right and privilege to host the image is a coveted religious honour sought after by devotees of all economic status, most notably wealthy patrons who hope to earn extra spiritual merit and enhanced social prestige. While in some cases such rights may rest with a family, transmitted from one generation to another, in other cases individuals, families, and neighbourhoods may earn this right by offering a portion of their wealth to the temple. Whereas in the former cases these honours offer public validation and legitimacy for existing religious and social status, in the latter they help establish newfound religious status and social esteem. Typically, these privileges are configured along caste, family, and economic lines.

Etymologically, *mandakapadi* is the conjunction of two terms: *mandapam*, literally 'hall', and *pati* 'step'. The term has dual meanings, religious and social. First, the *mandakapadi* tradition has been an integral part of the festival religion at Alakar Kovil, near Madurai, where the emphasis is on the sites associated with the presiding deity Vishnu's annual ritual journey to the Meenakshi temple in Madurai. More specifically, it refers to the various sites (*mandapams*) along the more than twenty-kilometre route from Alakar Kovil to Madurai where the image of Vishnu is received as a guest of honour. At each site, devotees extend ritual hospitality and rest to Alakar (Vishnu) during his ritual sojourn. According to the temple superintendent at Alakar Kovil, there are 396 such *mandakapadis*, though devotees speak of 3,000 such sites. As I drove from Alakar Kovil to Madurai, I saw several such stone structures. The second, or social, meaning of the term emphasizes the special rights and privileges bestowed on certain people who gain the right and privilege to host various religious and secular events during a major religious festival. It is the second meaning that is emphasized by Tamil Catholics of South India.[3]

The Catholic *mandakapadi* is an adaptation of the Hindu festival tradition. While this tradition is alive and well at Puliampatti, the many priests I spoke to in Madurai claimed that it is vanishing, or, more accurately, being radically redefined, since priests today make a conscious and sustained effort to do away with the practice of the investiture of special ritual privileges, honours, and rights on specific families and individuals which in their view is antithetical to the Gospel value of equality. They aim to level social distinctions and ensure religious egalitarianism in worship contexts

and religious festivals. Thus, reform –rather than total elimination –of tradition is their strategy. The priests claim that in the redefined Catholic *mandakapadi* tradition, the various festival events are assigned to different constituencies or groups of the parish, irrespective of social and economic status. In rural areas, each day's events are assigned to different villages while the central events of the festival are reserved for the entire parish. In urban areas, the distribution pattern is based on other variables, such as profession and geographical divisions. More recently, even this distribution system has been rearranged along the concept of Basic Christian Communities (BCC) so that a single unit or group of BCC has the collective honour of hosting a particular day's events. For example, St Joseph's parish in Gnanavolivupuram –an urban Catholic parish in Madurai –is divided into ten units of BCC, each of which is given the right and privilege of hosting different days of the festival. Each group enjoys some relative autonomy in constructing the contours of the day's events, although the final word rests with the local parish priest. These reform efforts have not, however, completely obliterated the traditional caste –and economy-based system that survives in many rural areas like Andaoorani near Devakottai in Tamil Nadu as well as in regional and pan-Indian pilgrimage centres like Puliampatti and Velankanni near Nagapattinam. This demonstrates that while the priests' reform initiatives have met with moderate success among educated audiences, they have not had similar success in rural areas that are deeply entrenched in tradition or in renowned pilgrimage centres. While this outcome is generally attributable to social factors and the tenacity and power of deeply held social beliefs and established tradition, economic considerations account for the failure of reform efforts at pilgrimage centres since these regional and pan-Indian sites generate considerable revenue for church coffers. Despite theological misgivings, church authorities not only feel compelled to make theological compromises but have continued to provide active and enthusiastic endorsement for the *mandakapadi* tradition because of the sizeable income it generates.

Concluding reflections

Processions are neither unique nor peculiar to Puliampatti or Tamil Nadu. One can find abundant cross-cultural examples throughout the Catholic devotional world. While the Puliampatti procession might embody and reflect a distinctive indigenous religious worldview, ritual idiom, and religious grammar, it also shares several ritual commonalities with its Catholic counterparts elsewhere. For example, the dynamic of the Puliampatti procession strikingly resembles in ritual action, behaviour, and intentionality the European, more specifically Greek, example that Jill Dubisch describes in her discussion of the festival celebrations at the church of the Annunciation on the Aegean island of Tinos. As at Puliampatti, the climax of the annual festival celebration at the island of Tinos, she writes,

comes when the icon is carried from the church and down the main street to the harbor . . . and pilgrims kneel between two permanently marked lines in the street to have the icon passed over them. . . . Many people reached up to touch the icon as it passed over them, undeterred by officials who kept striking down their hands.

(Dubisch 1990: 133)

Dubisch suggests that the manifest public display of devotion during the procession exemplifies a common trait and crucial feature of popular religion in European villages which is 'more outward than inward looking, more concerned with external images, with the public and communal than with the interior or the mystic' (Dubisch 1990: 129). While this concern and desire for display might be tied to the general emphasis in Greek society on outward appearance, Dubisch also associates this concern with public display in small-scale societies and communities where 'morality is defined not so much by what one does as by whether others know about it' (Dubisch 1990: 129). Dubsich's insight sheds light on the Puliampatti festival dynamics where the urge for the public display of devotion is not only intense but contagious. As in Greece, at Puliampatti too religious devotion is more public and communal than interior and inward-looking.

On another level, the Catholic festival tradition and the processional culture illustrated in the *chaparam* procession at Puliampatti also serves as an illustrative micro case-study for intra-religious complexity and diversity, competing theological voices, divergent social discourses, and the tense power relations between the priests and the laity as well as among the laity. In this devotional community, there is no uniform voice or perspective on the value and significance of festivals in general and of processions in particular. Church leaders and officials place greater emphasis on interior faith than on external manifestation and display, on theological orthodoxy than on ritual orthopraxy, on higher-order values and soteriological goals mediated through institutionally sponsored devotional exercises like Mass, the rosary, novenas, and Eucharistic processions and adoration. However, the laity's devotional preoccupations and concerns –much to the chagrin and dismay of religious leaders –are on this-worldly needs and mundane concerns such as fertility, health, social equality, and prosperity. They are more concerned about ritual efficacy than about theological orthodoxy. Even among the laity there is no one uniform voice but rather multiple voices and competing goals. There is a notable difference between the attitude of the economically well-to-do and socially privileged, on the one hand, and the economically disadvantaged and the socially marginalized, on the other. To these divergent constituencies among the laity, the festival – most notably the procession –provides a public forum to display their individual needs and concerns as well as their communal faith in and devotion to the patron saint. The procession also illustrates the double-edged

power relations characteristic of South Indian Catholicism, the tense power relations between the clergy and the laity on the one hand, and between the privileged laity and marginalized religious masses, on the other. Scholars of European village and peasant Christianity like Ruth Behar (1990), Ellen Badone (1990), and William Christian (1981) have highlighted this trend in European Christianity, one that is also manifest at Puliampatti where there is a notable disjunction between the perspectives of the priests and the people, revealing mutual mistrust between the two groups. While church authorities permit festival processions, many consider them Hindu and/or pagan and hence do not participate in them aside from offering a perfunctory blessing. The religious masses on the other hand view the clergy's lukewarm interest and indifference as a sign of lack of faith. Thus, as Behar notes in her study of popular religion in post-Franco Spain, the relationship between the religious masses and the priests is based on a 'mutual misunderstanding and a mutual devaluation of each other's religious practice' (1990: 106). While the masses mistrust the priests, the priests 'maintain an intellectual distance, a separation between the "simple" faith of the people and their post-Christian paganism,' and the 'adult' faith of the priest' (Behar 1990: 106). The peasant or popular religion of the masses is viewed as 'other' by the religious elite.

Finally, let me turn to the social implications of the Puliampatti festival celebrations including the procession. In his recent work *Playing Host to Deity* that examines festival religion in South India, Paul Younger rightly observes that 'the annual festivals are a central feature of the south Indian religious tradition' (2002: 3). Locating himself firmly in South Indian religio-cultural context but drawing inspiration from Geertz (1973), Turner (1974) and other theorists who have demonstrated ritual's role in social change, Younger argues that the specific social, caste, and cultural arrangements of South Indian life shape and define the festival tradition there. 'To operate in the economic, political, and cultural arenas', he writes, 'the relatively small caste groups needed forms of common social interaction with others and festivals provided one of the most effective forums for social interaction' (Younger 2002: 5). In this sense, continues Younger, 'South Indian festivals have a specific social function in both reflecting and redefining social structures' (2002: 5). Endorsing Turner's interpretation, he suggests that 'the festival is an explicit statement of social solidarity and serves as an opportunity to examine a deeper sense of social identity', inherent social divisions, and hidden tensions (2002: 4). The data presented in this chapter and my own field research experience confirm Younger's conclusion that the festival is an annual forum for self-definition of complex social, caste, economic, and religious identities (2002: 162). Given the pervasiveness of religious festival and its social value in South India, its occurrence at Puliampatti is neither strange nor unique. What is unique to this festival, however, is not the juxtaposition of the sacred and secular –common in other South Indian

Hindu festivals –but the spontaneous confluence of different, even disparate, religious and ritual streams –Hindu and Catholic –and the specific socio-cultural context that predicates this confluence.

A lingering question that Younger does not intentionally address but which warrants close scrutiny nonetheless, one that especially confounds the cultural outsider, relates to the urge and competition for the public – frequently extravagant –display of wealth and money, chiefly by the affluent, as well as the spectacular public display of religious devotion and piety, chiefly by the poor and the afflicted. At work here therefore are two types of public display, economic and devotional. Such displays are quite common in rural, economically depressed regions of Tamil Nadu. Indeed, the poorer the com-munity, the more ostentatious and extravagant is the display of material wealth and spiritual devotion. What motivates and compels these rural, poor, mostly illiterate devotees to resort to and vie for such an extravagant display of wealth and piety? For the wealthy, religiously, such displays serve as a public statement of their faith in and loyalty to the saint, garnering addi-tional spiritual merits. Socially, such investments and displays help establish or enhance their social status and prestige in the village. On the other hand, the public display of extreme ascetic piety by the humbler devotees also earns them short-term social dividends in so far as they win the admiration, even jealousy, of fellow pilgrims and villagers and greater spiritual merits and better health in the long term. Through these displays each group's social and/or religious status and distinctions are both transcended and reinforced. While these accrue to individual patrons and devotees, such displays also yield collective economic and religious dividends for the larger society as well as for the institutional church which stand to gain economic benefit and spiritual prestige. Thus, what appears initially as the simple juxtaposition of the sacred and secular indeed reveals a more complex, choreographed ritual union and collision of the secular and the sacred in such a way that the secular (money) yields sacred dividends (spiritual merit) and the sacred (ascetic piety and devotion) yields secular dividends (social prestige and admiration). It is this unholy –yet welcome, necessary, and salutary – alliance between the sacred and the secular that provides vitality to the festival tradition at Puliampatti.

Notes

* Names of some individuals have been changed to protect their privacy.
1 For a detailed description of the tenure and pastoral accomplishments of various clergy who have served as pastors at Puliampatti since 1910, see Lourduraj (2002: 33-40). *The Directory of the Diocese of Palayamkottai* (1973) states: 'Old little Chapel was extended to the size of a Cathedral Church at a cost of one lakh of rupees. The plan was given by Thiru Gnanapragasam Pillai, architect of the Loyola College, Madras. The Most Rev. J. P. Leonard, S. J., D. D., the Archbishop of Madurai blessed this new Church on 13.6.1961' (quoted by Lourduraj 2002: 29-30).

2 It is believed that this particular practice originated in the village of Kaman-aickkanpatti in Tirunelveli district. Mr Germanus, a wealthy Nadar Catholic businessman, who has *mandakapati* rights for the annual festival procession in his native village of Kamanaickkanpatti claimed that over 1,000 devotees perform this ritual during the annual parish festival on the feast of the Assumption of Mary in August. Joseph Beschi, an Italian Jesuit missionary who contributed much to the advancement of Tamil literature, once served as a pastor at Kamanaickkanpatti (based on interview with Germanus, Madurai, on 14 January 2003).

3 Information provided by Rev. Divyanandam in a personal communication.

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6

THE VIRGIN AND HER 'RELATIONS'

Reflections on processions at a Catholic shrine in southern India

Matthias Frenz

Religious sites in India are not usually perceived as autonomous or isolated entities in the religious landscape. Rather, they are regarded as part of a larger network, as being related to other locations and cults. In churches, temples, mosques and other places of religious significance we usually find various references to other shrines and holy places which depict such relations. Among different modes of representation, public processions are a means to link two or more religious sites and their respective cults with each other. Taking the Catholic shrine dedicated to the Virgin Mary at Velankanni, southern India, as an example, the referential mechanisms apparent in such processions are investigated. It is argued that the establishment and affirmation of ties thus achieved between religious sites is part of the positioning process in which different sites compete for recognition and status in the eyes of the public. The case of Velankanni shows that this process does not end in simply linking one locally rooted cult to another of comparatively higher status in order to participate in its prestige. Moreover, a rereading of the relationship may facilitate a reversal of the perceived status hierarchy, placing the local shrine in the most prestigious position.

Roman Catholic processions in India

Religious processions form an important part of the religious life of the Roman Catholic population in India. Catholic communities frequently hold a public procession to mark religious holidays and festivals. Despite the minority status of Catholics in India such public expressions of Christian faith

are not only tolerated by the majority communities, but numerous non-Christians actively participate in the processions. Before investigating the role processions have in the definition of religious sites, some general remarks on the characteristics of Catholic processions in India seem appropriate in order to understand why these ritual acts appear attractive to members of other religious communities, and thus become a field of interaction between adherents of different doctrines and convictions.

Despite the diverse forms processions take at different locations, five basic features may be identified as constituents of a Roman Catholic procession in India. Every procession makes use of and occupies public space –in a geographic sense as well as in a metaphorical sense. The path on which a parade is conducted not only connects the shrine and its objects of adoration with the environment, but it also marks a certain territory to which the religious community involved has a particular relationship (e.g. their living quarters). Music, prayers, preaching, crackers, and illumination are means applied to claim further space and carry the message beyond the territory, beyond the Christian community. Second, the precious objects taken to the street are characteristic of a Catholic procession. The effigy relevant to the festival in question (in most cases a statue of Christ, the Virgin Mary or a saint, sometimes the Eucharist or relics) is assigned the most important position in the parade. Adorned with costly cloth and garlands, it is placed on a chariot and drawn through the streets by devotees; alternatively it is carried on a palanquin. Often the main object of veneration is accompanied by other objects of minor importance (e.g. statues of other saints or angels, and crosses). Additionally royal paraphernalia such as flags, umbrellas, or incense are taken in the procession to assert the supreme status of the venerated objects. The manner of movement is equally characteristic. Usually the crowd walks along a circular path, thus marking an area of public space specific to the procession. The circumambulatory movement is sometimes interrupted when the main object of the parade is halted for a particular act of reverence, for instance in front of the residence of an eminent member of the Christian community. In a reciprocal act the notable's family pays homage to the sacred object and in turn receives special blessings. Closely connected with the manner of movement is the order in which the participants walk in the parade. The position next to the venerated object is regarded as the most prestigious, and is assigned to the leaders of the community conducting the procession or –if more than one group is involved –the representatives of the most respected community. Catholic processions are not spontaneous acts, but are placed in a certain time frame. Marking particular holidays and festivals, they are determined by the liturgical calendar or by regional conventions. Like other rituals, Christian processions offer the devotees a frame to regularly display and re-enact their relationships within the community and their collective religious convictions.

If we take a comparative look at core elements of temple processions performed by the major Hindu communities in southern India, their similarity to the features just described of Catholic processions of the same region is striking. Regarding their claims to public space, handling of sacred objects, direction, processional sequence, and timing, Christian and Hindu practices resemble each other quite closely. It would, however, be too simplistic to conclude that Indian Catholics just imitate the Hindu model for their processions. It has to be noted, that Christian processions in predominantly Roman Catholic areas of Europe are similarly structured. Rather than being a mere imitation of the Hindu ritual, it seems appropriate to consider Catholic processions in India as a creative conjunction of European conventions brought to India by missionaries and practices developed in the Hindu traditions.

The structural and functional similarities of their processions cannot obscure the fundamental differences between Hindu and Christian religious traditions. On the contrary, the similarity of the form of expression makes the dividing line even more visible. In her article on the public display of Catholicism in south-eastern India Joanne Waghorne observes that

> the sharing of a common idiom like the ter [chariot], rather than blurring the distinctions between the gods who ride these divine chariots, serves to stress difference. . . . There must be a common idiom for dialogue, an accepted grammar in which to pose debate. Yet at the same time, this common public religious idiom, if it is to function commonly, does not negate difference. It matters very much that Mary, dressed in a sari but in Her colour of white and gold, rides atop the palanquin, and not the Goddess Parvati.
>
> (Waghorne 2002: 16)

Due to this common form, Hindus frequently join processions conducted by Catholic communities, and vice versa –although Catholic clerics try to prevent the participation of their flock in Hindu parades (for historical examples see Bugge 1994: 123–30). The common idiom provides a basis for mutual exchange and competitive negotiation between Hindus and Christians.

The shrine of the Virgin Mary at Velankanni

'Who in this wide quarter of the globe has not heard of . . . Our Lady of Health –who loves to lavish her Graces so profusely on Her Children from that little throne in that insignificant village known as Velangani? . . . Yes, if you saw Mary's Children there invade the sanctuary . . . sing and pray, smile and cry; if you saw their faces radiant with hope and beaming with joy . . . ; if you saw one dozen of priests . . . ministering day and night to the crowds in diverse ways

spiritual and temporal . . . you could not but say in your heart of hearts: *verily, the finger of God is here!*'

These are the enthusiastic words of Antonio Maria Teixeira, bishop of the Catholic diocese of Mylapore, reflecting on his visit to the shrine of the Virgin Mary at Velankanni in September 1921. After praising Velankanni he concludes:

> 'Does not Lourdes also exist, Compostella Pompei, and the Holy Places? . . . Our Lady's Children will always visit Her in Shrines where She is known to dispense most graces and favours –and Velangani in the South is one of Her best known [shrines], best loved, most frequented by Her Children of all colours and races and social standing.'
>
> (Santos 1933: 3743)

These quotations vividly describe the Marian sanctuary at Velankanni in southern India. This shrine serves as an example for my reflections on processions. Teixeira's allusion to Lourdes and other holy places hints at my central argument: religious sites in India are generally perceived as part of a larger network, related to other locations and cults. Such relations are established and represented by a variety of means. Most importantly they include myths, iconography, architecture, and last but not least ritual acts. Among the latter, public processions form an important part. For a religious site processions are a powerful means to establish and maintain links within the sacred landscape and to define the status of the site in relation to other sites.

The shrine of Our Lady of Health is situated in Velankanni, a small town on the southern Coromandel Coast in Tamil Nadu (India). In the originally rather insignificant hamlet inhabited mostly by fishermen, the first Catholic chapel was erected in the early seventeenth century and consecrated to Nossa Senhora da Saúde. It was administered by Portuguese fathers of the Franciscan Order from nearby Nakappattinam. After the Portuguese lost Nakappattinam to the Dutch in 1658, Velankanni church grew in importance. In 1730 Protestant missionaries on a visit from Tarankampati characterized the shrine as a famous church and place of pilgrimage. The myths of origin speak of three apparitions of the Virgin Mary. From early times until today, the shrine has attracted people of all religious affiliations. It is widely acclaimed as the most famous Marian site in India. Most devotees consider Arokkiyamata, as Our Lady of Health is called in Tamil, a Virgin of Indian origin because she is said to have appeared on Indian soil. She is known for her miraculous powers: many pilgrims approach her for problems regarding health or reproduction. Papal privileges bestowed upon the shrine in 1962 have further supported the prominence of Punita Arokkiya Annai Tiruttala Peralaya, the Shrine Basilica of Our Lady of Health (see Frenz 2004: 82122 for a detailed history of the shrine).

The relations of the Virgin enacted in processions

At Velankanni various features of the layout, the architecture, the myths of origin, symbolic representations and ritual practices may be identified as bridges to other sites and to abstract concepts of a wider religious and socio-cultural sphere. They indicate that Velankanni is part of a larger religious network that provides points for orientation. Moreover, Velankanni itself has developed into an important focal point within this network. In this chapter I particularly want to emphasize links which are enacted in public processions. Examples found at Velankanni can be divided into two groups:

1   references to other religious sites, their central object of veneration and/ or specific elements of their cult, myths, architecture, etc.;
2   references to abstract concepts of high prestige.

Within the group of references to other religious sites (i.e. group 1) the most obvious links are those with representations of the Virgin Mary or saints whose alleged 'origins' are known to be not at Velankanni but elsewhere. In the past and the present this type of link seems to be most common and its function most important. The central figure of Velankanni, Our Lady of Health, was introduced by Portuguese missionaries as a representation of Nossa Senhora da Saúde, a form of the Virgin Mary originally venerated in Lisbon (Vale Carvalheira 1988: 237‒239). Since Arokkiyamata is Velankanni's main attraction, most processions there are conducted in her honour. Additionally, a number of Christian saints, angels and virgins feature in public processions.

The popularity of links between religious sites manifested by iconic representations is supported by their long history. Already in the early eighteenth century Our Lady of Health at Velankanni was flanked by Nossa Senhora da Boa Viagem ('Our Lady of Happy Voyage') and Nossa Senhora do Carmo ('Our Lady of Mount Carmel', in Tamil 'Uttariyamata') (Frenz 2004: 93). Whereas the former of these last two has vanished in the course of time, the latter is still held in high esteem in Velankanni today. Every year when the celebration of the Uttariyamata festival in mid-July attracts crowds from the Konkan coast, the Carmelite statue is taken in a procession through the township.

Processions in which references to cultic icons of external origin are displayed follow a basic pattern that is similar to most traditional processions in Europe and India. On the occasion of the relevant holiday determined by the calendar of the Catholic Church, statues are installed on chariots. After local notables have decorated the main object of reverence, devoted pilgrims carry the chariots through the Catholic residential area of Velankanni.

Among the different patterns of procession found at Velankanni, the Uttariyamata festival serves as a demonstration of the close ties between the

local Catholic community, the cult object and the Church. This form of festival in which the local parishioners and the pilgrims have particular roles is reserved for icons which can claim deep and firmly established roots at Velankanni. The figures carried in these processions are mostly regarded as part of local traditions. Thus the allusions to traditions brought in from Portugal long ago are hardly perceived as external references.

Besides links based on icons, other kinds of references to other sites and traditions are found at Velankanni. They include references through architectural features and mythological narratives. The most prominent example of an architectural reference is the 'Lourdes grotto'. In most Marian shrines in southern India an artificial grotto links the site to Lourdes, the famous place of pilgrimage in France. In the year 1858 apparitions of the Virgin Mary were reported in the vicinity of Lourdes, a village in the French Pyrenees. The authenticity of the visions was later officially recognized by the Catholic Church. Although we do not find a grotto at Velankanni, the two-storey church behind the main shrine, the so-called extension basilica, serves as a monumental link to Lourdes, because it is obviously modelled after the basilica there. An example of the bridging function of myths is the narrative according to which Arokkiyamata saved Portuguese sailors from drowning in the rough sea. The myth follows a pattern well known among Christian sailors from the Iberian peninsula. Such myths are quite common on the Iberian coast (Frenz 2004: 133). Since the focus of this chapter is on processions, I will not further elaborate on mythological and architectural links.

Whereas references to venerated objects, architectural structures or mythology have been common for a long time, references to specific elements of the ritual practice of another site seem to be more recent. A striking example found at Velankanni is a procession conducted on church grounds in honour of Arokkiyamata in which the participating pilgrims hold candles in their hands. The course of the procession is modelled on the daily evening processions carried out at the Marian shrine in Lourdes. There is no explicitly verbalized mention of Lourdes in this procession at Velankanni. The particular reference to the practice known at Lourdes lies in the use of candles, a special hymn (a Tamil version of the French hymn) and the collective carrying of the lit candles by the participants while the hymn is sung.

It is not clear at what point in time ritual elements of other traditions were introduced in Velankanni but my enquiries confirmed that the practice is of fairly recent origin. One explanation for the emergence of such a new mode of reference may be seen in the increased mobility of clergy and pilgrims, particularly those who belong to the growing Indian middle class. Compared to former times, those groups have more opportunities to visit famous shrines throughout the world and gain first-hand experience of rituals conducted there. Ritual models that have been proved 'successful' elsewhere may be imported through such direct connections based on personal experience. The use of ritual practices in the effort to build links between

religious sites is an intensification of the more traditional method of relating sites through cultic icons.

Having elaborated on the first group of references mentioned, that is references to other religious sites, their central object of veneration and/or specific elements of their cult, etc., I will now come to the second group: the references to abstract concepts of high prestige. Among this group I further distinguish two sub-types:

1   references to religious notions derived from the general, theologically grounded tradition of the Catholic Church which are not (or not yet) integrated in the local tradition;
2   references to notions that originally did not appertain to the religious sphere but have been integrated into the local religious agenda due to their high symbolic value and/or integrative potential.

An example of a procession at Velankanni belonging to sub-type 1 is that following the crowning ceremony of the Virgin Mary. On the last Saturday in May the bishop of the local diocese solemnly crowns a statue of Arokkiyamata in an open space near the location where the Virgin is said to have appeared for the first time. After the crowning, the statue is brought to the main shrine in a procession. By conducting such ceremonies, the Catholic Church highlights and propagates its 'orthodox' religious concepts. The crowning of Mary and the following procession symbolize the role of Mary as Queen of Heaven, as sovereign mother of humanity, as model of and orientation for the Church –concepts that are proclaimed in official documents of the Catholic Church (see e.g. 'Lumen Gentium' 1964: ch. 8). Such references are mostly introduced by the clergy in order to set theological guidelines. They are attempts to establish in the minds of the pilgrims teachings which are perceived as dogmatically important by Church leaders. However, the case of the procession of the Holy Eucharist, conducted monthly at Velankanni, shows that these efforts do not always meet with success. Although the Eucharistic procession falls into the same category as the crowning ceremony of the Virgin, it is obviously less appealing to devotees and does not attract as many people.

Turning to sub-type 2 of the references to prestigious concepts, I will give an example of references to notions that did not originally belong to the religious sphere but have been integrated into the local religious agenda. The date of 15 August figures twice in the calendar of Velankanni. In the ecclesiastical year the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary into heaven is celebrated on this date. On the political agenda it is one of the highest national holidays of India, the Day of Independence. The Marian procession conducted at Velankanni on 15 August reflects this twofold significance. Having duly honoured the Indian flag as a prestigious symbol of the nation after morning Mass, the evening procession brings together

national and Marian symbols. Three pieces of cloth are draped to form the national flag of India on the base of the Arokkiyamata statue carried in the procession. This unique imagery features the Virgin as mother of India. In this constellation she is depicted as a national symbol. The coincidence of two holidays is creatively transformed into one celebration that binds nation and Virgin together. Showing allegiance to the nation –which is the duty of every proud citizen –becomes inseparable from reverence to the Virgin. Thus the emotional and socially unifying power of two precious symbols is combined in the procession on 15 August.

Establishing the 'Lourdes of the East'

The structured description of the multifaceted relatedness of religious sites, given in the preceding paragraphs, does not yet account for the deeper significance and importance of the phenomena considered. Hence we have to ask further: Why do such relations matter? What is their function in this context? In brief, my answer developed in the following pages will be that the links are vital for the process of definition of the character of a site, including its rank and status. Furthermore I argue that processions are a particularly important means to define and alter the status of a religious site in the sacred landscape. The observation on which the argument is based is that processions feature in the reconstruction, affirmation or challenge of social structures and identities. They create a space for display and negotiation of religious notions aimed both at the people involved and at outsiders.

As already stated, religious sites are usually not regarded as autonomous. They can hardly exist in complete isolation; their characteristics develop to a large extent in a process in which they establish relations with other locations, bodies and notions. The points of reference 'offered' in the sacred landscape are, however, perceived as being of different value and prestige. The incorporation of a newly emerged religious site into the surrounding network involves a process of orientation within the 'web', the establishment of relations to some sites and the avoidance or even suppression of relations to other entities. The example of Velankanni and several other Marian shrines in southern India shows that preferred alignments are those with places and concepts of high prestige. The references described above reflect the search for recognition: the oldest strata of links reflect the orientation of colonial times when renowned icons of Iberian Catholicism like Nossa Senhora do Carmo were alluded to. Even comparatively minor figures like Nossa Senhora da Saúde, which never gained particular prominence across Europe, served as prestigious points of reference. More recently, places like Lourdes have come to be considered reputable models for the layout and ritual of Velankanni. In the same manner, much appreciated theological or secular concepts like those described above set the standards for a religious site that aims to project its

outstanding reputation. Such negotiation of status is a continuous process that does not end when a certain position is achieved.

Public processions are only one means among several others by which status is defined and rank is negotiated. But their potential in this respect should not be underestimated, not only with regard to the case study chosen, but for India in general and probably even for the Indian Hindu diaspora. The processions at Velankanni illustrate the efforts to position the shrine by establishing links to external locations, icons, concepts, etc. When different statues of Mary or saints are paraded through the streets and honoured by the devotees, they connect the local site with other prominent traditions. The above-mentioned candle procession refers to one of the most famous and eminent Marian shrines in the Catholic world, Lourdes. Crowning the Virgin points to the concept of Mary as the supreme mother of humanity and model of the universal Church. The flag procession on 15 August links Mary to the Indian nation, which is often proudly projected as nourishing 'Bharat Mata' (Mother India), full of self-confidence and strength.

It would certainly be too simple to describe the structure of such references as a mere reproduction of the object referred to. The link constituted by these references is not based on exact imitation. It rather points beyond its object, providing space for an adjustment of the matter, for the development of a new interpretation in accordance with the local circumstances. Thus the reference is integrated into the local system; a process of localization takes place. In Velankanni an evident example for this mechanism is the costume of the cult statue. According to the convention known in Europe, the statue is clad in costly cloth. It is a particular feature of Arokkiyamata, however, that she follows the Indian dress code and is wrapped in a sari. Similarly, processions display adapted versions of the references employed. Arokkiyamata occupies the central position in virtually all iconic processions, even if the reference has originally pointed to another or no specific object. The candle procession is performed in honour of Arokkiyamata, not in praise of the 'Immaculate Conception' as in Lourdes. The statue crowned publicly by the bishop is Arokkiyamata. The procession on 15 August features Arokkiyamata over the Indian flag. Even minor Marian feasts like the holiday of Our Lady of Mount Carmel are perceived by many pilgrims as events referring to Arokkiyamata.

Through adjustment and substitution the references exhibited in processions develop a two-sided character. They allude to external objects and underscore the central position of Arokkiyamata at the same time. The shrine is thus positioned within the network by indirect participation in the prestige of the established links. Simultaneously it attains a recognized position of its own in the sacred landscape. The phrase 'Lourdes of the East' appropriated and propagated by administrators as a slogan for Velankanni aptly expresses the self-assured relatedness. Arokkiyamata is perceived as just one

representation of the Virgin among many others. At the same time, however, she is considered independent and unique.

Rereading the references

The administrators of a religious site with the potential for development, and the residents of the adjacent area, often engage in promoting 'their' shrine. In the Catholic context priests and parishioners make efforts to create a distinguished reputation for the sanctuary, that offers prestigious ritual positions (cf. Frenz 2004:163‑78) and attracts pilgrims from the surrounding area. To attain this goal two techniques are often used simultaneously. On the one hand, links are established to illustrious sites, prestigious concepts or important rituals, as described above. On the other hand, the proponents emphasize, cultivate and document the unique character of the local shrine. For instance, local myths are compiled and published in the form of a shrine history, miracles are documented in so-called museums, liturgical texts such as prayers are drafted exclusively for the sanctuary.

These bridging processes bind the linked entities together. If a site is connected with external objects and notions, these are in turn integrated into the tradition of the shrine and thus are tied to it. An important consequence of the reciprocity of the links is that the references become readable in two directions, namely as an orientation of the local site towards the external points of references and vice versa. Stressing the distinct character of a sanctuary does not necessarily weaken the relations entertained with other sites, concepts, rituals, etc. However, the referential structure of the links may become blurred. Fewer people will recognize where the references point to, the external 'other' will grow ever more vague.

Under the circumstances of an increasingly ambiguous reference structure, the tendency to reread the references in the 'reverse direction' increases. The local shrine that has been linked to other entities by referring to their prestigious idols, rituals and so on, is in turn perceived as the centre to which all references point. The example of Velankanni indicates that due to their reverse reading of the references many devotees see Arokkiyamata as the primordial figure to which all references point, in which all authority culminates. This perspective is further reinforced when the pious visitors apply a mythical concept of time to the development of the sanctuary. From this angle, arguments brought forward from a linear understanding of time – in the sense of a historical sequence of events –are not regarded as valid. In the perspective based on the mythical time concept, Arokkiyamata is the origin and cause of all developments in Velankanni, despite historical evidence that the image was imported and installed by Portuguese missionaries in the seventeenth century. Arokkiyamata is hailed as a sovereign in her own right, reigning over the region, India and the world. Consequently, the candle procession taken over from Lourdes is performed as an original

homage to Arokkiyamata. In Lourdes itself Indian pilgrims often proudly present Arokkiyamata in processions during their visit. The conjunction of the feast of the Assumption of Mary and the commemoration of India's independence on 15 August is interpreted as divine providence rather than as a mere coincidence. In the eyes of many participants the procession depicts the triumph of Arokkiyamata who –it is believed –was instrumental in India's attaining independence.

For devotees who perceive the sanctuary in such a light, the site and its object of veneration attain a unique and outstanding quality. The extent to which this attitude has been disseminated indicates the degree of rootedness, the dimension of localization of the sanctuary. If the reverse reading of references becomes the predominant perspective –as seems to be the case in Velankanni –the setting at the shrine in question may in turn be regarded as a yardstick by other shrines. The numerous sanctuaries dedicated to Our Lady of Health across India which owe their status to the shrine near Nakappattinam prove that Velankanni has itself become a prestigious model that provides orientation for other sites.

Conclusion

To conclude, I come back to the starting point of my argument. Divinities and religious sites are defined through references to other entities in the sacred landscape. Divine manifestations usually start off rather unfocused. The emergence of a deity's 'face' involves a process in which its initially unspecific features are brought into connection with the surrounding sacred landscape; they thus come to be defined in relation to other gods, religious concepts and known phenomena that are already widely acknowledged within the sphere in question. New occurrences become meaningful and recognizable when they are assigned a specific place in the prevalent discourse. New phenomena attain their own distinctive character by developing links with other already well-established divine manifestations. The reciprocal ties provide further space for positioning when the relations become readable in two ways.

Public processions play an important role in this positioning. Although references are also established and negotiated in other performances and representations, processions seem to have a particular potential. As public events processions are a strong means to proclaim or challenge the prevailing discourse. The social functions of processions, that is the display of hierarchy and the formation of a corporate identity, add to their power. Third, in the procession each and every participant enacts the relation represented. Devotees are thus brought into a direct and personal relationship with the matter exposed. The performative nature of the parade introduces a bodily dimension that is more compelling than a mere literary, oral or iconographic representation.

Apparently the clergy administrating the shrine in Velankanni have recognized the compelling character of public processions. Although the number of religious festivals celebrated at the shrine has not increased, several processions have been introduced in the local liturgical calendar during the last two or three decades.

The formation of linkages between a religious site and the wider sacred landscape is not confined to Velankanni or to Catholic shrines. At Hindu temples in India, too, the process of status negotiation within the religious network involves public enactment and the possible rereading of established references.

Even beyond India this has considerable implications. Although Catholics are a religious minority on the sub-continent, Catholicism in India is not a religion in diaspora and any comparison with the Hindu communities overseas must therefore be undertaken with great caution. I am nevertheless convinced that my remarks on the shrine at Velankanni offer some hints to a better understanding of processions organized by Hindus in the so-called diaspora. In a diaspora the need for positive recognition of religious symbols and practices is perceived particularly strongly. In an environment in which references are far less evident and a rather heterogeneous public has to be won over or integrated into the community, public displays gain special importance. They are part of the efforts to obtain an acknowledged status in the universal sacred landscape. In this process of localization a unique but equally related sacred space is created.

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7

'YEH MATAM KAYSE RUK JAE?' ('HOW COULD THIS *MATAM*[1] EVER CEASE?')

Muharram processions in Pakistani Punjab

Mariam Abou Zahab

> In India and Pakistan, Shi'ism has existed primarily as a religion of rituals, of devotionalism, and of a collective memory of suffering.
>
> (Ahmad 2003)

Pakistan where Shiites make up approximately 15 to 20 per cent of the population –or a total of 25 to 30 million people –has the second largest Shiite community after Iran. Up to the 1970s there was relative sectarian harmony and considerable blurring of boundaries in terms of shared beliefs and religious rituals. The islamization policy of General Zia ul Haq (1977-1988) which increased Deobandi influence in Pakistan, and the Iranian revolution which emboldened the Shiites, contributed to the radicalization of religious identities and to sectarian violence which has claimed several thousand lives in the last two decades.

This chapter focuses on Muharram processions (*julus*), which were once trans-communal but have become over the past thirty years a vehicle for identity assertion and sectarian mobilization. We will first describe the historical context of the mourning rituals, then provide an outline of the reform movement launched from the late 1960s in favour of the rationalization of rituals. Then we will examine the controversy around some popular practices, notably *zanjir ka matam* (self-flagellation with knives). Finally, we will address the new meaning of rituals in the context of the Shia awakening and the redefinition of Shia identity in Pakistan vis-à-vis both Sunnis and other Shia communities of the region.

To understand the importance in South Asia of the mourning rituals of Muharram referred to collectively as *azadari*, and particularly of the processions (*julus*) which are at the heart of Shiite piety, it is necessary to put them in their historical context.[2] Muharram processions are documented at the time of the Buyid dynasty (932–1055) in Iraq. [3] Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi (d. 1273) observed and criticized a Muharram procession before the gates of Aleppo (Halm 1997: 44) but it was during the Safavid period that mourning rituals developed in Iran (1501–1722). [4] They were introduced in the sixteenth century by Iranian immigrants in India where 'the popular classes developed creative ways of mourning the wronged family of the Prophet' (Halm 1997: 24).

In around 1635 Mahmud bin Amir Wali, a traveller from Bukhara, described celebrations of Muharram in Lahore (Rizvi 1980: 191);[5] in the late eighteenth century processions of *tazieh* (replica of Hussain's tomb)[6] and *alams* (battle standards used at Karbala) became spectacular events in Awadh[7] and spread from Lucknow into the rural areas. The Iranian practice of chest beating was introduced into India by Syed Dildar Ali Nasirabadi (1762–1819) [8] and the concept of Zuljinah[9] (the horse with two wings) processions, also from Iran, was introduced into Lahore by Nawab Ali Raza Khan Qizilbash in the nineteenth century.

Although Shia ulama criticized some of the Muharram rituals like the use of drums, horses and camels and some forms of *matam*, they mostly had to come to terms with folk practices: 'Sayyid Mohammad Nasirabadi [the chief mujtahid of Lucknow from 1820 to 1867], asked about self-flagellation in the 1820s or 1830s, replied that wailing and beating one's chest over the calamities that befell the family of the Prophet was only permissible if one lost control of one's self' (Cole 1988: 108).[10]

Before Partition, Sunnis and Hindus took part in great numbers in Muharram processions although they refrained from chest beating and self-flagellation. Processions were an important feature of a composite culture.

Traditionally Sunnis shunned all festivities during Muharram, although they made special food offerings (*niaz*), facilitated processions and arranged *sabeels* (refreshment stands).[11] Zuljinah was –and still is –particularly venerated as a powerful intercessor.[12] Women watched from the rooftops and brought their children to Zuljinah to press them against its flank and offered money to the horse's attendants.[13] In Bengal, Hindu and Muslim women placed their newborn babies at Zuljinah's feet to gain protection; they gave milk to the horse, collecting what fell on the ground in a vial; it was said not to curdle and was used as medicine.

Sunnis kept *taziehs* and took them out in procession mostly to honour vows (*mannat*) that had been made. Many descriptions of Muharram processions in the pre-Partition period[14] emphasize the emotional integration of the society through rituals 'which stressed cultural values shared in common among Shias and other Indians' (Freitag 1989: 278).

Hindu influence shaped the rituals and 'helped create a Shi'i tinged traditional culture' (Freitag 1989: 116-17) which was trans-communal. Shia rituals were 'Indianised' and observed with fervour by Hindus and Muslims alike: 'The vast Hindu majority often also took part in the mourning for Imam Husayn, incorporating his cult into their ritual calendar as yet one more divinity in the pantheon' (Freitag 1989: 115). Garcin de Tassy pointed out that Muharram, like the festival for Durga, lasts ten days. On the tenth day of Durga puja Hindus cast a figurine of the goddess into the river, paralleling the Shia custom of casting *taziehs* into the river -or into the sea in Bombay and Karachi -on the tenth day of Muharram (Freitag 1989: 117). Hindus adopted Hussain as a god of death. According to Mushirul Hasan, 'in popular belief, [Hussain] was Ram of Ayodhya . . . his brother Abbas personified Lakshman . . . his sister Zainab and wife Um-i Kulsoom were cast in the image of Sita . . . Yazid, the Umayyad ruler and Husain's persecutor, was Ravan' (Hasan 1997: 119). Keith Hjortshof notes about present-day Lucknow: 'The most ostentatious public processions . . . still attract many Hindus, who tend to view Muharram as a spectacular festival and celebration of precolonial urban culture' (1987: 293).

Hindus built *taziehs*,[15] bowed to them and asked for favours.[16] Hindus were generally hired to carry the *taziehs* during processions. They shared with Muslims the belief that *taziehs* can cure illnesses and during processions children were made to pass through the empty space under the *tazieh* to seek intercession. In Bihar, low castes worshipped Hassan and Hussain as gods, they called the *alams pirs* and incorporated them into their religion (Hollister 1953: 178-80). However, Muharram processions were used from the late nineteenth century to create communal identities. They served to heighten sectarian consciousness at a time when each community was making deliberate efforts to publicly define its boundaries (Freitag 1989: 262). According to Mushirul Hasan, 'the first ominous sign surfaced around 1906 when some Sunni zealots constructed their own Karbala . . . opposite the existing Karbala' (Hasan 1997: 122). Sunnis engaged in *Madhe-e Sahaba* (public praise of the first three Caliphs) whom the Shias regard as usurpers of Ali's claim as successor of the Prophet. Shias retaliated with *tabarra* (curse of the first three Caliphs). This practice 'erected communal barriers between Shi'is and others and the violence it provoked helped reinforce internal Shi'i solidarity' (Cole 1988: 117). Muharram processions were declared acts of heresy by Sunni preachers and people were exhorted to avoid them. Processions were denounced as *bidaa* (heretical innovation) and considerable polemical literature was written against *azadari*. 'A powerful symbol of unity turned into a potent vehicle for sectarian mobilization' (Freitag 1989: 124) which led later to political mobilization.

In spite of this, David Pinault notes that the Muharram rituals he witnessed in the 1990s in India 'all involved some aspect of darshan [ritual viewing of a sacred image], all drew non-Muslim as well as Muslim participants'

(2001: 18).[17] He adds that 'it would be more accurate to speak of trans-denominational Indian devotionalism than of Hinduism and Islam' (Pinault 2001: 18).[18] Indian Sunnis tend to participate in smaller numbers in Muharram processions due to the influence of the Tablighi Jamaat which aims at eroding the composite culture in rural areas and advocates an end to Muharram processions; also due to the rationalization of practices among Sunni Muslims who migrated to the Middle East and have been exposed to radical forms of Islam.

In Pakistani Punjab, widespread Sunni -and before Partition Hindu -participation in Muharram processions and the introduction of Hindu practices helped create forms of rituals which were considered not as purely Shia but as an element of local folk culture. In some areas, Muharram is celebrated twice a year, once according to the Muslim calendar and once again on the 10th of the Hindu month of Har (mid-June) during the season at which Karbala occurred.[19] Up to now, many *tazieh* licence holders in Lahore and Multan are Sunnis.

At the time of Partition, many ulama from the United Provinces of Northern India emigrated to Pakistan. Many of them, like ulamas from Western Punjab who had obtained their religious education in Lucknow, were strongly opposed to the esoteric, charismatic approach of Shaykhism, an extremist movement based on *tafwid* (delegation of divine powers to the Shia imams who can perform miracles, among other supernatural powers), which contradicts 'orthodox Shiism' and had emerged in North India in the late eighteenth century[20] where it gained wide currency. In spite of that, the majority of Shiite preachers, perhaps influenced by ulama migrated from Hyderabad (Deccan) 'where Shaykhiyya beliefs flourished' (Naqvi 2001: 140), propagated Shaykhiyya doctrines. The majority of the Shia population accepted these beliefs to the point that Shaykhism became dominant in Punjab. Besides, more Hindu rituals which were commonplace in India, like *ag ka matam* (fire walking),[21] were introduced by the Muhajirs in Muharram processions in Karachi. This 'invented' ritual is now part of Muharram processions in Lahore and Multan.

The neo-islamization of Pakistani Shias started before the Iranian revolution. In the late 1960s, local ulama who had completed their studies in Najaf returned to Pakistan where they started a campaign against Shaykhiyya beliefs and unorthodox practices. The most prominent among them was Maulana Mohammad Hussain Dhakko (born in 1933) (Naqvi 2001: 141-144; Naqvi 1984: 319-322) who published a series of books explaining the proper Shia beliefs and aiming at reform of the rituals. He was soon accused of preaching 'Wahhabism' and a systematic campaign was launched against him. The Pakistani Shiites were thus divided into two groups: the 'Dhakko Party' or so-called 'Shia Wahhabis' and the Shaykhis. Many books and pamphlets were published against the Shaykhiyya in Pakistan in the 1970s. Many saw this as an attack on the very foundation of Shiism as it was practised in South Asia.

At the same time, in 1971, the Iraqi government began restricting the visas of non-Arab seminarians, so that Pakistani clerics were compelled to leave Iraq. Many of them went to Iran and a new generation of Qom-educated clerics, together with students of the Imamia Students' Organization (ISO), launched a campaign of rationalization of rituals[22] and utilized old structures for political activism. Some students who were supporters of Maulana Dhakko campaigned against the *zakirs* (religious specialists who recite *majalis*) and were accused by the traditional clergy of being 'Wahhabis'.

The Iranian revolution in 1979 had a tremendous emotional and psychological influence on Pakistani Shias; it gave them a new visibility and empowerment. Shiites were mobilized against the Sunni *hanafi* (Islamic law school) laws that General Zia intended to implement. The creation of the Tehrik-e Nifaz-e Fiqh-e Jaafria (TNFJ, Movement for the Implementation of Shiite Law) as a religious pressure group was announced in April 1979 and Mufti Jaafar Hussain was elected as Qaid-e Millat-e Jaafria (Leader of the Jaafari [i.e. Shiite] People). One of the main demands was the lifting of restrictions on *azadari*. Mufti Jaafar gave the community a degree of unity, but his death in 1983 led to a split between the traditional clerics and the modern reformists. Traditional ulama elected Agha Syed Hamid Ali Musavi, a cleric with Shaykhi leanings, to replace Mufti Jaafar and formed a splinter faction concerned only with *azadari*. At the same time, the ISO and the Qom-educated clerics united around the charismatic leadership of Allama Arif Hussain al Hussaini, who had the support of Iran and was described by Musavi as this 'Pathan who is against *azadari*'.

A kind of 'Qomization' of Pakistan took place under the leadership of Allama Hussaini. Processions which had always been a coming together of communities became occasions for competition over status and a reaffirmation of the superiority of Shia beliefs and devotion to the *ahl-e bait* (the family of the Prophet). Rituals were rationalized and politicized on the Iranian pattern. The divide between 'old' and 'new' Shiites became deeper. As in Iran, the Karbala paradigm was reinterpreted and religious symbolism was used to legitimize political action. Iranian rhetoric was used and slogans against the USA and Israel were heard in 'ISO-sponsored processions'. All this was resented as a provocation by the Sunni majority. Pakistan became 'the site of a battle between Shia and Sunni fundamentalism' (Nasr 2006: 161). Sectarian violence soon became a part of life and Muharram processions are now a nearly exclusively Shia concern and a vehicle for identity assertion and sectarian mobilization.

Polemics and counter-polemics between traditionalists and modernists around rituals are far from over. The main bone of contention is the controversy over the religious lawfulness of *zanjir ka matam* (self-flagellation), a ritual which differentiates Shias from Sunnis. As David Pinault (2003) noted, 'the public self-flagellation functions as a communal marker precisely because other Muslims disapprove of such rituals'. This relatively late introduction[23]

is seen as a symbolic demonstration of love for Hussain with the purpose of earning rewards in Paradise; it indicates remorse at the community's inability to prevent Hussain's martyrdom and places men among those martyred with Hussain. *Zanjir ka matam* expresses at the collective level the courage to endure persecution as a member of a minority community and at the personal level the 'desire to demonstrate physically the willingness to suffer the kind of wounds that would have been incurred at Karbala' (Schubel 1993).[24]

Many ulama disapprove of this practice, claiming that Islam forbids acts that involve deliberate harm to one's body (Ende 1978). The controversy among Shiites over the religious lawfulness of flagellation caused a crisis in the Shiite communities of Lebanon and Iraq which has been called 'the great *fitna*' (dissent). The central figure was Syed Mohsin al Amin al Amili (d. 1952) who, in the late 1920s, declared as *bidaa* not only the flagellations but also the use of musical instruments and drums and the appearance in the processions of unveiled women impersonating Imam Hussain's female relatives (Ende 1978), practices which are still today part of Muharram processions in India and Pakistan. This triggered a chain of polemical replies. Syed Mohsin al Amin did not intend to abolish *azadari*, but rather to revive it by clearing rituals of all *bidaa*. At the same time, many prominent ulama, 'out of fear of losing control over the uneducated masses of their community endorsed the flagellations as a sign of piety, while at the same time refraining from joining these processions' (Ende 1978).

Moreover blood is impure and ulama see this ritual as a perversion. The practice is banned in Iran[25] where fully dressed men use chains rather than curved knives. Scholars regularly issue fatwas denouncing self-flagellation as a *bidaa* (Ende 1978). In answer to questions about *zanjir ka matam*, Ayatollah Sistani said that 'those actions which are not understandable and cause misunderstanding and contempt for the religion must be avoided'; yet some Pakistani Shias claim that Ayatollah Sistani permits *zanjir ka matam* provided there is no fear of loss of life or irreversible injury to any limb. In a sermon on the occasion of Arbain (the fortieth day after Ashura) in 2003, Syed Mohammad Hussain Fadlallah condemned self-flagellation: 'Living Ashura is standing against oppression . . . it is not living in a tragedy of tears and hitting ourselves with swords and chains . . . for swords should be raised against the enemy as we were taught by the Imam.'

Shaykhis refer to polemical pamphlets mostly published in Iraq to defend flagellation. They consider this practice as the height of worship and an expression of love for Hussain, claiming that whatever they do is not sufficient for what Hussain did. Agha Musavi says: 'Azadari is our jugular vein. It is the soul of all ibadat [worship] while zanjir zani is the soul of azadari.' To justify the practice, they quote, for instance, Ayatollah Shirazi: 'The shedding of blood during Muharram for Imam Hussain is not only halal [permitted], but it is also very mustahabb [desirable] and all prominent scholars and religious authorities [marajae] always encouraged it throughout the

history of Islam.' They add that self-inflicted wounds do not get infected and that they heal remarkably well and fast which is a *mojeza* (miracle) of Imam Hussain.

The controversy took a new turn in 1994 when Ayatollah Khamenei issued a fatwa on *azadari* declaring 'unlawful and forbidden' acts of *matam* performed in public, involving the use of weapons to shed one's blood in front of TV cameras and under the 'eyes of enemies and foreigners'.[26] His main concern was obviously the harm caused to the image of Shiism and the fact that this practice might be used to present it as an institution of superstition. Shaykhi ulama published pamphlets against this fatwa and associations were formed to defend *zanjir ka matam*. Many of the reformists interpreted this fatwa as concerning only *shamshir zani* (blows inflicted on the head with a sword) and Maulana Murid Abbas Yazdani, who was then secretary general of the Sipah-e Mohammad, a radical Shiite organization funded by Iran, said that he considered *zanjir ka matam* obligatory.

Following Khamenei's fatwa, ISO students asked Shias to donate blood as a substitute for flagellations and organized blood donation camps in Karachi in collaboration with the Hussaini blood bank, a Shiite NGO.[27] But their initiative did not meet with much success as *zanjir ka matam* is part of the local devotional culture. This practice invokes feelings of strength and identity and anything against it falls on deaf ears.

The awakening which followed the Iranian revolution was subdued at the end of the 1990s and the reformists were marginalized. Greater awareness of Shia identity has also meant a greater susceptibility to Iranian attempts to curb controversial practices. Many of the reformists felt betrayed as they became aware that Iran had been using them for its own political interests and that as Sunnis became more militant, Shiites would only suffer more. Although the majority disapproves of the politicization of processions, ISO activists still raise slogans during Muharram processions. For instance, in February 2006 in Peshawar, they carried banners calling on the government to end diplomatic and economic relations with the European Union to protest against the publication of blasphemous caricatures of the Prophet (Ali 2006). In 2007, during the *Chehlum* (the fortieth day after Ashura) procession in Karachi, 'a number of participants raised slogans against the US and Israel and in favour of Iran and its leadership. Some of them also set fire to US and Israel flags and protested against the atrocities committed in Iraq and Afghanistan' (*Dawn* 2007). In spite of that, the Shia revival in Iraq did not have the same impact as the Iranian revolution; on the contrary, it led to a revival of Shaykhism and of heterodox practices in Pakistan. Mourning rituals have become more ostentatious. The amount spent on *niaz* is increasing every year. *Zanjir ka matam*, which also represents a masculinity ritual, a *rite de passage*, is more and more popular among children and teenagers who emulate each other.

Although intention is essential and *zanjir ka matam* should not be motivated by ostentation, the performance dimension should not be underestimated. Ulama say that women should avoid looking as men take off their shirts in public in a society where nudity is taboo, but the mourners know that women are watching and they want to be seen demonstrating their courage and their devotion. Moreover, every procession is filmed and there is a brisk trade in DVDs; this influences mourners in their performance, consciously or unconsciously. Although the ritual is controlled and others interfere to stop mourners carried away by religious enthusiasm from causing themselves excessive injury when they have reached a state of frenzy, many of them need medical care for major incisions and bleed heavily.[28]

The Shaykhi ulama argue that the celebrations in Karbala prove that mourning rituals are not restricted to India and Pakistan and cannot be considered as Hindu practices. At the same time, they insist on the fact that blood letting is banned in most other countries and they are proud to say that they when it comes to *zanjir ka matam*, Pakistanis put to shame the Arabs who always claim that they are not Muslim enough.[29] This practice is a demonstration to mark Pakistani Shias as distinct not only from local Sunnis but also from Shias abroad, and to show that they are better Shias and real *muhibban-e ahl-e bait* (true lovers of the Prophet's family).

This chapter has attempted to demonstrate that Muharram processions, which were once a display of communal harmony and the expression of a composite culture, have been politicized and used to assert a sectarian identity. In Pakistan, the interference of the State in the 1980s and the impact of regional developments has led to a growing assertiveness of the Shias and a radicalization of sectarian identities. Shias now suffer the backlash of the Shia revival in the Middle East and of the sectarian war in Iraq. Since 2004 processions have regularly been the target of attacks and of suicide bombers and they take place among heavy security, but people participate in greater numbers as they want to show that they are not afraid of attacks and to demonstrate their readiness to die for their beliefs and reassert their Shia identity in a re-creation of Karbala.

The appeal to keep processions restricted to *imambaras* (buildings used for the performance of Shia religious activities) after the Peshawar blast in January 2007 was not well received. Many Shias agree with Maulana Musavi who said: 'Nobody has been able to stop Shias from performing *azadari* since the tragedy of Karbala took place and no one can deter them in future from carrying out this religious rite. Our protests will continue till the Day of Judgment.'

Notes

1 In Urdu, the term *matam* refers collectively to physical acts of mourning.
2 On the history of Shiism in South Asia and the development of rituals, see Cole (1988).

3 The Shiites in Baghdad were allowed to commemorate the events of Karbala for the first time publicly in 963 (Halm 1997: 43). For the significance of Karbala, see p. 00.

4 For a detailed report by Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, among others, see Halm (1997: 49‒52).

5 Aurangzeb prohibited the observance of Muharram rituals, but there was an enormous expansion of mourning rituals in the eighteenth century due to the migration from Iran and the conversions.

6 The origin of the custom of *tazieh* (called *tabut* in South India) is shrouded in legend. The story of Timur Lang's bringing of *tazieh* to South Asia in 1398 is highly questionable. The reason for the development of this tradition is more probably the distance of India from the holy places of Iraq and the fact that pilgrimage was beyond the means of most people in South Asia. The custom started in India in the sixteenth century under Shah Jahan. North Indian *taziehs* strongly evoke the Hindu *rath* (chariot) taken in procession. See Schubel (1993: 110).

7 The Shia-ruled State of North India (1722‒1859).

8 He also introduced congregational Friday prayers and promoted the Usuli school of Shiism as orthodoxy.

9 The faithful horse of Imam Hussain.

10 Interestingly, it is precisely this loss of control which is now widely criticized both by Sunnis and by reformist Shia ulama.

11 This tradition is linked to the thirst of the martyrs of Karbala.

12 This devotion to Zuljinah which is peculiar to South Asia has been strongly criticized by Ayatollah Khomeini.

13 Women make a *mannat* (vow) and pray to the horse for the health of their children.

14 For descriptions of Muharram processions in the pre-Partition period, see, among others, Cole (1988); Hasan (1997); Sharar (1975); Crooke (1917).

15 Hindu *taziehs* were common in Rajasthan, Gujarat and Maharashtra in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

16 We witnessed Hindu veneration for the *taziehs* in Lucknow in April 2007.

17 Pinault describes *darshan* as 'involving seeing . . . but also adorning, clothing, and touching some figural representation of the divine' (2001: 18).

18 A good example is the joint Hindu‒Muslim Muharram procession in Kadegaon, Sangli district (Maharashtra), in February 2006. See 'Hindu‒Muslim Muharram Procession', *India West*, 17 February 2006.

19 Notably in Bhalot Sharif, a village of the NWFP on the bank of the Indus river.

20 For details on Shaykhia beliefs in the Indian subcontinent and the refutation of them by Mohammad Hussain Dhakko, see Naqvi (2001: 135‒149) and Cole (1988: 186‒188).

21 It commemorates the suffering of Zainab who ran from one burning tent to another with other women and children after the forces of Yazid set their camp on fire. This form of *matam* was initiated in Lucknow in the 1940s (interview with Maulana Kalb-e Sadiq, Lucknow, April 2007); see also Freitag (1989: 278).

22 For details about the ISO (created in 1972) and the political mobilization of Pakistani Shias, see Abou Zahab (2007).

23 *Zanjir ka matam* (or *zanjir zani*) as a public ritual appeared in Iran and was introduced in the last decades of the nineteenth century in Lebanon and in India.

24 See also David Pinault (1992: 103‒106).

25 It was first banned by Reza Shah in 1928.

26 'Muharram mein talwaron se sar zakhmi karna khalat kam hai' (To inflict oneself wounds with swords during Muharram is wrong) (*Urdu Blitz*, 9 July 1994).

27 Surprisingly, those who are opposed to *zanjir ka matam* never mention the danger of spreading AIDS.
28 In Lahore, ten persons were hospitalized in 2007 after the Ashura procession and over 2,000 received first aid consisting in an average of 7-8 stitches.
29 Most Iraqi Shias, like Iranians, perform *matam* fully dressed and they use chains rather than knives. Many of them disapprove of the performance of South Asian pilgrims in Najaf and Karbala (personal communication, May 2007).

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8

MODERATING MUHARRAM

Stig Toft Madsen and
Muhammad Hassan[1]

Forms of reform

During Muharram processions, Shia Muslim males beat their breasts with their bare hands, flog their backs with sharp metal instruments, or scar their heads.[2] The ritual has deep roots in Shia Islam and has been considered constitutive of Shia identity and habitus by scholars and believers alike. Equally, however, the sight and the smell of agitated flagellators drenched in blood making their way along streets made slippery by their blood has raised the issue of whether this form of penance should be considered legitimate in the light of Islamic precepts, acceptable in the light of reason, legal in the eyes of the state, politically expedient, or warranted in multiethnic urban environments. According to Sam Harris, the controversial critic of religions, Muharram is an example of irrational behaviour:

> Witness the rebuilding of Iraq: What was the first thing hundreds of thousands of Iraqi Shiites thought to do upon their liberation? Flagellate themselves. Blood poured from their scalps and backs as they walked miles of cratered streets and filth-strewn alleys to converge on the holy city of Karbala, home to the tomb of Hussain, the grandson of the Prophet. Ask yourself whether this was really the best use of their time.
>
> (Harris 2005: 149)[3]

According to Harris, the door that leads believers away from religious dogmatism cannot be opened from the inside. It is always forced open by the power of modernization (Krasnik 2006). If Harris was right, one would not expect the Shia clergy to be the agents of reform of Muharram. Yet the driving force behind the moderation of Muharram has come from leading Shia clerics in Iran and elsewhere, who have declared 'bloody' forms of

flagellation unlawful. Based on their rulings, Shias have invented a new practice, allowing believers to offer blood to blood banks instead of wasting it in self-flagellation. Verily, it looks as if moderation and practical reason flow from the pronouncements of Shia potentates!

In an unpublished paper, Madsen has argued that religion may, indeed, change its spots. While religion is an inherently irrational and dangerous institution that creates sharp, rather than blurred, boundaries between large groups with a high degree of group solidarity,

> humans may handle the danger that religion gives rise to not only by creating competing non-religious structures such as those associated with the institutions of secularism. Religion may also loose its bite by offering people vicarious ways to find their moorings and express their fervor.
>
> (Madsen 2005)

The goal of such ritualistic engineering is a degree of disenchantment or *Entzauberung*:

> Vicarious experience may allow people to water down religious fervor into a shadow world, where the slaughter and sacrifice does not really take place, but remains imagined. While some rituals may be provocative, some forms of vicarious participation open the way to displace religion from the center of social, economic and political life.
>
> (Madsen 2005)

At issue here is whether or not vicarious acts can temper the religious fervour of Muharram. Harris's reading does not bode well for the efficacy of such substitution to appease or mollify religious fervour. Yet this chapter argues that one may see in the reform of Muharram an interesting potential for religious moderation through a toned-down form of participation in a core ritual. Such re-engineered participation falls short of secularization but points to reform.

The blood of the mourners

The Muslim fascination with blood takes several forms. According to the Koran, God bade Abraham sacrifice his son Ismail –rather than his other son Isaac as in the Jewish and Christian traditions –but was allowed to kill a ram in the boy's place. Since then, Muslim families have striven to sacrifice an animal –either a ram, goat, cow or camel –once a year on the occasion of the pilgrimage to Mecca (hajj) at the end of the Islamic lunar year. The animals are slaughtered by cutting their veins and bleeding them to death in order for the meat to be halal and fit for human consumption.

A less widespread tradition connects human blood with the martyrdom of Imam Husain. Imam Husain is the third Imam of the Shia line within Islam. Shortly after the death of the Prophet, the Muslim ummah was divided on the issue of succession. Whereas the Sunni Muslims consider that the Prophet Muhammad was rightly succeeded by the caliphs Abu Bakr, Umar and Osman, the Shia Muslims hold that the *imamat*, or authority of the Prophet, fell on his son-in-law Ali, the husband of Muhammad's daughter Fatima. From Ali, the line of succession among the Shias went to Ali's elder son Hasan. Hasan was poisoned by the governor of Damascus, Amir Muawia. Hasan was succeeded by his younger brother Husain. Subsequently, Amir Muawia's son Yazid demanded that Husain swear loyalty to him, but Husain refused to obey a tyrant and left Medina for Mecca and Iraq.

In 61 AH on *Ashura*, the tenth day in the month of Muharram in the Islamic calendar, the Umayad army of Yazid intercepted Husain, his family and his army (most of which fled before the battle) at Karbala in Iraq. In the ensuing battle Husain was defeated and killed together with seventy-two close companions. Sunni Muslims thereby gained the opportunity to expand and consolidate their power, whereas Shias were left to confront the Umayad and the Abassid dynasties ruling the Muslim world from Damascus and Baghdad.

Except in a few places such as Cairo under the Fatamids and Persia under the Safavids from the sixteenth century onwards, Shias were generally left to play second fiddle. Repeatedly, Shias were even persecuted by Sunnis. Therefore, Shias throughout history have cultivated an image of themselves as innocent victims suffering tyranny. Every year on *Ashura*, Shia clergy recount the martyrdom of Husain at the battle of Karbala, thus inscribing their deprivation into current history. The Shia community typically commemorates the event by street processions in which the enthusiastic mourners, or *azadars*, work themselves into a frenzy by shouting the names of the martyrs, 'Yaa Husain, Yaa Hasan' or by reciting more elaborate lamentation poems while thumping their bare breasts with their hands (*hath ka matam* in Urdu). In many places, the mourners flog themselves. In Iran, mourners may use an instrument (*zanjir*) consisting of a bunch or flail of steel chains held together with a handle to flog themselves on the back. In Pakistan the *zanjirs* are often fitted with steel razors sharpened on both sides, or with small knives. These instruments of self-torture are sold (often by Sunnis) in the markets across Pakistan, including the *sadar bazar* in Karachi. In places with less market access, mourners have to make do with ordinary razor blades. The practice of *zanjiri zani* may be compared to another form of penance known as *shamshir zani* where wounds are inflicted to the (fore)head with daggers. Alternatively, mourners may tie weights to hooks and suspend them from their breast. This is done in some parts of Karachi, for example. All forms of penance in which blood is shed may be referred to as bloody forms of Muharram or *qameh zadan* (literally 'dagger-striking' in Farsi). The

wounds that the flagellants inflict on themselves often heal quickly, but some require medical treatment.

Varied response to Muharram processions

The response of non-Shias to Muharram processions varies. In Banaras in North India and Hyderabad in South India, Sunnis and Hindus participate in some parts of the Muharram rituals, which thereby serve to integrate, or symbolically merge, various religious communities who imagine themselves to be temporary fellow-mourners (Katz 2004, Pinault 1992: 99-100, 2001: 21).[4] Similar syncretistic, or 'transcretistic', trends are found elsewhere in India. In New York City, Shias have staged Muharram processions on Park Avenue, advertising the event widely and linking it to the fight against terror. Nonetheless, in many parts of the Islamic, Buddhist and Christian worlds, Muharram processions are looked upon with disgust and disapproval, or seen, at the least, as an 'infelicitous performance', as Pinault reports from Chicago (2001: 218). Examples of negatively tinted portrayals of Muharram may be found in V. S. Naipaul's writings from Iran (see Naipaul 2006) and in Dervla Murphy's travelogue from Baltistan (Murphy 1977: 133-138). Pinault conveys several graphic portrayals of Muharram by British writers in India, including Rudyard Kipling and William Sleeman, who saw the processions as the supreme test of the ability of the colonial power to handle 'Muhammadans' inflamed to madness (Pinault 1992: 64).

Nowadays, in some Indian cities including Lucknow, Muharram processions are regularly banned so as to forestall Shia-Sunni clashes. In the largely Buddhist city of Leh in Ladakh, a 'social boycott' was imposed on Muslims by Buddhists from 1989 to 1992. One of the issues dividing the communities was the Muharram procession. Shia Muslims in Norway, Denmark and Sweden have also started commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Husain. In Norway, flagellation occurs out of public view, but mourners who turn up for medical treatment have to pay because their wounds are self-inflicted (Bjarne Skov, e-mail, 1 December 2006). In February 2006, a procession was organized in Denmark when the controversy over the cartoons of Muhammad in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands Posten* was at its peak. Fearing violence, the Copenhagen police followed the procession closely, but the mourners carried umbrellas to protect themselves against the rain rather than chained knives, and no untoward incident occurred (Clausen 2006). Still, this may have been the first time the Danish public has held its breath on the occasion of Muharram. Whereas fear of violence in connection with religious processions is a recent developments, the city has witnessed several incidents of football hooliganism. According to Paul Brass, the two forms of collective violence actually share common dynamics and mechanisms. In Brass's view, Bill Buford's book about British football hooligans entitled *Among the Thugs* (1992) provides the best description

of how gatherings may 'go off' on a spree of violence (Paul R. Brass at a seminar in April 2003 in Denmark; see also Brass 2003: 29, 259, 379).[5] Both formal and more impromptu processions –whether religious or not – present a risk: male mobs may turn violent through the sheer combination of emotional fervour and the act of congregating and marching through public space. However, as Brass emphasizes, mobs do not always turn violent, even when emotionally charged. Feelings may run high, but mobs characteristically await the signal of individual riot 'specialists' before letting go. The art of peace is to play the game according to rules that enable people to displace and control the violence which inheres in social life. Walking this thin line has been famously described by Clifford Geertz in his study of Balinese cock fights (Geertz 1973).

In South Asia, the apprehension that religious processions may turn violent is deeply ingrained both historically (Bayly 1985) and in the present. Some years ago Madsen had a conversation with an officer at the Indian Embassy in Copenhagen during which he said that there would soon be a chance to see a carnival in Copenhagen. A sort of parochialization of the much more elaborate Rio carnivals, the idea of Danish carnivals had been floated to bring more flavour to the streets of Copenhagen. The immediate reaction of this young, and somewhat timid, diplomat was to extend his assurances that he was confident that soon the government would bring the situation under control, and that life would return to normality. To the official mind, processions often convey war by other means.

Given these responses to processions in general and to Muharram processions in particular, what is the possibility of moderating Muharram?

The new political economy of blood

The Iranian revolution in 1979 has fostered extremism among Muslims in many places, but in some respects the Iranian revolution has had the potential to promote reform and moderation instead. Thus in 1994, Ayatollah Sayyed Ali Khamenei (President 1981–1989, Supreme Spiritual Leader 1990–present) issued a statement that the practice of drawing blood by flogging during Muharram is not an Islamic principle (*usool*), but a practice without roots in the scriptures. According to Pinault's reading of Khamenei's fatwa, 'his primary concern was the harm that might befall the image of Shi'a Islam if outsiders saw Muharram mourners scourging themselves' (Pinault 2001: 149). Thus Khamenei wrote, 'It is not a question of individual or physical harm, but of great injuries linked to the reputation of Islam' (Pinault 2001: 149; see also Pinault 2003). Khamenei's intention, according to Pinault, was to unite Shias and Sunnis religiously in order to face common political enemies. The fatwa had a considerable impact. Several religious leaders in Pakistan, including Sayyed Ali Sharafuddin Musavi Ali Abadi in Karachi and Agha Sayyed Twaha Shamsuddin Almoosavi in Shigar in Baltistan, have

accepted Khamenei's fatwa. In support of their stand, religious leaders often quote a (non-specified) saying (*hadith*) of the Prophet to the effect that saving one life is like saving all of humanity. Further, some Iranian and Pakistani religious leaders have argued that since Shias are not so down-trodden nowadays, they no longer need to express their identity through self-flagellation. Instead, the argument goes, devout Muslims should use the occasion of Muharram to donate blood to help the sick in the name of Imam Husain. Blood is a scarce good and should not be wasted.

In Pakistan, among the first to adopt the new ideas were Shia students in universities, colleges and schools, organized in the Imamiya Students' Organization (ISO). Together with the Imamiya Organization of Pakistan, the ISO established the Imamiya Blood Transfusion Services. Collaborating with the Husaini Blood Bank, a medical NGO, these organizations have opened blood donation camps on the ninth and tenth days of Muharram where people can give blood to blood banks in various public and private hospitals.[6] After the blood has been deposited, patients only have to pay for it to be screened, and poor patients may not have to pay at all. Both men and women may donate blood, and the blood is available to all patients, irrespective of religious affiliation. This non-commercial venture started in Karachi, but it has since spread to other parts of Pakistan. In Skardu in Baltistan, a blood donation society was present in 2006 during the Muharram processions request-ing people to register as donors on demand. Skardu does not have facilities to store blood, hence the need for commitments rather than immediate blood donations (Hassan, e-mail dated 18 August 2006).

Khamenei's fatwa has also made an impact on Shias in the Levant. According to Zaatari:

> Two years ago, Hizbullah issued instructions forbidding members and supporters of the resistance group from engaging in self-flagellation and have set up blood donation centers to replace blood being lost during the ceremony. The ban has also received support from a number of leading Shiite figures in the region, including the Iranian Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and Lebanon's Sayyed Mohsen Amin, Sayyed Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah and the late Sheikh Mohammed Mahdi Shamseddine. One religious leader has stressed the importance of celebrating Ashura 'away from exaggerations which have become irrelevant to the event, such as exaggerating the nar-ration of the Ashura event, by some readers of the Husseini history'.
>
> (Zaatari 2003)

In a recent article, Deeb notes that Lebanese women are increasingly pro-minent in Ashura processions. Taking Husain's sister, Sayyida Zaynab, as a role model rather than Fatima, these Shia women emphasize courage and leadership. Such feminization of the public sphere, according to Deeb, puts

less stress on the public expression of grief and more on piety and reform (Deeb 2006).

In New York, too, a Husaini Blood Bank was set up in connection with the Muharram procession in 2006 (http://www.shiachat.com/forum/lofiversion/index.php/t74084.html, accessed 24 September 2006).

In other words, people within the religious establishment in Iran, South Asia, the Levant and elsewhere have reinterpreted one of the central practices among Shia Muslims in utilitarian and humane directions. Donating blood benefits others while imposing less of a penance upon oneself. As in the case of Abraham's sacrifice of a ram instead of Ismail, here, too, a more severe form of penance is substituted by a less demanding, but supposedly scripturally valid, sacrificial gift. At the same time, the new political economy of blood is an attempt by the clergy and members of the educated classes to modify and purify the religious practices of the masses in a direction which the clergy considers both orthodox and politically expedient. In this way, the moderation of Muharram is part of the levelling that Ernest Gellner posits as a characteristic of modern nations.[7]

For a theologically sophisticated Shiism

Notwithstanding these recent attempts to appease Sunni Muslims by moderating Muharram, the divisions between Sunnis and Shias continue to run deep within Islam. Sunni Islam has always been sensitive to the sin of *shirk* ('association', veneration of anything other than God). The propensity of Shia Muslims to focus on the House of the Prophet (Ahl al-Bayt), their openness towards the idea of intercession by saints, and their attendant urge to visit graves and other holy places have repeatedly alarmed and mobilized Sunnis. The Sunni aversion to the worship of graves has been dramatically manifested in Saudi Arabia where the Wahhabis, upon coming to power, destroyed a number of sites held dear by Shias. The most important such site is located adjacent to the Mosque of the Prophet in Medina. Here the graveyard of 'Muhammad's aunts, of nine of his wives, and of his infant son Ibrahim, as well as of male descendants through the marriage of the Prophet's only child to survive, his daughter Fatima, to his cousin Ali', i.e. of the second, fourth, fifth and sixth Imams, was destroyed in 1925 by an army led by first king of the present Saudi kingdom (Rodenbeck 2006: 44, Howden 2006). This act of aggression, according to Rodenbeck, should be interpreted as a part of a century-long backlash against Shias that can be traced to the fall of the Fatamids. The rivalry between the two sects continued as a rivalry between the Ottoman and the Safavid empires from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, the period during which many Shia institutions crystallized (Pinault 2001: 163).

More recently, however, the backlash against Shias has been tempered by the apparently secure Sunni dominance of the Muslim world outside Iran,

Iraq and Lebanon. Sunnis currently make up about 85 per cent of the world's Muslims. Such numerical and political dominance, argues Rodenbeck, has until recently been so secure that prominent Sunnis have extended their munificence to Shias. Thus, in 1959, al-Azhar University in Egypt accepted Iranian 'twelver' Shiism as a form of Islam (Rodenbeck 2006: 46). In several Sunni-dominated countries individual Shias have held high positions. The 'father' of Pakistan, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, after all, was a Shia. However, this balance of power is increasingly threatened by the decline of secularism, the revival of Sunni Islam in the Arab world and Pakistan, the revival of Shia Islam in Iran, Lebanon and elsewhere, and by the wars in Afghanistan. The confrontation between the two sects is currently most intense in Iraq despite the restraining voice of Iraq's leading Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. According to Vali Nasr (2006), Shiites account for about half the population in the Middle East, Iran included. Thus, Shia–Sunni conflicts have the potential to spread further in the Middle East, threatening the balance which has been precariously built up.

Such deterioration of relationships has been visible in Pakistan for more than two decades. Pakistan has a sizeable Shia population spread out over most of the country, even including some of the tribal agencies in the North-Western Frontier Province. According to radical Sunnis, Shias make up only 2.5 per cent of the population, but others put the figure at 30 per cent. In reality, the Shias may constitute between 12 and 15 per cent of the country's population (Ahmad 2003). Until the Iranian revolution, Shia politicians focused on safeguarding their rituals (including Muharram) and on the integrity of their belief system. After the Iranian revolution, an increasing number of Shias went to Qom in Iran for higher studies. The result was that Pakistani Shias have become 'more centralized, more clericalist, more Iranianized, and more integrated with the international Shi'i community' (Ahmad 2003: 64). At the extreme, heavily armed Shia militant groups have organized in the Sipah-i-Muhammad to battle Sunnis organized in the Sipah-i-Sahabah under the shared principle of *khun ka badlah khun*, i.e. blood for blood (Ahmad 2003: 69).

In this perspective, the fatwa against shedding blood during Muharram issued in 1994 stands a lesser chance today of effecting a rapprochement between the two major sects within Islam than it did when Khamenei issued it. Rather, the Muharram passion plays may act on Sunnis increasingly like a red cloth in front of a raging bull. How, then, may the reform of Muharram proceed?

According to David Pinault's sensitive study of Muharram, Shias might 'articulate further that which is most characteristically Shi'a in worldview and theological insight, so as to contribute more actively to religious dialogue' in the USA and elsewhere (Pinault 2001: 221). Such a theology, Pinault recommends, should not simply 'explore suffering as the consequence of human evil localized in specific figures such a Cain and Yazid' or in their
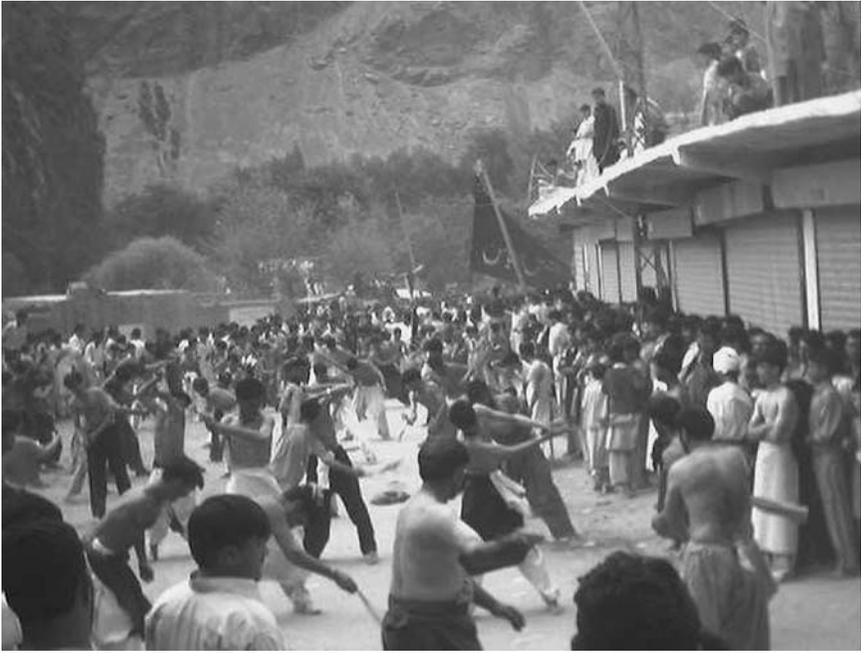
Figure 8.1 'Flogging flock' in a Muharram procession.

more recent substitutes such as the Ottomans or the Americans. Instead of such a 'cosmic vendetta-vision', Pinault argues that Shia Muslims should learn from recent developments within the Catholic Church. These developments focus on 'our ongoing personal responsibility for Jesus's sufferings', and not on Jewish treachery and deicide, which the Vatican formally held responsible for the death of Jesus until 1965. The recent rapprochement between Catholics and Protestants, Pinault believes, rests on the notion that both sects contribute to Christian theology. Similarly, a reformed Shia Islam would 'encourage reflection, self-criticism, and spiritual interiority' in a manner that would align the Shia theology of suffering with key Sunni principles. Pinault's arguments may carry little weight with the majority of Shias who want to express their grief over Husain's martyrdom in the traditional manner. In Skardu traditional Muharram processions are still popular, as can be seen in Figure 8.1 which shows the Muharram processions in 2006. For many Shias the prospects of a grand political alliance between Shias and Sunnis are of little concern. Yet the Muharram processions are already non-confrontational in some important respects. They focus on the battle lost, not on the battle to be won. Though they are a species of 'the mother of all processions', i.e. funerary processions, they do not feature replicas of corpses. In that sense, they are already 'religion light'. The reflexivity that

Pinault recommends would further lower the fervour or pitch of Muharram processions. A theologically and ritualistically more sophisticated Shiism counterbalancing the excesses of Muharram may still develop despite the current sectarian crisis in the Islamic world.

Notes

1 This chapter was written by Madsen based on our initial conversations in 2002 at the Department of International Development Studies at Roskilde University in Denmark. First published by *Monsun* on the net (Hassan and Madsen 2003), the present chapter also draws on the revised paper presented at the Nineteenth European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies held 27–30 June 2006 in Leiden and the comments offered there. The authors would like to thank Bjarne Skov and Hugh van Skyhawk for drawing our attention to the works of David Pinault and Finn Thiesen for clarifying details regarding Muharram.

2 Similarly, women also sometimes beat their breasts, but rarely in public processions (Pinault 1992: 109–10).

3 See also Meera Nanda's critique of Sam Harris (Nanda 2005).

4 We are not aware whether Christians anywhere in South Asia participate in Muharram. Catholics were forbidden by the Pope in 1744 to participate in pagan processions, but have since reformulated their procession policy several times (Bugge 1991: 123–124).

5 The book is based on Buford's 'infiltration' of a Manchester United fan club. Football violence is not limited to Europe. In 1969 the so-called 'Soccer War' broke out between Honduras and El Salvador (Kapuscinski 1992), and in Senegal football violence on a smaller scale is a regular feature that also involves 'maraboutization', i.e. sorcery (Andersen 2006).

6 The Imamiya Students Organization together with the Sipah-i-Muhammad 'have emerged as the militant wings' of Pakistani Shiism (Ahmad 2003).

7 For a contemporaneous discussion of issues raised by Gellner, see Ismail (2004).

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9

MUHARRAM PROCESSIONS AND THE ETHICIZATION OF HERO CULTS IN THE PRE-MODERN DECCAN

Hugh van Skyhawk

Writing on 7 January 1849, in letter forty-two of his famous 'Hundred letters', Gopāḷ Hari Deśmukh (1823–1892), alias Lokah ītavādī ('Propounder of Social Well-being'), who was later to be deemed one of the founders of Liberalism in Maharashtra (Lederle 1976: 112–124), confirms the widespread Hindu practice of building grave replicas (*tābūd*, *ta'ziya*) and carrying them in processions on the tenth day of the Islamic month Muharram (*āšūra*) as observance of communal mourning for Ḥusain ibn 'Alī, who was martyred together with seventy-two loyal relatives and followers on the battlefield of Karbalā on the same day in 61 AH (680 AD):[1]

> As the Hindus are not proud of their religion today they have fallen.
> One sees that in their deeds. Though they are Hindus by birth, they
> practise *Musalmān-dharma*. At present in Puṇe there are some five
> or ten *ḍoḷās* (= *tābūd*, *ta'ziya*) of the Muslims and a hundred of
> the Hindus. And just as these people see to the *śrāddha* rituals for
> their ancestors or the pilgrimage to Vāraṇāsi they take the matter
> into their hands and build replicas of Husain's grave. Isn't that
> a disgrace for the Hindu religion? . . . What blindness this is! Their
> ignorance has become great! Thus they sit down in front of the
> Muslims, perform (the ritual), and become fakirs![2] . . . But these
> people are not ashamed. They spend money and build replicas
> of Husain's grave. And the morons take vows in front of these
> *tābūd*s. Just like this –so I've heard –have some Brahmins fallen.
> In fulfilment of their vows their wives pour water from vessels in

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front of the *tābūd* on the day the *tābūd*-procession takes place. . . .
The Hindus have adopted the customs of the Muslims completely!
(Deśamukha 1967: 105)

Though recent years have seen the publication of several important stud-
ies on Shiism in India and, specifically, in the Deccan (Pinault 1992), apart
from remarks in passing, no attempt has been made to explain why the mourn-
ing procession of a minority community within the minority community of
Indian Muslims achieved such widespread and exuberant acceptance among
non-Shiites, and, even more remarkably, among non-Muslims. It will be the
work of this chapter to illuminate this important question.

Using historical, religious-historical, archaeological, and traditional oral
sources, I intend to show how the sacred events that are remembered and
re-enacted in Muharram mourning processions, especially on the tenth day
of Muharram (*āšūra*), were seen by Hindus as familiar themes in the reli-
gious landscape of the pre-modern Deccan, while, at the same time, devo-
tion to Ḥusain and the People of the House (*ahl-i-bayt*) added a new
dimension to indigenous hero worship: the divine passion of a holy martyr,
Ḥusain ibn ʿAlī, younger son of Fatimā bint Muḥammad and grandson of
the Holy Prophet Muḥammad (PBUH).

Certainly, no analysis of the development of Muharram as a major reli-
gious observance in the pre-modern Deccan can ignore the geo-political deci-
sions of two centuries of Muslim rulers. Shiism had been openly and, at times,
assiduously promoted by the Muslim sultans of the Deccan since as early as
1422, when Aḥmad Šāh Wālī Bāhmanī (ruled 1422‑1436) invited the great
Sufi-šāyḫ of Kirmān, Šāh Niʿmat ʿAllāh (d. 1431 AD), to take up residence
at his new capital, Bidar. In Bijapur, Yusuf ʿĀdīl Šāh (ruled 1490‑1510 AD)
attempted in 1506 to establish Shiism as the state religion and, later,
ʿIsmāʿfīl (ruled 1510‑1534) and ʿAlī ʿĀdīl Šāh (ruled 1558‑1580) openly
practised Shiism as state religion. In the long reign of Burhān Niẓām Šāh
of Ahmadnagar (1510‑1553) Shiism was not only the religion of the court
and the capital city but was disseminated to villages throughout the sultanate
by the efforts of the prime minister Šāh Tāhir al-Dakkanī (in office 1520–
1538), who may have been the thirty-first *imām* of the Muḥammad Šāhī Niẓārī
ʿIsmāʿīlīs (Daftary 1990: 554). From the time of Aḥmad Šāh Wālī Bāhmanī
until the final conquest of the Deccan sultanates by Aurangzīb in 1687 the
promotion of Shiism was always linked to the hope of gaining support from
Iran against the invasions of the predominantly Sunni Mughals.

Though royal decree may declare a religion to be the official faith of a
state, it cannot oblige the people to have enthusiasm for its practice, as no
less a monarch than Akbar, the Great Mughal (ruled 1556‑1605), was to
learn when Rājā Mān Siṅgh refused to accept his *Dīn-i-ʿIllāhī*. Thus, the
widespread participation of Hindu devotees in pre-modern Muharram
processions must be explained with reference to the interaction of popular

Shiism with indigenous religious traditions and practices of the Deccan. The most significant single historical development in this context was the introduction of the portable replica (*tābūd*, *ta'ziya*) of Husain's grave to Muharram processions by none other than Tīmūr Lane (d. 1405) on his return to India from a pilgrimage to Karbalā in 1398 (Sharīf 1972: 164).

The worship of hero stones (*vīra-gal*) had been one of the two predominant forms of popular religiosity in the Deccan since time immemorial, the other being the worship of God by entering into an emotional relationship with one's chosen deity (*bhakti*) (Settar and Kalaburg 1982: 17). The Muharram procession with portable grave replicas was to combine both indigenous forms of religious experience with popular Shiite cults of Husain and his ten-year-old nephew, Qāsim ibn Hasan, the Holy Bridegroom. Moreover, the cult of Husain as protector of the family is typical of later, more ethicized, Vaiṣṇava *vīra*s of the Deccan such as Viṭhṭhala of Paṇḍharpūr (though he himself may have begun his career as a cattle rustler) (Sontheimer 1982: 265ff.), while the cult of the slain bridegroom had long been a familiar theme in hero stones, the slain *dūlā-vīra* or bridegroom hero often being depicted on the upper panel of hero stones in the company of heavenly nymphs (*āpsaras*) who escort him to the heaven of Śiva where he will (presumably) dwell in bliss for eternity.

Though the *vīra* ('hero') of the *vīra-gal* was worshipped or petitioned for help in various worldly matters by devotees, detailed re-experiencing of his agonies and death struggle was not a typical form of hero-stone worship. Thus, specific descriptions of the hero's battle and heroic death were often forgotten (Sontheimer 1982: 263). In the cults of Husain and Qāsim the reverse is true: vivid word pictures of the injuries and suffering of the holy martyrs are invoked by sobbing rhapsodists (*zakīr*, *waqia'ah ḫān*) at mourning assemblies each year during the month of Muharram, eternal bliss in paradise being more axiomatic here than the focal point of devotion. Unlike the meditative detachment typical of the *vīra* or *yogī* when facing death, the agonies of Husain, his relatives, and his loyal followers are felt to be very near indeed. One remembers the heroic attempt of Abbās 'Alī Alamdār to bring water in a leather bag from the Euphrates to quench the thirst of the dying children in Husain's camp. One remembers Husain standing as a supplicant asking for water with his infant son, 'Alī Ašgar, in his arms. One remembers the cruel answer of his enemies in the form of a three-headed poisoned arrow inscribed with the names of Abu Bakr, Omar, and Uthmān (for Shias, usurpers of 'Alī's caliphate) that pierces 'Alī Ašgar's innocent heart and the heart of Islam in one terrible blow. As the early Austro-Hungarian Jewish Orientalist Ignaz Goldziher (1850‒1921) once observed: 'The mourning for Husain forms the very essence of Islam. It is impossible for a Shî'ah not to weep. His heart forms a living grave, the grave proper for the head of the beheaded martyr' (Goldziher 1910: 213f. quoted and translated into English by Lassy 1916: 135).

Such word pictures were so well known to participants in Muharram observances that objects closely related to the martyrs could be used in processions as characteristic symbols that would be immediately recognized by the masses, such as the *mašk-i-Sakīnah*, the leather water-bag carried by Abbās ʿAlī Alamdār on his heroic ride to the Euphrates, the noble shield of Ḥusain, the *ḍhāl sāhib*, or Lord Horseshoe, the *naʿl sāhib*, which is said to be a horseshoe from Ḥusain's battle charger, Zuljanah, which had been brought by a pilgrim from Karbalā to Bijāpūr and later taken to Hyderabad, in which the spirit of the Holy Bridegroom, Qāsim ibn Ḥasan, is believed to dwell (Sharīf 1972: 160).

From the point of view of history of religions we recognize two major themes in the popular cults of Ḥusain and Qāsim: protection of the family and the granting of children as effected by worshipping *taʿziyas* and *naʿl sāhibs*, respectively. In 1907 John Campbell Oman reported for Lahore:

> While the *tazias* stood in their appointed places on the roadside, devout women were fanning them with palm leaves and horse-hair *chauris* (fly-flappers), and even with their own *chaddars* (veils). Some were Hindu women, probably unfortunate mothers, who thus paid respect to the effigies of the martyrs' tombs, in the fond hope that Imam Husain would graciously extend his protection to their surviving children and grant them long life. . . . In one instance I noticed a woman pinning on to a *tazia* with her own hands a paper on which her *arzi* (petition) to the martyrs was written, and it need not be doubted that she did so in trembling hope of a favourable response.
>
> (Omen 1907: 300f., quoted in Pinault 1992: 3)

Even a brief review of the corresponding entries in the *Gazetteer of India, Maharashtra State* for the districts Aurangabad and Ahmadnagar, and (beginning in 1969) for District Bid,[3] will confirm that similar devotion to Ḥusain via the *taʿziya* or to Qāsim ibn Ḥasan via the *naʿl sāhib* was widespread among Hindus in the pre-modern Deccan (in some places even continuing to the present day). While supplication and petition are characteristic forms of devotion with regard to Ḥusain and his *taʿziya*, the cult of Qāsim ibn Ḥasan embodied in the *naʿl sāhib* was (and still is) a cult of possession. Strangely, David Pinault (quoting Sir Richard Temple's diary of 14 May 1867) mentions the *naʿl sāhib* in his 1991 monograph on popular Shiite piety in Hyderabad but does not explain what it might be or mean as a popular religious symbol:

> In the evening I went out driving to see the tazia processions by torch-light in Chadarghat. The usual crowds and detachments of the Nizam's troops were present. About midnight the torchlight procession

of the '*Na'l sāhib*' took place. I wrote to the minister to know if it was worth seeing, but he replied that it was attended only by the lowest classes of the population.

<div align="right">(Pinault 1992: 83)</div>

Thus, Ja'far Sharīf's description of 1832 remains the most detailed account of the cult of the *na'l sāhib* in the pre-modern Deccan:

As soon as they see the new moon . . . They recite the Fātiha over sugar in the name of the martyrs and go to the spot selected for the fire pit (*alāwā*). . . . [A day or two later] After the pit is dug they light fires in it every evening during the festival, and ignorant people, young and old, fence across it with sticks or swords. Or they run around it calling out: 'Yā 'Alī! Shāh Hasan! Shāh Husain! Dulhā! Dulhā! Hae dost! Rahiyo! Rahiyo!' In Gujarāt a hole is dug about a foot broad and a foot deep. In this hole a fire is kindled and the person who has vowed to become a Dulā, Dulhā, or bride-groom, goes round the fire seven or eleven times. If any of his friends notices the bridegroom spirit moving the devotee they wave a rod with feathers on it up and down before his face, fanning him gently, while incense is freely burnt. The people round keep up a chorus of 'Dūlā! Dūlā! Dūlā!' to the measure of which the person wishing to be possessed sways at first in gentle, and by degrees, in more violent, oscillations. When the full power of the 'breath' (hāl) fills the devotee, that is, when his eyeballs turn up and become fixed in a steady stare, and his body grows cold, he is made to keep his face bowed among the peacock feathers. After his face has been for some time pressed in the feathers, the spirit seizes him and he rushes out heedless of water or of fire. As he starts, one of his friends holds him from behind, supporting and steadying him. He guides the Dūlā's aimless impulses to the Akhārā or place of other Dūlās or of the ta'ziya cenotaphs, where fresh incense is burnt before his face. On the way from place to place the Dūlā is stopped by wives praying for the blessing of children, or the removal of a rival, or the casting out of a jinn or other evil spirit. To secure a son the Dūlā generally directs a flower or two to be plucked from the jasmine garlands that deck his rod, a bar of silver or iron ending in a crescent or horseshoe, and covered with peacock feathers. . . . On the seventh day of the moon, by the ignorant on the seventh day of the month, the standard of the martyr Qāsim, distinguished by a little silver or gold umbrella fixed on it, is paraded. . . . He is one of the sacred bridegrooms, for at the age of ten he was betrothed to Fātima, daughter of Husain, and was slain in battle. . . . His standard is carried by a man on horseback and the dancing girls

who follow sing elegies and beat their breasts. Sometimes it is carried by a man on foot who reels like a madman calling out 'Dulhā!' 'Dulhā!' 'Bridegroom!' as he passes any 'Āshūrkhāna on the road he salutes the standards and recites the Fātiha over the smoke of burning aloes wood. Then he is escorted to his own 'Āshūrkhāna, where he is laid on a stool as he is believed to impersonate the dead martyr, shrouded and treated as a corpse, while lamentations are made. . . . The Holy Horseshoe is made of gold, or other metal, or of wood, or paper smeared with sandlewood paste. It is rather larger than a common horseshoe. The bearers rush through the crowd, upsetting men, women, and children to the diversion of the lookers-on.

Some, in ignorance of the Law, make a thing like a human figure, and put the horseshoe on it as a head. . . . A woman makes a vow to the horseshoe: 'If through thy favour I am blessed with a son I promise to make him run with thy procession.' Should a son be born to her she puts a parasol in his hand and makes him run with it. . . . Something of the bridegroom's spirit is supposed to dwell in the horseshoe, which works miraculous cures. To gain the inspiration a silver or iron rod ending in a crescent or horseshoe, and covered on all sides with peacock's feathers, is set up with the burning of incense. In the Deccan, particularly in Hyderabad, after each Muharram many such rods with horseshoes mounted on the tops are thrown into a well, and before the next Muharram all those who have thrown their rods into the well go there and await the pleasure of the martyr who makes the rod of the person he has chosen rise to the surface.

(Sharīf 1972: 158f.)

Writing in 1977, B. G. Kunte confirmed the continuing importance of the cult of Qāsim and Lord Horseshoe in Muharram processions in Aurangabad District:

The month of *Muharram* . . . is observed indifferently by *Sunnis* and *Shiahs* and the proceedings with the *Sunnis*, at any rate, have now rather the character of a festival than a time of sorrow. Models of the tomb of Husain called *tazia* or *tabut* are made of bamboo and paste-board and decorated with tinsel. These are taken in procession and deposited in a river on the last and great day of *Muharram*. Women who have made vows for the recovery of their children from an illness dress them in green and send them to beg; and a few men and boys having themselves painted as tigers go about mimicking as a tiger for what they can get from the spectators. At the *Muharram*, models of horse-shoes made after the caste shoe of

Kasim's horse[4] are carried fixed on poles in a procession. Men who feel so impelled and think that they will be possessed by the spirit of Kasim make these horse shoes and carry them. Frequently they believe themselves possessed by the spirit, exhibiting the usual symptoms of a kind of frenzy and women apply to them for children or for having evil spirits cast out.

<div align="right">(Kunte 1977: 350)</div>

Writing the first gazetteer of Biḍ District in 1969, the late Padmabushan Setu Madhavrao Pagadi documented the continuing importance of *ta'ziya* processions:

The Shias and the Sunnis keep different holy days. However, festivals like the *Muharram*, the *ramzān* and the *bakr id* are common to both the sects. . . . Another activity in the *Muharram* festival is the preparing of *taaziahs* or *tābūts*, bamboo or tinselled models of the shrine of the *Imām* at Karbalā, some of them large and handsome costing a few hundred rupees. . . . Poor Hindus and Muslims, men and women, in fulfilment of vows throw themselves in the roadway and roll in front of the shrine.

<div align="right">(Pagadi 1969: 204f.)</div>

The colourful and, at the same time, highly didactic contents of pre-modern Muharram processions cannot fail to have left vivid impressions of Ḥasan, Ḥusain, the *pañcatan pāk* ('The Pure Five'), and the *ahl-i-bayt* ('The People of the House') in the minds of devotees of all communities. But up to now historical reconstruction of the popular cults of Ḥusain and Qāsim has been attempted only on the basis of descriptions of contemporary observers. In contrast, the following oral text of the Dhangar shepherds of the Deccan offers a perception of Ḥusain and the 'People of the House' from within a community known for its Bhakti to god Viṭhṭhala and its devotion to the cult of hero stones:

On the bank of a river a *dhangar* kept watch over his sheep. He saw that each time a [certain] *bāhmaṇ* (Brahmin) performed [his rituals] he took his sacred thread in his hand and laid it over his neck[5] . . . 'It's about Yallamā, isn't it?'[6] [a listener interjects].
   Yekvā, Mhākvā, Durgāvā, Durgvā, Margvā, Jakvā, Tukvā, these were the 'Seven Sisters'. 'Seven Sisters' [there were], and the youngest was Yallavā [Yallamā],[7] and she was the most stubborn, this Canarese Yallavā. These 'Seven Sisters' joined together, took shield and sword, and went off hunting, these 'Seven Sisters'.[8] What happened then? When they had gone hunting in the forest at a certain place the little sister, Yallavā, became thirsty.[9] 'O elder

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sister! I feel very thirsty,' she said. Then she said: 'Let's stay [for a while] at this place.' And she said: 'You go, drink water, and come back.' And the little Yallavā went to drink water [too].[10]

Going through jungles, through bushlands, through grasslands, how would Yallavā find her way back? She wouldn't.[11] So what did she do? She wove ropes of grass and bound up mounds of stone as way markers for coming back. Like this she went very far.[12] Where did she want to find water? She climbed up a little hill and gave such [angry] looks in all directions.[13] And where did she see water? She saw water in Mahādev's pond. The water in Mahādev's pond sparkled so brightly that she went there to drink from it.[14] Now, after she had drunk from it, what happened to the chickpea bush there on the bank of the pond?[15] [Mahādev thought:] 'The chickpeas should not be picked! The beautiful yellow chickpeas should not be picked! Now she has gone into [my] water up to her knees and thighs, filled her cupped hands, and has drunk [my] water.[16] [And now] on the way back this has come into her head: 'I should take a twig of the chickpeas.' [And] chewing on that she should go [17] [on her way].' So when she took such a twig in her hand Mahādev cried out: 'Don't pluck that twig! If you pluck that twig, blame will fall on your head!' Just as she thought: 'Now I'm going to pluck the twig I'm holding', [Mahādev spoke a curse:] 'The same to your own father!', and on the palm of the hand with which she had held and pulled [the twig] a blister appeared on Yallamā.[18] Yallamā held the hand on which the blister had come on her stomach.

The little mother went very far. The blister began to burn. When the blister began to burn a lot . . . [anacoluth]. What did she do because the blister burned? 'Now', she said, 'the blister should be pierced.'[19] So what did she do? With the thorn of a Piḷakuṭi she pierced the blister. When she pierced it there was a lump of blood in the blister and a little baby was born, just as when the full moon has risen and its light falls [on the earth], such was the radiance of this baby.[20] But who was that baby who was born from the blister on Yallamā's hand? Parasarāma [Paraśurāma]. She tore off the end of her ochre-coloured silken sari, cleansed the new-born baby with it, and held him on her stomach, and holding the baby crosswise on her stomach, Yallavā set out.[21]

On her way she saw the 'Seven Sisters'.[22] 'Stay away!', they cried. 'Don't come closer! You have made us the relatives of a bastard! We don't want to touch you! And we don't want you in our group! As you have borne a bastard go away from us![23] Don't ever come to us!' Then the six sisters turned back.[24] The Canarese Yallavā had a problem. 'O God! What shall I do now? My sisters have said that I am blameworthy with no reason at all, then where shall I eat now?'

Weeping bitterly she said: 'Where should I put the child God has
given me?' So she held little Parasarāma on her stomach.[25]

And what did she do at that time [long ago]? Where there is a
'blister', there is nowhere to go [aside]. So Yallamā set out through
bushy jungles and terrifying[26] forests. When the day had gone she
drowned in pitch-blackness. She asked herself 'Which way should I
take? Where should I go?',[27] and at that time, [long, long ago], she
saw the light of the oil-lamp of the Musalmān brothers Āsan Usan
[= Ḥasan and Ḥusain]. Then she said: 'Now I see the light of a lamp.
We should go toward the light of this lamp.' So she went near to
the brothers Āsan Usan.[28]

She began speaking to the brothers Āsan Usan: 'O elder broth-
ers! Give me a place in the dead of night! I will stay on your
veranda for the night and after daybreak I will go.' And what hap-
pened when she said that [long, long ago]? The brothers Āsan Usan
answered: 'Stay on our veranda.' And she stayed the night on Āsan
Usan's veranda. And at daybreak [long, long ago] she stood on the
veranda with folded hands and spoke to the brothers Āsan Usan:
'Now give us a place[29] [to live].' The brothers Āsan Usan thought:
'What can we say?'. At that time [long, long ago] they took the golden
sling, laid the silken lash on it, and tied it with golden strings. Then
they said to the Canarese Yallavā: 'Wherever this stone falls [on the
earth], that place is yours.'[30] Then the brothers Āsan Usan made
the golden sling whirl, the stone flew [through the air] and fell on
Saundatti Hill. Having reached the top of Saundatti Hill, the stone
fell, and at that time [long, long ago] she held Baby Parasarāma on
her stomach. And the Canarese Yellavā set out at that time[31] [long,
long ago].

She set out and went to Saundatti Hill. Yaḷḷā [Yellamā] went to
the foot of the hill on the front side at evening time, at that time
[long, long ago], to the house of one Jagūḷ Satyavā ['Sweet Jaggery,
Speaker of Truth']. She went to Jagūḷ Satyavā's compound.[32] 'Do
give me a place to stay in the dead of night!', she said. 'O woman!
I would give you a place to stay, but mine is a Musalmān house and
there will be meat. My sons have gone hunting. So how shall I give
you a place to stay now?'[33] [answered Jagūḷ Satyavā]. 'Say what you
want! But give me a place to stay here in the dead of night!',[34] [insisted
Yallamā]. Then she stayed there at that place in the dead of night.
And what happened after she had stayed at that place? [rhetorical
question]. Then in the evening the sons who had gone hunting
came[35] [home]. Bhram and Āppā were the names of the two sons
who had gone hunting. 'Satyavā's, Jagūḷ Satyavā's?' [a listener
asks]. Jagūḷ Satyavā's [the narrator confirms]. 'What were the other
names, Bhram, Āpā, and . . . ?'. Bhram and Āpā [they were] the two.

Āpā and Bhram. Bhram and Āpā –they were the ones who had come from the hunt.[36]

They had hunted, brought [wild] goats back, skinned them, and were now about to sit down to eat, but first she said something to this Jagūḷ Satyavā: 'Your sons have come and sat down to eat. My . . .' [anacoluth]. At that time [long, long ago] she said: 'Hey father! Your maternal aunt has come! My boy should sit down with you. Let your sister join your dining row!' –that's how she spoke. Then the two [sons] sat down to eat. What did she do then after they had sat down to eat? [rhetorical question]. 'Hey father!', she said, 'Your sister needs a place to eat in your dining row!' And what bliss there was! Taking Baby Parasarāma on her lap, Yallamā sat down there at that time[37] [long, long ago].

Yallamā sprinkled the nectar of immortality on all the meat they had there and gave [the dead animals] their full life-force again. And Baby Parasarāma was accepted in the circle of the Musalmān boys, and in bliss did they eat together. And in the dead of night she stayed there.[38]

Who saw Yallamā's temple there at daybreak? Bhram and Āpā, Āsan and Usan, these four brothers were there.[39] They were Jagūḷ Satyavā's four children.

And they said this: 'We are two and we have two more brothers. So the four of us will build your temple. On Saundatti Hill will the four of us build your temple, and on the hill there will be room for all of us'.[40] After they had built the temple the Canarese Yallavā took Baby Parasarāma and stayed in the temple on the hill. And how many days did she pass in that temple at that time[41] [long, long ago]?

Thus with the sublime silhouette of the Śaivite goddess Yellamā standing with the folded hands of a supplicant on the veranda of Āsan Usan's house asking for shelter for her baby, two important features of folk religion in the Deccan come into sharp focus: the ethicization of indigenous hero cults through *bhakti* and the perception of Ḥasan and Ḥusain as protectors, not specifically of sacred cows, but all the more clearly of helpless women and children, as they are known to millions in South Asia today in the posters depicting the martyrdom at Karbalā.

While oral traditions are usually difficult to trace with any certainty, an important detail in the above narrative clearly points to the Muharram procession as its source of inspiration. Throughout the story the narrator refers only to 'Āsan Usan', almost as a *dvandva* compositum, and never to Ḥasan or Ḥusain individually. This is especially striking when one remembers that a similar *dvandva* originating in the same religious context has since become immortalized in the title of Henry Yule and Arthur C. Burnell's Anglo-Indian dictionary, *Hobson-Jobson* (first published 1886).

For this linguistic misapprehension occurred when British soldiers whose mother tongue was Cockney recalled the cry they had heard most often while keeping the peace at Muharram processions.

Notes

1 The following transliteration and translation follows a preliminary transcription of an oral text of the Dhangar shepherd Nārāyaṇ Koṇḍibā Māne (Dt. Kolhapur) given to me by the late Professor Dr Güther-Dietz Sontheimer (1933-1992) who suggested that I translate and discuss this text as a contribution to the religious history of the Deccan. The material given in square brackets is my own.

2 *ajñāna phāra jhālyāmuḷeṃ Musalamānāṃ puḍheṃ basūna gheūna phakīra hotāta.*

3 See Pagadi (1969: 204f.); Kunte (1976: 891f.; 1977: 350).

4 *Contra* Sharīf (1972: 160) who writes that the *na'l sahīb* is a horseshoe from Ḥusain's horse in which 'something of the spirit of the bridegroom (i.e. Qāsim) dwells'.

5 *nadicyā kāṭhālā dhanagara meṃḍharaṃ rākhīta vhatā. tara tara bāhmaṇanaṃ kāi keleṃ vhataṃ gāḷyāta jānavaṃ ghālāicaṃ soḷaṃ hātāta ghyāyācaṃ.*

6 *Yallamā viṣayī nā.*

7 *Yekavā, Mhākavā, Durgāvā, Durgavā, Margavā, Jakavā, Tukavā āśā sāta bhaṇī hena tyā [sāta bahiṇī]. sāta bahiṇī. ma sagaḷyāta lahānagī Yallavā [Yallamā].* On the 'Seven Sisters' as Śaivite goddesses in the Deccan see Sontheimer (1976: 38-43, 54-60); Feldhaus (1995: 126-141).

8 *Karaṃḍī Yallavā sagaḷyāta thākaṭī. āsā sāta bhaṇīcā myāḷā jamūna ḍhala talavārī ghivūna āśā sāta bhaṇī gyālyā śikārīlā.*

9 *ma śikārīlā āraṇyāta gyālyā āsatānā kāi jhālaṃ. maga āraṇyācyā ṭhīkāṇyālā lahānagyā bhaṇīlā tāhāna lāgalī Yallavā.*

10 *malā mhaṇalī jāvūna pāṇī pivūna [ye]. ma hyā pāṇī pyāyālā nānhagī [lahānagī] Yallavā gilī.*

11 *ma Yallavā gilī tara ātā jaṃgalātanaṃ jhāḍātanaṃ gavatātanaṃ jāyacaṃ maga ātā parata yāilā vāṭa kaśī ghāvaṇāra. ghāvaṇāra nāhī.*

12 *mhaṇūna hinaṃ kāi keleṃ gavatācyā gāṭhī mārāicyā āna dagaḍācyā ḍhigūryā māṃḍāicyā. majī [mhaṇje] tyā khuṇavarūna māghārī yāyalā āśī gilī barīca lāṃba.*

13 *ma ātā hilā pāṇī kuṭaṃ ghāvaṇāra. ekā ṭekāvara caḍalī āna cahukaḍaṃ āsī nadāra ṭākalī.*

14 *pāṇī kuṭhaṃ disatai kā tara Mahādevācyā taḷyāta pāṇī tilā disalaṃ. Mahādevācyā taḷyāta pāṇī āsaṃ jhaḷakāi lāgalaṃ mhaṇūna Mahādevācyā taḷyālā hī pāṇī pyāyālā gilī.*

15 *ma pāṇī pyālā gilī tara tataṃ kāi jhālaṃ vhataṃ taḷyācyā kāṭhālā hārabaryācaṃ jhāḍa vhataṃ.*

16 *hārabaryācā solāvanā, pivaḷājarata hārabaryācā solāvanā. ma hī guḍaghyā māṃḍyā pāṇyāta gilī, cuḷa bharalī, pāṇī pīlī.*

17 *hicyā dhyānāta kāi ālaṃ kī parata jātānā mhaṇalī eka hārabaryācā ḍhāḷā ghyāvāvā. āna āpalaṃ khāta khāta jāvāvaṃ.*

18 *mhaṇūna hinaṃ āsā ḍhāḷyālā hāta ghātalā, tavhara [toṃ vara] Mahādevānaṃ hāḷī [hāka] māralī. ḍhāḷā upaṭū nako, ḍhāḷā upaṭaśīla tara śirī dosa lāgala tulā, hijaṃ [hinaṃ] mhaṇaṃ ātā dharalyālā ḍhāḷā upaṭāicaṃ, tasāca āpalā vaḍalā, dharūna vaḍhalyābarubara tijyā taḷātāta phoḍa ālā, Yallamācyā.*

19 *Yallamācyā hātāta phoḍa ālyābarubara tyo [tī] tasāca hāta poṭāsaṃga dharalā. vais barīca lāṃba gilī. tyo phoḍa jaḷajaḷāi lāgalā. jaḷajaḷāi lāgalyāvara lai . . . phoḍa jaḷajaḷātoi mhaṇūna, tinaṃ kāi kelaṃ, ātā mhanalī hyo phoḍāvā.*

20 *mhaṇūna tin [tineṃ] kāi kelem, Piḷakuṭicyā kāṭyānaṃ ti phoḍa phoḍalā. phoḍa phoḍalyāva tyā phoḍāta raktācā jaḷū tānhā bāḷa jalāmalā [janmalā], jasā punavecā caṃdra ugāvaton [ugāvatūna] tasā parakāsa [prakāśa] paḍato, āsā tyā bāḷācā parakāsa paḍalā.*

21 *tara tyā Yallamācyā taḷātātalyā phoḍāta bāḷa jalāmalā kuṇacā. Parasarāma. Parasarāma bāḷa jalāmalyābarubara tinaṃ pitaṃbrācā [pitāṃbara] padara phāḍalā āna tyo bāḷa āsā lusūna pusūna āsā poṭasaṃgaṃ dharalā, āṇi bāḷa āḍavā dharūna Yallavā nighūna cālalī.*

22 The fact that Yallamā could see only six sisters as she herself is one of the 'Seven Sisters' disturbed neither the narrator nor his audience.

23 There is a pun here involving the different meanings of *phoḍā*: as noun, 'blemish', 'blister', 'pustule'; as verb, 'break', 'pluck', 'pick', rhyming with *thoḍā* ('little') and *phuḍha* ('ahead', 'in front'). Yallavā plucked the forbidden chickpeas and therefore she received a blister or pustule (something to be 'plucked' and broken open) as a punishment from Mahādev both in a literal (on her hand) and in a figurative (the blemish of an illegitimate child) sense. Her hard-hearted sisters tell her to go away by saying 'Where there is a blister [that is, the illegitimate baby] there is no land in front [that is, nowhere to go]'. I am grateful to Dr Arun Gupte (Ingelheim, Germany) for making me aware of this proverb in Manwaring (1899: Nr 1176).

24 *ma nighūna jātānā sātī bhaṇinī baghitalam. sātī bhaṇīn baghitalyābarubara lāṃbaca ubhā rāhā mhaṇalī, mhoraṃ [moharūna] ivū [yeū] nakosa. amacyā mhaṇalī biradālā baṭā [beṭā] lāvalāsa, āmhālā mhaṇalī tū śivū nakosa, āṇ tū āmacyā myāḷyāta nakosa. Jjyā ārtī tū baṭā lāgalā tyā ārtī tū āmhākaḍan jikaḍaṃ phoḍā takaḍaṃ muluka thoḍā takaḍaca tū mhaṇalī jā. āmhākaḍaṃ kāi ivū nakosa. mhanūna hyā sāhā bhaṇī parata gyālyā.*

25 *Kāraṃḍīyallavālā koṃḍaṃ paḍalaṃ. dyāvā ātā karāicaṃ kāi. malā tarī hī dosa lāgalā bhaṇī mhaṇatyātyā, bīna ānnyāyācā, ma ātā jāvū tarī kuṭaṃ. baraṃ āsū mhanalī, dyāvānī dilyālā bāḷa ṭākāicā tarī kuṭaṃ, mhanūna tyo tānhā Parasarāma bāḷa poṭāsaṃga dharalā.*

26 Literally: 'through the forests of the Demon of Dread' (*bhayāsūra*).

27 *āṇī tinaṃ tyā vaktālā kāi kelem. phoḍā takaḍaṃ muluka thoḍā. āsī tī Yallamā jhāḍī jaṃgalātaneṃ bhayāsūra vanātan[eṃ] nighālī. divasa gyālā buḍāilā. kaṭi kāḷūka paḍalaṃ. vāṭa kuṭaṃ ghāvānā, jāyācaṃ kuṭaṃ ātā.*

28 *mhanūna tyā vaktālā Āsana Usana baṃdū Musalamānī dyāvācā divā disalā tilā. maga ātā mhaṇalī ātā hyāhitaṃ divā disatoyā, divyācyā sumārana āpūṇa jāvāvaṃ, mhanūna tī Āsana Usana baṃdūjavaḷa gilīn.*

29 *Āsana Usana baṃdūlā bolāi lāgalī, dādānū mhaṇalī malā rātacī rāta jāgā dyā mhaṇalī. tumacyā mī vasarīlā rāhate ratacī rāta, āṇ dinamāna ugalyāṃtara mī jāte. kā vhainā mhanūna tinaṃ sāṃgitalaṃ tyā vaktālā, āsana Usana baṃdunī rāhā mhaṇalī āmacyā vasarīlā. ma Āsana Usana baṃdūcyā vasarīlā rātacī rāta rāhilī. dinamāna ugavalā hāta juḍūna ubhā rāhilī tyā vaktalā Āsana Usana baṃdū mhaṇalī āmhālā jāgā dāva ātā.*

30 *Āsana Usana baṃdūnī vicāra kyālā manālīn [mānālīn]. tyā vaktālā savarṇācī gophana ghitalī. ryāsamācaṃ pāgāra lāvalam, savarṇācā guṇa ghātalā tyā guphanīlā, āna sāṃgitalaṃ Kāraṃḍyā Yallavālā jyā ṭhīkāṇyālā hyā dagaḍācā ṭipū vhaila, tyā jāgyālā mhaṇalī tujī jāgā.*

31 *ma Āsana Usana baṃdunī savarṇācī gophana garāgarā phīrīvalīn dhoṃḍā phyākalā tyo dhoṃḍā jāvūna paḍalā, Sauṃdaticyā ḍoṃgarālā. ḍoṃgarācyā māthyālā jāvūna tyo dhoṃḍā paḍalā. ma Sauṃdaticyā ḍoṃgarālā tyā māthyālā jāvūna tyo dhoṃḍā paḍalā, maga he tyā vaktālā Parasarāma bāḷa poṭāsaṃgaṃ dharalā; āṇi Kāraṃḍyā Yallavā nighūna cālalī, tyā vaktālā.*

32 *nighūna gilī Sauṃdaticyā ḍoṃgarālā. ḍoṃgarācyā pāithyālān mukhāicyā bājulā, tyā vaktalā gilī saṃdhyākāḷī Yaḷalā kuṇācyā gharalā Jagūḷa Satyavā. Jagūḷa Satyavācyā vāḍyālā gilī.*

33 *ān rātacī rāta mhaṇalī malā vastīlā jāgā de. bāī gaṃ. mājhyā hitaṃ tulā vastīlā jāgā dilī āsatī, paṇa mājhaṃ Musalamānācaṃ ghara; āna mājhyāta mhaṇālī vaśāṭa āsaṇāra. mājhaṃ lyoṃka [leṃka] gyālyātī mhaṇalī śikārīlā; ān mhaṇalī ātā tulā kasā vastīlā jāgā divū.*

34 *kāibī mhaṇ para mhaṇalī rātacī rāta malā hyā ṭhīkāṇyālā vastīlā jāgā de.*

35 *maṃ rātacī rāta vastīlā rāhilī; maga vastīlā rāhilyānaṃtara kāi jhālaṃ, tavhara [to vara] tijaṃ saṃdhyākāḷī mulagaṃ śikārīlā gyālyālī ālaṃ.*

36 *Bhrama, Āpā nāvācī dona mulaṃ ticī śikārīlā gyālyālī . . . [Satyavācī, Jagūḷa Satyavācī]. Jagūḷa Satyavācī. [dusaryācaṃ nāvaṃ kāi, Bhrama, Āpā āṇi . . .]. Bhrama, Āpā doghaṃ. Āpā āṇi Bhrama, hī Bhrama Āpā doghajaṇī, āpalaṃ śikārīsna āle.*

37 *ma tī śikāra karūna āṇālyālaṃ bakaraṃ toḍalaṃ, śijīvalaṃ, ān āpalaṃ ātā jevāi basāicaṃ tara hinaṃ kāi sāṃgitalaṃ vhataṃ ādī tyā Jagūḷa Satyavālā, tujhī mulaṃ ivūna jevāilā basalī majī [. . .] tyā vaktālā mhaṇāicaṃ bābā re, eka māvacī bhaṇa ālīyā; mājhaṃ mulagā jī hāyī [?] tī tyāṃcyājavaḷa nihūna basīva; ān āpalyā bhaṇīlā jevāi paṃgatīlā ghe, mana āsaṃ sāṃgitalaṃ. ma i[kaḍe] doghaṃjaṇī jevāilā basalaṃ, ma jevāilā basalyānaṃtara kāi kelaṃ, bābā re mhaṇalī āpalī bhaṇa mhaṇalī āpalyā paṃgatīlā jevāilā ghyāilā pāije [pāhije]. maga kāi tyāsnī ānaṃda jhālā. i[kaḍe] Yallamā titaṃ basalī.*

38 *Yallamānaṃ āmṛta śipūna tī tyāṃcaṃ tī vaṣāṭa jī sāraṃ vhataṃ tī cāṃgalaṃ sāraṃ sājīvaṃta kelaṃ; ān tyā bāḷālā ghivūna māṃḍīvara āgadī tyā ānaṃdāta jivalī khāvaḷī; rātacī rāta rāhilī.*

39 Now the narrator remembers the names of the four sons of Jagūḷ Satyavā.

40 *dinamāna ugavalā, ma sakāḷacyā pāhārī hī devaḷa kuṇī bāṃdhalaṃ Yallamācaṃ, tara Bhrama Āpā Āṇi āsana Usana he caudhaṃ bhāū vhataṃ. hī Jagūḷa Satyavācī cāra mulaṃ. tara tyān kāi sāṃgitalaṃ kī āmhī doghaṃ hāi, āṇi āṇika āmacaṃ doghaṃ bhāū hāitī; āsaṃ hī āmhī caudhaṃjaṇī miḷūna tujhaṃ devaḷa bāṃdhū, Sauṃdaticyā ḍoṃgarālā tyā caudhāna devaḷa bāṃdhūna, ḍoṃgarācyā kaḍyālā āvaghaḍa jāgyālā.*

41 *hinī devaḷa bāṃdhūna tataṃ Karaṃḍī Yallavā tyā Parasarāma bāḷālā ghivūna tyā ḍoṃgarācyā dyāvaḷāta tinaṃ kāḍhalaṃ tyā vaktālā.*

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10

PERSONIFYING THE SIKH SCRIPTURE

Ritual processions of the Guru Granth Sahib in India[1]

Kristina Myrvold

On the Sunday before full moon in the month *Katak* (November), the playground of Guru Nanak Khalsa School in Varanasi is noisy and crammed with people of all ages. School children, dressed in well-ironed uniforms, are standing in lines chatting, sounding trumpets, and waving banners. Girls from a local association for devotional Sikh music (*kirtan*) are putting the finishing touches to placards carrying messages like 'The whole world is happy to receive the divine name'. Small boys wearing royal-blue battle dress and saffron-coloured turbans are lined up, holding short swords upright. In Varanasi it is a festival day commemorating the birth of Guru Nanak in 1469. This will be celebrated with pomp and show by a procession (Nagar Kirtan) through the main streets of the city. The centre of everyone's attention is a lorry adorned with marigolds in ornamental patterns, at the front of which is a palanquin (*palki*) with robes and cushion in it. At about 1 p.m. a male attendant from the local gurdwara, with an armed escort of five senior men, enters the schoolyard carrying the Sikh scripture, Guru Granth Sahib, on his head. All of them repeatedly chant the divine name (*satnam vahiguru*), while another person waves a whisk (*chaur*) over the book. The attendant mounts into the float, arranges the cushions, and finally places the scripture on the bedecked seat. At this juncture he exhorts everyone to exclaim the Sikh salutation ('Jo Bole So Nihal'), whereupon the whole crowd –school children, teachers, men and women – loudly reply 'Sat Sri Akal.' Shortly thereafter, devotees and members of various Sikh organizations, bands and guards mounted on horseback

start out on the festive procession which for the rest of day winds its way slowly through the streets of Varanasi.

In the social and religious life of Sikhs various types of procession have been a traditional means to honour community members and collectively celebrate a fortunate event that has happened or is about to occur.[2] Perhaps the most spectacular form of religious processions in the Sikh community today is Nagar Kirtan, or 'town praising', which is staged as the main attraction of *gurpurubs*, festivals commemorating the ten historical Sikh Gurus and the Sikh scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib.[3] For a whole day a large number of devotees take the scripture in procession and go through different neighbourhoods of their city or village, singing devotional hymns and participating in communal activities. The eye-catching parade permits important symbolic elements of the community to be seen and worshipped, and has become a popular way of creating public awareness of the Sikh religion. Despite a recognized increase in the number of Sikh religious processions in India and the diaspora during the twentieth century, the topic in general and Nagar Kirtan in particular have not attracted due attention from scholars. An analysis of contemporary Sikh processions in India will demonstrate the centrality of the Guru Granth Sahib, in religious performances. The ritual acts and regal symbols used in solemnized transportations of the Guru Granth Sahib, and processions like Nagar Kirtan in which the Guru Granth Sahib plays a significant role, are not merely means to symbolically represent the spiritual superiority of the scripture. The arrangement of spaces and ritualized acts in any procession that involves moving the Guru Granth Sahib can be viewed as strategies by which participants invest the scripture with the agency and authority of a Guru. Within the framework of an enduring social relationship to the Guru-scripture, disciples personify the text and treat it as a social being who is present in and interacting with the world. Before describing how this attribution of agency is accomplished in the transportations and processions of the Guru Granth Sahib, a few basic religious beliefs about the text must be considered.

A Guru invested social agency and cultural habits

What is unique to Sikhism as the religion is lived and practised today is the supreme status and authority that Sikhs attribute to the Guru Granth Sahib.[4] The scripture is the focal point of Sikh religious life. Almost every ceremony is performed in the physical presence of the Guru Granth Sahib and includes devotional singing and readings from the text. The Sikh place of worship, the gurdwara (literally the 'Guru's gate'), is by definition a space in which the scripture is enthroned on a majestic seat with embroidered cushions and robes under a canopy. By dignified acts cloaked in royal symbolism

devotees have created a diurnal rhythm for the scripture which is treated like a living Guru granting audience.

For religious Sikhs the Guru Granth Sahib is the abode of the true *shabad* Guru –the divine words which were revealed to Guru Nanak (1469‑1539) and then continued to be transmitted to the world through the personal voices of ten human messengers in succession. Although Sikhs would make an epistemological distinction between the Word of God (*shabad*) and the utterances of human messengers (*gurbani*), this ontological difference involves merely the progress of words from a divine source to a material form, a scripture which can be perceived by the human senses. The words and teaching of Guru Nanak and the following Gurus, transmitted through 'the mouth of the Guru' (*gurmukhi*) and later committed to writing, emanated from a divine source and record the Gurus' revelatory experiences.

According to a traditional account, in 1604 the fifth Guru Arjan made a written compilation of the works of the first five Sikh Gurus, Hindu and Muslim saint poets, and bards in the Sikh court. In the 1680s the ninth Guru Tegh Bahadur added his hymns to what became the Adi Granth, literally 'the original Book'. By the time of his successor, Gurn Gobind Singh, the scripture had gained significant status within the Sikh community. On his deathbed in 1708 Guru Gobind Singh declared the scripture to be the eternal Guru of the Sikhs, and it became known as the Guru Granth, with a suffix of reverence added (Sahib ji). By this decree, the Sikh scripture entered the line of human succession and became invested with the same spiritual authority and agency hitherto bestowed on human preceptors or Gurus. It is generally assumed that the Gurus in the Sikh tradition had doctrinal and spiritual continuity but corporeal diversity; that is, the same 'light' or 'spirit' (*jot*) of the Guru inhabited all of them and was passed on to their ten different human bodies. As believing Sikhs interpret their history, the Guru Granth Sahib came to manifest the 'spirit' of all the ten historical Gurus and enshrine the total divine knowledge and power revealed to humanity by its predecessors. Devotional stances which Sikh believers had taken towards the human Gurus of the past would likewise be taken to the scripture. With the shift of authority the same ethos and modes of practice that presumably existed in the courtly and domestic culture of the human Gurus were to be applied in contexts in which Sikh believers interacted with the Guru Granth Sahib. As a consequence, the scripture was attributed habits of the human culture, and to be made the subject of various Sikh devotional practices. The eighteenth- and nineteenth-century emic historiography in the *Gurbilas* literature provides accounts of how the Gurus and their closest disciples embedded the scripture in courtly symbolism and stipulated models for a future ministry that would evoke imaginaries of the text as a worldly sovereign.[5] For contemporary Sikhs, these textual references legitimize the careful choreography of their actions in the pres-

ence of the Guru Granth Sahib. Descriptions of what the Gurus did in the past function as prescriptions for proper handling of the text in the present.

The careful ministration of the Sikh scripture must be viewed from the perspective of enduring devotional and social relationships between Sikh disciples and a scripture invested with spiritual authority. Well aware that the Guru Granth Sahib is a book made of paper and ink, and not alive in any physical sense, Sikhs treat the text as if it possessed the social agency of a personal Guru who continues to communicate divine knowledge and mediates human-divine relationships. Following anthropological theories, personification of objects is not measured by biological qualities, but is relational; that is, it occurs in the context of social relationships within which the object is transformed into a subject believed to demonstrate varying degrees of intentionality and social agency. The thing-person is thought and spoken of as if it had a soul and possessed capacities to communicate ideas, exchange gifts with humans, and in other ways express the underlying relationality that defines its position.[6] According to Gell (1998), ritual activities are strategies to make inanimate objects socially alive by establishing exchanges between humans and objects and creating spaces that emphasize the interior identity of the object. Religious processions in contemporary Sikh worship can be interpreted in the light of these anthropological perspectives. By tradition the scriptural form (*sarup*) of the Guru Granth Sahib requires the same respectful treatment as was given to the living human Gurus. Through reciting and singing hymns of the scripture the Sikhs are constantly mediating and making present the true agency or 'spirit' (*jot*) of the Guru embodied in the text. The religious rituals with which Sikhs take the scripture in processions both create and confirm these notions. In view of the ideological presumptions underlying Sikh religious processions, it would be correct to call these collective activities *a processional cortège*, that is, a retinue accompanying a king, queen or other eminent person in order to legitimize and maintain their sovereign authority, and at the same time establish a dialogue with the inhabitants of the royal domain.[7] An analysis of the proceedings by which Sikhs engender spaces will reveal that similar notions of exchanges between the Sikhs and the superior Guru-scripture are present in the processional cortège of the Guru Granth Sahib. The ritual acts performed, the symbolic fabric used, and the location of the scripture in relation to participants reinforce the image of royalty. The scripture is publicly decked in royal glamour and invited to the neighbourhood to grant blessings, while devotees show their devotion in acts of reverence to the text. Altogether, the ritualized action creates and confirms notions of a scripture endowed with the spiritual authority and agency of a Guru.

Daily conveyances

Perhaps the most widespread type of procession in Sikh worship is the solemnized transportation of the Guru Granth Sahib. In a Sikh gurdwara every morning begins with *prakash*, or 'the light', which is the opening ceremony when the robes covering the Guru Granth Sahib are removed and the scripture is installed and opened on a royal throne (*takht*). At nightfall the day is concluded with the ceremony of *sukhasan*, 'the comfortable posture', when the Guru Granth Sahib assumes a closed position, is wrapped in cloth, and carried to a scriptural bedroom (*sachkhand*) for the night. The main feature of these events is the processional transportation of the Guru Granth Sahib between the throne and the resting place. It is carried on the head of a male attendant, who places it on a robe on top of his turban and then walks barefoot holding the book cover with both hands. Typically, the attendant carrying the text is preceded by another attendant, who sprinkles the ground with water as a symbolic purification of the way for the Guru, and is followed by a third person who waves a whisk over the scriptural corpus as a sign of respect to the text.[8] The attending congregation is expected to stand still with folded hands and, at the moment when the scripture passes by, perform *matha tekna*, going down on their knees and bowing until their foreheads touch the ground.[9] In the daily life of a gurdwara the nightly procession of the Guru Granth Sahib to the bedroom is usually an impressive moment of the evening liturgy: all those assembled, young and old, create a pathway for the scripture, kneeling and touching the floor with their foreheads, while melodiously chanting the standardized formulas representing the name of God (*satnam vahiguru*) in chorus. The chanting is viewed as an enactment of *simran*, meditation and remembrance of the divine name by means of verbal repetition, which has the power to charge action with spiritual properties and transform acts into virtuous deeds. Once the attendant has reached the bedroom and put the scripture to bed under blankets, he exhorts all participants to exclaim the Sikh salutation ('Sat Sri Akal') which in this context functions as a verbal marker announcing the scripture's departure and the end of the day at the Guru's house.

The custom of carrying a religious text on the head is neither a modern phenomenon nor one typical only of Sikhism, as it occurs in other religious traditions.[10] Consistent with body symbolism in South Asia and elsewhere, a text enshrining a religious teaching should be placed on the highest and most noble part of the human body to mark its supernatural origin and qualities. In Sikhism this mode of veneration has become the institutionalized practice for any transportation of the Guru Granth Sahib that evokes strong association to soteriological metaphors in the Sikh teaching. The divine words illuminating the path to salvation are continually revealed to humans through the scripture placed on the human crown in which

the 'tenth gate', or the door to liberation, is located. For believing Sikhs the daily ministration of the scripture is contained in the emic notion of *gurseva*, or humble and selfless 'service to the Guru'. The act of carrying the book on the head is transformed by means of the internal devotional stances of devotees into the merit-bestowing deed of serving the Guru-scripture which constantly reveals divine knowledge to humanity.

From an analytic perspective the ritual ministration of the Guru Granth Sahib in a gurdwara does not merely communicate messages about individual or collective Sikh perceptions of a sacred text, but the enactment of these rituals moulds meanings, values and ideologies. The *prakash* and *sukhasan* ceremonies consist of a set of ritualized acts, including the transportation, which aims to emphasize the interior Guru of the words and teaching enshrined in the text. The ceremonies make the Guru present and create the framework for congregational worship in a gurdwara. By incorporating the Guru Granth Sahib into a structure of daily routines the manifest form of the Guru is set in a context of external relationships articulated in the language and social practices of humans. The routine acts display the text as a 'social other' that may be the target of real ministration, hear prayers, receive offerings, and be a causative agent in the human world. Well aware that the scripture does not possess life in any biological sense, Sikh devotees place the sacred text firmly in a network of social relationships with themselves and other co-disciples. Their acts and behaviours are making the Guru Granth Sahib socially alive. The solemn transportation of the Guru Granth Sahib in the daily liturgies can be viewed as part of larger strategies by which Sikhs effectively create the presence and authority of a majestic Guru which/who continues to act in the world and interact with disciples. These strategies assume even more elaborate forms when the scripture is taken outside the abode of the gurdwara to travel longer distances.

Long-distance journeys

An important development of Sikhism in modern times was the transfer of the tradition from manuscript culture to print culture. When the printing press was introduced into Punjab by Christian missionaries in the early nineteenth century the Sikhs were receptive to the new technology. The first printed edition of the Guru Granth Sahib appeared in 1864 and by the turn of the century the city of Amritsar had developed into a major centre for publication of sacred Sikh literature. Since the 1950s the autonomous Sikh organization Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) has been the main producer of scriptures, with its own printing house (The Golden Offset Press) in the basement of Gurdwara Ramsar at Amritsar.[11] Contrary to theories claiming that printing technology developed at the expense of oral culture, the print culture of the Guru Granth Sahib seems to have

resulted in an increase of domestic and public Sikh worship as standardized editions became easily accessible to the literate masses. In face of modern challenges the SGPC has with various degrees of success striven to protect its production from market interests and to maintain control over the printing and distribution processes to ensure that the text is treated with respect. In response to developments in transport in the twentieth century and a growing demand for printed editions, Sikh authorities invented new customs for ceremonial conveyance. Publishers in Amritsar do not hesitate to send copies of the scripture to distant congregations by car, bus, train or plane, but they show deep concern for how this is done. The SGPC has, for instance, decided that it is a disrespectful act and a gross violation of the normative code of conduct (*Sikh maryada*) to send the Guru Granth Sahib by post or to ship it by freight train as an ordinary commodity. Instead the scripture should go by passenger traffic under guard of a group of five and should have its own seat, preferably in an upper compartment. To comply with these regulations people have to buy an additional air or train ticket for the scripture and in some more unusual instances may charter a special train or air plane.[12] Passengers travelling by car hold the scripture tightly in their arms if the vehicle does not have enough space for the customary palanquin. To meet the new situation the SGPC and other Sikh organizations have constructed special buses and vans to provide communities all over northern India with new scriptures under the proper ritual conditions and at the same time to collect used and damaged printed volumes which are taken to Goindwal Sahib for cremation in a funeral rite for scriptures.[13]

As is customary, a team of five people should accompany the scripture at all times when travelling. The number five is embedded in the doctrine of *Guru panth*, the idea of the Guru's mystical presence among five or more Sikhs who gather for devotional activities. Decisions taken by the assembly of five Sikhs are believed to express the intentions of the Guru. In the context of processional transportation the number five normally signifies the *panj pyare*, or the 'five beloved' disciples representing the first five Sikhs who underwent the Khalsa ceremony in 1699. Sikh gurdwaras either have a permanent group of initiated male members who act as 'the five beloved' in the various ceremonies or select men of stable character for each particular event. These five people are expected to walk ahead of the scripture as the Guru's armed guard, courageously carrying their swords upright to show their readiness to fight for justice, while simultaneously chanting the name of God (*satnam vahiguru*) (see Figure 10.1). With their bodies, dress, and acts the *panj pyare* create kinetic images of the ideal saint-soldier (*sant sipahi*). In processions with few devotees the men representing the *panj pyare* may divide the duties of the ritual conveyance among themselves: one man goes in front, sprinkling water or wet flower petals on the ground; another carries the Guru Granth Sahib, followed by a third man waving the whisk over the book;
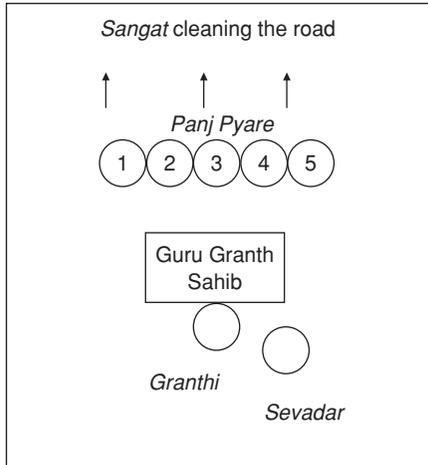
Figure 10.1 Transportation of Guru Granth Sahib, first example.

two other men walk on either side to protect the cortège (see Figure 10.2). In either case the five men represent an elite unit of saint-soldiers who are responsible for escorting and protecting the scripture treated as a worldly sovereign.

   Whenever the Guru Granth Sahib is to be moved from one location to another, devotees will stand with folded hands to read the standardized
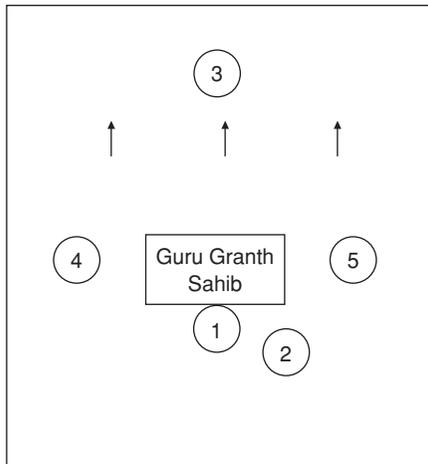
Figure 10.2 Transportation of Guru Granth Sabib, second example.

Sikh supplication. To Sikhs the performance of *Ardas* is a communicative instrument for asking the Guru permission to carry out certain acts in the future and to gain approval of action already completed. The reading of *Ardas* is hence a speech act that frames and sanctifies all religious action in Sikh life. In addition to the standard *Ardas* text, the reader will add a few sentences in which he states the destination, mode and condition of the journey, and asks pardon if it is as inconvenient to the Guru. The enactment of *Ardas* is framed by beliefs that presume that the Guru Granth Sahib is a subject able to hear and respond to prayers presented by humans. The prayer is believed to establish communication with the invisible Guru who dwells within the pages of the text and who consequently must be apologized to and informed of the travel arrangements whenever the scriptural corpus is moved.

When procuring new printed scriptures from publishers in Amritsar or consigning old editions for ritual disposal, the local congregation is likely to organize lavish processions and convert the means of public transport into a ritualized cortège. When devotees at the Sikh centre Patna Sahib in Bihar, for instance, sent a large number of damaged scriptures to Goindwal Sahib for cremation in the 1990s they reserved two separate train coaches and cleaned them and decorated them with flowers. The Guru Granth Sahib was taken from the gurdwara to the local railway station in several stages. First, devotees walked barefoot carrying the scriptures on their heads and placed them on palanquins mounted on trucks. In a long parade the trucks solemnly advanced through streets which had been sprinkled with water and petals. The Sikh congregation had requested local residents to temporarily refrain from smoking cigarettes and *bidis* in order to keep the route pure in honour of the Guru. At the railway station people carried the scriptures on their heads into the compartments and placed them on palanquins installed on the seats. During the eighteen-hour train journey to Punjab, a select group of pious devotees took turns to guard the volumes and sing devotional hymns. Every time the train stopped at a station, the doors of the coaches were opened to let local Sikhs pay homage and hand over additional old volumes. By arranging sacred spaces and performing ritual acts, devotees temporarily converted an ordinary train journey from Bihar to Punjab into a solemnized funeral procession of the Guru Granth Sahib. The mode of transporting the scripture exemplifies the religious strategies by which Sikhs attempt to surmount the difference between a mere 'book' and a text attributed the agency of a Guru. The scripture is publicly displayed as a 'person' of superior status requiring honourable ministration. To religious Sikhs the careful ministrations to the Sikh scripture are acts of reverence and devotion to the Guru who enables devotees to establish relationships with the invisible supreme God. The Guru who shows the way to the path of liberation should be served and honoured in the best possible way.

City processions of praising

As a religious festival, the procession called Nagar Kirtan, literally 'town praising' or 'singing in town', is an occasion to celebrate a shared collective history and publicly express, to other devotees and to outsiders, commitment and adherence to basic religious values. For *gurpurubs* –festivals commemorating the Sikh Gurus –and other major events of the Nanakshahi calendar,[14] Sikhs worldwide come together in local community groups and stage mile-long processions in their city or village to display their collective social and religious activities. The most essential feature of Nagar Kirtan is the presence of the Guru Granth Sahib, which temporarily leaves the sacred abode of the gurdwara for a one-day tour of the city, attended and escorted by devotees. The scripture is installed on a palanquin mounted on a float that may be transported in various ways depending upon local resources and initiative, ranging from a motor-rickshaw to a large flamboyant trailer. Sometimes the main float is designed as a replica of the Golden Temple. Early in the morning of the festival, devotees, both young and old, decorate the vehicle of transportation with roses and saffron-coloured marigolds and create a temporary throne for the Guru Granth Sahib with the usual canopy, embroidered robes, cushions and other ritual paraphernalia, intended to make the scripture comfortable and display the sovereignty of the text. If the procession continues after nightfall the vehicle may be decorated with electric lights in festive colours and designs.

The factors determining the route of Nagar Kirtan performances are often related to practical circumstances and the theme of a specific festival, although to achieve maximum public display local Sikhs generally choose the central points of their city or village and areas in which large numbers of devotees live.[15] The route may be circular, with the local gurdwara constituting the starting and finishing point and the collective movement enclosing a geographical space, or it could go in one direction between two or more sanctuaries that have a historical or mythical association to a particular Guru or have some other symbolic value for the celebration.

Whichever type of route is chosen, the procession temporarily manipulates the public places that already exist in the local geography to create a meaningful space. Before the day of the festival, local Sikhs decorate and mark out the road with bamboo gates wrapped in colourful cloths and banderols carrying religious messages. Individual Sikh families and businessmen with houses and shops along the route illuminate their buildings with electric lights to celebrate the arrival of the Guru-scripture and the congregation of Sikhs in their neighbourhood. At selected points along the route they prepare so-called '*seva*-stations' where devotees perform selfless service (*seva*) by distributing sweets, snacks and tea to participants and spectators. Before the carriage arrives on the day of procession, Sikhs beating kettle-drums and marchers carrying banners announce the event. They are followed

by groups of devotees who sweep and wash the streets and strew petals on them. For observing spectators these acts clearly signal that a person of exalted status is approaching.

An analysis of the morphology of Nagar Kirtan indicates that several elements are always present and are important to the procession. As always when the Guru Granth Sahib is taken out, the Sikh supplication (*Ardas*) frames the beginning and the end of Nagar Kirtan, modifying the usual meaning of time and space by having the event sanctified by the Guru. As in the daily liturgies the scripture is installed on a float in an outdoor ceremony, and taken back to the bedroom at the end of the parade. The arrival and departure of the Guru Granth Sahib are the two key events that identify when participants should come together and disperse and provide the external structure of Nagar Kirtan. The procession generally starts as a well-structured arrangement, but changes form on its way with new elements added and others removed. Devotees and spectators may join and leave the procession more or less as they like. A senior group of *panj pyare* and adult men and women performing devotional songs must, however, escort the scripture from the beginning to the end.

Several scholars have observed that the order of people parading and other spatial dynamics within processions may suggest social and ideological hierarchies (Marin 1987, Trainor 1997). The way in which Sikh congregations stage Nagar Kirtan certainly varies, although it is typical of a standard performance that all participants are positioned in relation to the carriage of the Guru Granth Sahib. The main float with the scripture is the focus of attention, either in the middle or at the back of the procession, and it is spatially framed by the *panj pyare* and groups of adult devotees singing hymns from the scripture to folk tunes. Young participants representing different Sikh organizations and demonstrating martial arts and worship modes, such as selfless service (*seva*) to the Guru and society, go at the front under the guardianship of teachers and senior members (see Figure 10.3). The composition of these key elements of the procession ‑the sacred text, surrounded by young people and adults who demonstrate devotional acts ‑serves to make the superior Guru present in a here and now context and emphasize that the object of veneration is not just the scriptural corpus but the teaching and words contained in it. Devotees take out the words of the Guru Granth Sahib to express the Guru's teaching aesthetically in music and in acts of charity that implement the teaching in social life.

Within the temporal and spatial dimensions of Nagar Kirtan the social rules and differentiations of everyday life should be set aside to promote an ideal relationship that underscores the absolute authority of the Guru, coupled with absolute equality between Sikhs. Through participation and acts of service (*seva*) devotees of differing backgrounds are expected to temporarily abandon their social selves, and experience and acknowledge a shared lower status as disciples in a 'communitas' of equals (Turner 1995). At the same

1 Mounted on an elephant, a *Nihang* Sikh beating a kettle-drum.
2 *Panj pyare* riding white horses, holding Sikh standards and swords.
3 A brass band playing music.
4 Garlanded portraits of Nanak, Tegh Bahadur and Gobind Singh, transported on a rickshaw.
5 A garlanded painting of Nanak transported on a rickshaw.
6 A brass band playing popular *bhangra* music. The musicians are dressed in traditional Punjabi folk dress.
7 A garlanded painting of Nanak transported on a rickshaw.
8 Children from Guru Nanak Khalsa School in Gurubagh.
9 Children from Guru Nanak English School in Shivpur.
10 Girls of Bibi Nanki Kirtan Jatha from Guru Nanak Khalsa School in Gurubagh carrying placards and playing devotional music.
11 Female members of the Red Cross from Guru Nanak Khalsa School.
12 Children from Guru Nanak Khalsa School College carrying flags and batons.
13 Boys and girls of the Karate club at Guru Nanak Khalsa School demonstrating karate chops.
14 A tractor with a water reservoir.
15 Ten to fifteen Sikh and Hindu devotees carrying watering cans to clean the road.
16 A group of male adults playing devotional music.
17 A junior group of *panj pyare*.
18 A junior group of *panj pyare*.
19 A senior group of *panj pyare*.
20 The main float conveying the Guru Granth Sahib. An attendant distributes sanctified food (*prashad*) along the way.
21 A group of female adults playing devotional music.

Fgiure 10.3 The internal structure of a Sikh procession in Varanasi during the celebration of Guru Nanak's birthday.

time the internal structure of the procession extols collective norms that differentiate between Sikhs who comply with the normative Khalsa discipline (i.e. *amritdhari*) and other Sikhs. The *panj pyare*, who have a prominent position near the scriptural carriage, symbolically display the high religious status granted to initiates within the communitas. The spatial organization of Nagar Kirtan achieves different effects simultaneously by forging a common identity between disciples of the Guru and reinforcing a particular relationship between Khalsa Sikhs and other worshippers.

Constructing meanings

The acts performed within the structure of processions are determined by traditional norms and not affected by individual intentions or motives for participation, although various types of meanings may be ascribed to the ritual re-enactment by individual participants, the broader Sikh tradition, or a student analysing the events. The interpretations are relative and will vary depending upon individual perspectives. When local Sikhs in India are

asked about the meanings of celebrating Nagar Kirtan, some immediately emphasize the entertainment aspect, saying it is an occasion to socialize with friends and enjoy music, food and the visual beauty of the procession and its accompanying brass bands and other artistic performers dressed in Punjabi folk dress to enhance the festive atmosphere. Other respondents would emphasize the religious meanings, foregrounding the royal symbolism and other ritual elements that are necessitated by the presence of the Guru Granth Sahib.

As public events, the processions are occasions for displaying Sikh religious activities to one's own community and the city or village of residence. They may serve as means for religious edification, strengthening common beliefs and passing on religious values to younger members. Children are enthusiastically encouraged to do acts of charity and demonstrate their skill in music and martial arts. Collectively participants display themselves as guardians of the religious power and authority enshrined in the text, and to take part in the procession is to be and become a Sikh. In a performative manner the procession attempts to create a self-representation of a coherent Sikh community, or a fixed 'religious genus', to claim visibility and acknowledgment in the outside society.[16] Local congregations may hand out leaflets, exhibit placards with religious messages and invite prominent propagandists (*pracharak*) to create public awareness of Sikh doctrines, history and social institutions. In the immediate context of a festival, Nagar Kirtan is often perceived as a commemorative event that revives stories about the Sikh Gurus of the past and re-establishes their teaching in the present. The most visible way of doing this is the exhibition of paintings which depict the Sikh Gurus or events in their lives. For spectators, these visual renderings may evoke memories of well-known legends in the narrative tradition. A more corporeal representation is the collective group of Sikhs moving in procession through the city or village. By demonstrating communal devotional activities, participants metonymically represent cardinal Sikh doctrines as taught and instituted by the Gurus. Men and women chanting the divine name and singing hymns from the scripture do not merely exemplify worship forms rooted in everyday practice, but embody key Sikh doctrines of remembering and reciting the divine name (*nam japna*). The actions of school children and members of the Red Cross, the public distribution of food and other activities represent the concept of selfless service (*seva*) in the form of education, medical treatment and distribution of food. In a similar fashion the display of martial arts, folk music and traditional costumes functions as a metonymical representation of an ethnic belonging to Punjab and a Punjabi culture. For spectators and participants, the total accumulation of religious and cultural activities performed in the various sequences of Nagar Kirtan creates a narrative scenario of the Sikh religion, history and culture.

To other participants, Nagar Kirtan may be seen as way of honouring the particular historical Guru of celebration by taking the Guru Granth Sahib

out in majestic splendour to grant blessings to the city and devotees. Sikhs who live along the route of the religious procession say they are inviting the Guru and the holy congregation of Sikhs to their neighbourhood. When arriving in a local area the procession makes a temporary halt to create spaces of interaction between devotees and the Guru. Families present the scripture with bowls of sweetened pudding (*karah prashad*) which they have prepared at home. The attendant guarding the Guru Granth Sahib on the main float will present the food offerings to the Guru by cutting a straight line over the pudding with his dagger. By means of this ritualized act the pudding is considered to have been formally accepted (*kabul*) and sanctified by the Guru and is returned to the givers as blessed food to be consumed.[17] Offerings like this belong to an exchange paradigm which presumes that the text is socially alive and responds to approaches made by human subjects.

From an analytical perspective, the arrangement of culturally prescribed acts and symbols in processional transportations of the Guru Granth Sahib and the performance of Nagar Kirtan do not merely confirm the supreme spiritual authority of the Guru Granth Sahib, but effectively create this authority. Participants moving within the temporal and spatial framework of processions simultaneously define and re-embody religious experiences and notions of the presence and power of the Guru Granth Sahib. For religious people, the type of action selected for the conveyance seems to respond best to the nature of the text, but at the same time the performance of these acts creates religious values that impress themselves on participants (Bell 1992). The various sequences of acts in processions can be viewed as external strategies by which Sikhs personify the scripture, that is, attribute to the text the agency of a Guru with the capacity to act and cause action in the world. This personification occurs in the context of enduring social relationships between Sikh disciples and the Guru embodied in the text. When the Guru Granth Sahib is taken out for processions the text is surrounded by pious devotees who by acts of veneration make it a 'social other' invested with the agency of a personal Guru. The setting of the scripture within the performance also points to the interior content of the text and underscores that the object of veneration should not be merely the scriptural corpus, but the words and teachings forever dwelling in the scriptural pages.

Notes

1 I am greatly indebted to Professor Gurinder Singh Mann and Professor Hew McLeod for their valuable comments on versions of this chapter.

2 A common noun for 'procession' and 'cortège' in the Punjabi language is the Arabic loan word *jalus*, the original meanings of which are the act of sitting on the throne and the first year of a reign reckoned from the date of the coronation of an emperor (Nayeem 1980). Sikhs rarely use the term *jalus* for religious processions since it has negative connotations in general speech. (The noun-verb *jalus kadhna*, literally 'to take out procession', signifies an act of causing disrepute. In the tra-

ditional Punjabi village a person who had 'blackened' his face and been deemed guilty of dishonourable deeds would be taken out in a procession called *jalus* to be publicly humiliated.) Instead, people use the name of the particular procession intended, depending upon what type of collective movement is performed during which ceremony. For example, the morning procession called *prabhatferi*, or 'to go around in the early morning', is organized daily for forty days prior to anniversaries commemorating the Sikh Gurus. Before dawn devotees –men, women and children –gather together in their respective neighbourhoods and march to the Sikh temple, singing devotional hymns. After a death in a Sikh family, the mourning party consisting of both men and women carries the bier from the house of the deceased to the cremation ground in a procession called *antim yatra*, or the 'last journey'. For different types of processions in Punjabi wedding and death ceremonies, see Myrvold (2004, 2006).

3 Occasionally the event is referred to as 'the auspicious journey' (*shubh yatra*).

4 The compilation history of the Guru Granth Sahib, as well as the poetic form and semantic content of the text, have attracted considerable attention among scholars. See e.g. Kaur (1995), Singh (2000), Mann (2001). Anthropological studies on local perceptions and ritualized uses of the scripture among contemporary Sikhs are still awaited.

5 The oft-quoted *Sri Gurbilas Chhevin Patshahi* ('The splendour of the sixth master'), a nineteenth-century text attributed to Sohan Kavi, relates how the fifth Guru Arjan brought a collection of manuscripts (*Goindwal pothis*) containing compositions of his predecessors from Goindwal to Amritsar before compiling the first canonized version of the Sikh scripture. To honour the manuscripts Guru Arjan placed the texts on a palanquin decorated with precious stones that was borne by devotees, while the Guru himself marched behind barefoot with musicians and devotees singing sacred hymns. Hargobind, the youngest son of Guru Arjan, is said to have showered petals in front of the manuscripts. Sri Gurbilas Chhevin Patshahi also describes the ceremonial installation of the compiled Sikh scripture at the Golden Temple (*Harimandir Sahib*) in 1604, when the newly appointed custodian of the scripture, Bhai Buddha, carried the text on his head to the temple and Guru Arjan walked behind waving a whisk over it. For a review of this reference, see Fauja Singh (1990: 45 50).

6 See e.g. De Castro (2004), Harvey (2006: xvii).

7 As Marin (1987) notes, historically the royal entry often included a dual performance: one which the monarch gave to the city and another which inhabitants of the city bestowed on the sovereign.

8 In the early hours of festival days celebrating the historic Gurus, Sikh congregations enhance the festive atmosphere by offering the Guru Granth Sahib a seat on a bedecked palanquin and conducting circumambulatory processions (*parikrama*) within or around the gurdwara, singing hymns and scenting the air with perfume.

9 In social situations of everyday life *matha tekna* usually refer to the symbolic act of touching the feet of elder or other esteemed persons in order to salute and pay reverence to them. In the gurdwara a humble act of submission is to let the highest part of the human body –the forehead –touch the ground before the Guru-scripture.

10 For example, Gombrich (1971) has described how Buddhist monks carried sacred books on their heads in procession when they went to ceremonies in which Pali texts were chanted.

11 For Sikhs the location of the press is laden with symbolic meanings: according to *Sri Gurbilas Chhevin Patshahi 6* it marks the spot on which Guru Arjan and

his scribe Bhai Gurdas pitched a camp and compiled the Sikh scripture. The place where scriptures are manufactured today marks out the place at which the scripture came into being.

12 In 2004 an item on the transportation of Sikh scriptures from Amritsar to Canada was included in the BBC news. At the request of Sikhs in Canada, the SGPC sent 150 scriptures by chartered airliner. All the scriptures were carried on foot in a procession from the SGPC's printing house to the Rajasansi airport in Amritsar, more than four kilometres away, and then placed on separate seats in the aircraft (BBC News, 3 April 2004).

13 This will be discussed in my forthcoming PhD thesis at Lund University.

14 Nanakshahi samat is the Sikh calendar based on a tropical solar year with the new year beginning on the first day of the month Chet, corresponding to 14 March in the Julian calendar. The new calendar was formally implemented by the SGPC in April 2003.

15 Since large number of devotees walk all the way, Nagar Kirtan must be somewhat limited in terms of distance. Communities also need to be granted permission by the local authorities for the route of the procession.

16 The term 'religious genus' is borrowed from Dusenbery (1990).

17 The verb compound often used in general speech for the act of making edible gifts 'accepted' and blessed by the guru is *bhog lagana*, which in a broader cultural Indian context refers to the act of offering food to a deity and thereby sanctifying it.

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Part II

PROCESSIONS IN THE SOUTH ASIAN DIASPORA

11

GODS ON THE MOVE

Hindu chariot processions in Singapore

Vineeta Sinha

Introduction

Religious processions, involving the physical movement of the sacred through a designated territory, continue to be integral to Hindu religious life both in India and among Hindu communities in the diaspora. Whatever their size and scale, the enactment of processions potentially serves a multitude of functions: spreading divine power, marking territory, enhancing unity and solidarity within the community, registering religious distinction and difference, to mention just a few. Furthermore, their analysis reveals complex socio-cultural and political dynamics at work. Using these theoretical possibilities as starting points of my enquiry and drawing on primary ethnographic data, I theorize the phenomenon of chariot processions in Singaporean Hindu domains. However, I first provide some brief but necessary contextual and historical grounding.

A complex array of rituals, mythologies, festivals and customs, encapsulated in the description 'Hinduism' (recognized as a religion), is still energetically reproduced by fourth- and fifth-generation descendants of nineteenth-century Indian and Hindu arrivals to British Malaya, as part of a larger colonial initiative, predominantly from Tamilnadu (and in smaller numbers from other parts of India). The current religious lives of Tamil Hindu migrants show a level of pluralism and syncretism across a number of religious traditions (Sinha 2007a). Today their descendants in the region are conspicuous in staunchly adhering to a range of 'traditional' Hindu religious practices imported from India, even as this domain is continuously and creatively invented. Merely 99,904[1] strong, and constituting only 4 per cent of the total population of Singapore, the Singaporean Hindu community is

nonetheless marked by internal diversity and complexity. Under the rubric of 'Singaporean Hinduism'[2] these intersecting and interacting strands coexist: Puranic and Agama-based Hinduism, the predominance of Saiva Siddhanta precepts and a *bhakti* (devotional) stance; a theistic focus, shown in the practice of Saivism, Vaisnavism and mother-goddess worship, together with reverence for folk and village deities (both male and female) from Tamilnadu and; finally, a wide assortment of India-based Hindu reform movements, from Arya Samaj to Sai Baba, as well as a number of 'home grown'/local movements (Sinha 2007b).

Everyday Hindu religiosity on the island nation-state of Singapore reveals varied and contrasting styles and is recognizable in a series of daily rituals and festivals in Hindu homes and the 24 officially registered Agamic Hindu temples, the earliest of which is dated to 1827. Hindu temples are scattered across the country, mostly built in the archetypical South Indian style with colourful, towering *gopura*s (gateways) and *vimana*s (domes) featuring figures, motifs and legends from Hindu mythology. The Southern Indian style temples are constructed and function according to the Agamas, Puranas and Tantras, and through the services of Brahmin priests from Tamilnadu or Sri Lanka. It is hardly surprising that the Singapore Agamic temples are similar in form and function to their counterparts in Tamilnadu, given the strong links that persist between these two regions. Today, Hindu temples as places of worship and as symbolic manifestations of spirituality are firmly entrenched in the religious cityscape of Singapore and central to the every-day lives of Hindus. Temples derive their strength from donations, which may be in the form of cash contributions made at the *hundial* (donation-box), or fees for *arccanai* on a daily basis, personal or familial sponsorships of a range of festivals as well as payments for a variety of services, including the marriage ceremony and other life-cycle rituals conducted at the temple. These contributions go a long way towards sustaining the temples and reproducing the ritual complex within and allowing these religious institutions to remain economically viable.

Hinduism is but one religious tradition that finds adherents on the island. Forms and modes of religious expression continue to have a presence in Singapore despite its modern and secular outlook. Here, attachment to religion is strongly discernible, as seen in census data over at least the last 50 years and confirmed by social science analyses of the local religious scene (Tong 1992, Kong 2001, 2005). Today, Singapore provides a full religious spectrum from very orthodox, traditional religious orientations to independent spiritual clusters and new religious movements. A strong sense of choice and religious experimentation defines the local religious domain, as the island hosts a vast array of religiosities – across religious traditions – making it possible for both the official institutional variety and its myriad innovative, popular interpretations to coexist. Signs of religiosity are visible in the public domain, from the multitude of places of worship – churches,

Hindu, Taoist and Sikh temples and mosques – that dot the island, to the array of conspicuous communal festivals that punctuate the calendar year. Religious communities here are aware that they are located (and have to function) within a multi-ethnic, multi-religious context which at all levels (including state and government levels) privileges and promotes religious pluralism and harmony and is wary that religious differences might culminate in conflict and tensions. While private religiosity is constitutionally guaranteed and indeed largely unregulated, the relevant state authorities are far more circumspect about collectivized expressions of religiosity in the public domain and these are thus subject to a variety of regulations and constraints. Yet, this was not always the case and the greater vigilance vis-à-vis public expressions and displays of religiosity is the outcome of specific events in the history of Singapore. A brief historical detour is instructive.

Religious pluralism has characterized Singapore from its days as a British colony (Nathan 1921). Additionally, historical data from a variety of sources confirm that the various religions were visible and conspicuous in the public domain in these early years. For example, historical records attest to the founding of places of worship across the island in the early decades of the nineteenth century. The observance of Hindu rituals and festivals like *tai pucam*, *timiti*, *churrack puja* and chariot processions can be dated to at least the mid-nineteenth century (Ampalavanar 1969). The visual database of the National Archives of Singapore includes thousands of photographic images of a variety of religious processions on the island in the public domain at the turn of the twentieth century. I cite a few examples by way of illustration: the Corpus Christi procession at a church in Thomson Road in 1939, Vesak Day celebrations and procession in Geylang in 1955, a procession marking the Prophet Mohammad's Birthday from the Sultan Mosque to the Muslim Missionary Society in 1955, a candle-light procession for Good Friday at a church in Victoria Street in 1959, the procession of Lord Murugan from the Chettiar Temple to a Chettiar Kittingi in Market Street on the night before *tai pucam* in 1960 and the annual Novena procession to celebrate the Feast of Our Lady of Perpetual Succour in Thomson Road in 1960.[3] These images and the accompanying text inform us that these processions were made on foot, with the use of vehicles (as floats) and bullock carts. We also learn that hundreds and thousands of people participated in these processions, which involved distances of up to 5 km, along the main streets of Singapore, featuring traffic pile-ups, banners, chanting, singing and dancing to the accompaniment of musical instruments.[4]

But all this changed after 21 July 1964, when on the occasion of the procession to commemorate the Birthday of the Prophet Mohammad, disturbances and clashes occurred between Malay and Chinese youths. The event is remembered in the history of Singapore and Malaysia as the 'racial riots of 1964' and has been interpreted variously and controversially by scholars. This landmark episode has nonetheless changed the shape of all

public assemblies and processions on the roads of Singapore. A number of legislative[5] and bureaucratic measures have been instituted, rendering the present-day domain of religious assemblies and processions in the public space a highly regulated one (Kong 2005). Nevertheless, religious processions and, in the Hindu case, chariot processions continue to be popular and are regularly staged on the streets of Singapore, but within the conditions set by a number of secular authorities, notably the Singapore Police Force.[6] These limits were stated in no uncertain terms by the the then Minister for Health and Home Affairs, Mr Chua Sian Chin, responding to questions during the budget debates of the Ministry of Home Affairs in 1973. It is necessary to quote these responses in full as they frame the guidelines that continue to be applied and enforced in the present:

> Permits may be granted for religious foot processions to be held within the grounds of churches, temples, mosques and suraus. In the case of Kiew Ong Yah and other religious processions involving deities, permits are granted for processions but these are subject to the following:
>
> a) Only vehicular processions are allowed.
> b) Distances travelled must be the shortest possible route from point to point.
> c) No music, gongs, drums or cymbals shall be played en route.
> d) The procession will be restricted to small groups in vehicles, and
> e) There shall be no stoppage en route.
>
> There have been applications for religious processions which involve pulling a chariot with bullocks. This was in connection with processions on Lord Krishna's Birthday. As these animals were banned from the streets of Singapore – Members may remember the Cattle Act that we had passed some years ago – organizers should consider the use of a motorized chariot.
> (Ministry of Home Affairs 1973. Column 948, Budget)

Indeed, all chariot processions in Singapore are now vehicular/motorized. A first step in organizing a chariot procession involves making an application for a police permit via the Police Licensing Computerized System. There are now facilities for making an online application for such a permit and I was told that this was a fairly straightforward process and approval could be secured within a week. The application form is an interesting document and requires these particulars of the assembly or procession: name and date of event, commencing and ending time, number of participants, total security guards and marshals deployed, if musical instruments are to be played and if banners, placards or insignia are to be displayed.

Additional information about the exact processional route (with names of roads along which the procession is to travel) and the specific stopping points are also requested. For a religious procession a fee of S$50 is payable for the police permit and a security deposit of $2,000 is required.

Three chariot processions in Singaporean Hindu domains

The three chariot processions discussed in this chapter are the Chariot Festival of the Maha Sivarathiri Vizha, organized by the Sri Sivan Temple, the Ratha Yatra (Chariot Festival of Lord Jagannatha), organized by the Shri Krishna Mandir, and the Ratha Urvalam organized by the Sri Samayapuram Mariamman Pillaigal, each revealing a different slice of Singaporean Hinduism, all of which coexist here. These three rather contrasting types of chariot processions are self-defined by their organizers and participants alike as instances of 'Hindu' religiosity. My interest in highlighting these cases is partly to convey the complexity of 'Singaporean Hinduism' but, more crucially, to demonstrate the inherent similarities in their enactment despite their varied ceremonial, spiritual and symbolic value. The discussion also attends to the challenges of enacting them within the secular, multi-religious, multi-ethnic and highly urbanized space of the island.

Chariot procession of the Maha Sivarathiri Vizha

Early instances of chariot processions in Singapore were initiated by groups of Hindu migrants associated with Hindu temples. In these early years, images of deities were placed on wooden chariots, which were either pulled by devotees within the temple grounds or in the streets or pulled by bullock carts. The book *Beyond Divine Doors*, published under the auspices of the Hindu Endowments Board (HEB), Singapore (2006), includes photographs of a chariot procession for Sri Drowpathai Amman in the 1930s, most probably organized by the South Bridge Road Sri Mariamman Temple, established in 1827. My own interviews with Hindus confirm that there were chariots pulled by bullocks at Hindu festivals such as *timiti* and *tai pucam*, up to the early 1960s. Thereafter, the streets of Singapore have seen only motorized and vehicular chariot processions, which are typically organized under the auspices of registered Agamic temples for observance of Hindu festivals or temple *thiruvizha* (festival associated with the founding of a temple).

One such procession is organized on the occasion of Maha Sivarathiri by the Sri Sivan Temple. This is one of the oldest temples on the island and is dated to the 1850s when it was in the Orchard Road area. It remained there till 1983, when it had to be relocated to make way for the mass rapid transit system. For ten years, it was sited temporarily in the grounds of the Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple; then, in 1993, it was moved to the east of the island where it remains. This is one of the four Agamic temples

administered by the Hindu Endowments Board[7] of Singapore. Today the temple is a major site of Saivite worship, drawing devotees from local Southern and Northern Indian Hindu communities. The temple observes major festivals of the Saivite tradition, among them the Maha Sivarathiri Vizha (MSV), which is celebrated in a grand and spectacular manner. According to the Hindu almanac, this festival falls in the month of Vaikasi, deemed to be auspicious for the deity Siva. The MSV is an elaborate, activity-packed 3–5 day festival, which includes among other events an impressive chariot procession, during which the presiding deity of the temple, Lord Siva, is taken out of the temple grounds. Public processions are a vital aspect of large-scale temple festivals in Tamilnadu (Waghorne 1999) and Sri Lanka, and the practice has been carried to the Hindu diasopra, including Singapore. The processional cart, *ter* or *ratham*, is a temple-like structure which carries the *utsava murti* (processional or movable image of the deity) on its public rounds beyond the sacred space of the temple.

My fieldwork data come from the observance of the festival in 2004 and 2005, when it spanned four to five days in the month of February. The chariot procession was held on the evening of the third day and was scheduled between 6 p.m. and midnight. The actual convoy included the chariot attached to a tow truck, a few cars and vans carrying musicians and their instruments, temple volunteers and members of the management committee and a back-up tow truck. This is defined as a motorized, vehicular procession in which the chariot is towed at a speed of 40–50 km/h and no roads have to be closed or blocked for the purpose. The chariot moves with the other traffic on the roads. The chariot in use was a silver one, the property of the HEB, and shared by the four HEB temples and also generously loaned out to other temples for a nominal fee. The HEB had commissioned the building of the silver chariot which was completed in October 1991. It is a massive wooden structure, about 4.2 metres high with four large wheels, and completely encased in sheets of silver with elaborate engravings of decorative motifs and symbols from Indian and Hindu art. The frontal, centrepiece of the chariot carries a striking seated silver statue of the four-faced Brahma who is flanked on both sides by silver statues of horses and female attendants. The various parts of the chariot were designed and constructed by sculptors and artisans in India and then shipped to Singapore where the entire structure was first assembled and then encased in silver. This silver chariot was recently refurbished by the HEB at a cost of S$100,000 and is a modern vehicle, complete with an inbuilt electricity generator and coloured optic fibre bulbs, arranged in the domed section.

For established, older temples like the Sri Sivan Temple, chariot processions have a long history. By now, they are defined by a strong degree of institutionalization and a set pattern can be identified in the enactment of the event. The accomplishment of the ritual and ceremonial dimension of the procession is under the charge of the Brahmin priests while the details of

the procession, including the processional route outside the temple, are decided upon by the temple's management committee. After the completion of the rituals at the temple, the chariot (together with an attending priest whose role is to accompany the deity, to look after it, and to accept offerings made by devotees and perform rituals at the various stopping points) leaves the temple grounds on a predetermined pathway on the eastern part of the island. It stops at four designated 'stopping points' – the Sinhdu House, the Senpaga Vinayagar Temple, Block 615 Bedok Reservoir and the Macpherson's Boys Club. At these stopping points, Hindu devotees gather with trays of offerings, *varisai* (flowers, fruits, garlands, *sarees*, *veshti*, etc. which are accepted by the priest), to catch sight of the deity (*darsana*) and to receive the deity's grace and blessings. Because of the large crowds and limited time, the chariot only stops briefly at these locations, just long enough for devotees to make offerings. The return of the chariot to the temple and the restoration of the *utsava murti* to its original state, including appeasing the deity, mark the end of the procession. The entire procession, along a route of 4–5 km, takes about six hours. A series of cleansing and purification rituals are also conducted a few days after the end of the procession to return the deities to their original state.

Ratha Yatra (Chariot Festival of Lord Jagannatha)

On 2 July 2006, a prominent half-page advertisement in *The Straits Times* (Singapore) announced the observance of the Ratha Yatra Chariot Festival of Lord Jagannatha, described as a 'colorful, melodious extravaganza', organized by the Shri Krishna Mandir. The site for the event was a sports stadium in Toa Payoh – one of the oldest Housing and Development Board estates in Singapore. It was held on a Sunday in July at 5 p.m. and attracted an impressive crowd of about 3,000 observers and participants who took turns to manually pull and push three large chariots around the stadium tracks. Three 30 ft tall, four-wheeled wooden chariots with towering red and yellow canopies, decorated with garlands of fresh marigolds and multi-coloured balloons, carrying images of Lord Krishna, Baladeva and Subhadra, attended to by *pandas*, circled the jogging tracks of the stadium, pulled by hundreds of Krishna devotees dancing and singing to the beat of drums and cymbals.

I witnessed these proceedings in July 2006 and I read these as attempts to approximate the annual Jagannatha Ratha Yatra, the chariot journey of Lord Jagannatha (Lord of the Universe) in Puri, Orissa, India, held in the month of Asadha. The three massive chariots, 45–50 ft high with 16 wheels, are modelled on replicas of temples that house the images at Puri. They are pulled by thousands along a 2 km route, culminating at Gundicha Bari (Garden House) where the chariots remain for a week. They are then taken back to the temples at Puri. In all the festival lasts nine days. The Singapore Ratha

Yatra is an abbreviated, compressed version of the grand, majestic and striking festivities at Puri. According to a publicity brochure prepared by the organizers, the festival is explained thus:

> Annually the Lord ventures out of the inner sanctum of the temple to shower his mercy on the fallen souls and to enjoy transcendental pastimes in the form of the chariot festival.
>
> There are many miracles which have been attributed to the Jagannatha deity. In a similar way, we are carrying out this festival in Singapore. Anybody who pulls the chariot immediately acquires heaps of pious merit.

The festival is organized by the Shri Krishna Mandir which was formally registered as a charity welfare organization in October 1997. This formalized the status and identity of a group of Krishna devotees who have been present in Singapore and meeting informally since the early 1970s. Long-standing members of this collectivity recall the observance of the annual Ratha Yatra festival in different locations since at least 1989. Between 1989 and 2006, this group of devotees has explored and experimented with a variety of sites to find the appropriate locale for holding the festival – from the Pasir Panjang Wholesale Market to a farm in Lim Chu Kang to a huge, open field in Race Course Road and finally the Toa Payoh Sports Stadium.[8]

Not only was the site of the festival unusual, but it was also striking to see hundreds of Krishna devotees pulling the chariot, to the sounds of impassioned chanting of 'Hare Krishna Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna Hare Hare, Hare Rama Hare Rama, Rama Rama Hare Hare' – the 16 words that typify devotion to Lord Krishna – and swaying and dancing to the rhythmic beat of the drums. It would be entirely accurate to describe the ambiance as jubilant, joyous, ecstatic and blissful. One of the organizers of the festival explains this mood at the festival:

> 'Smiling and happy, everybody was joyful because of the holy name of the Lord. So when you worship the Lord you get purified and you come to the mode when you are happy. The chanting generates spiritual vibration and ambiance.'

He explained the significance of pulling the chariot thus:

> 'So when we pull the cart, it means you are doing service to the Lord, especially when you touch the rope . . . you go back to Krishna. . . . How many lives get the chance to go back to Krishna by doing some service? By pulling the cart, the Lord becomes very merciful. Not only pulling, when you follow, you just chant, you just stop and see. Everybody on that day will get a chance to get so much purification,

starting their journey back home to the Lord. This is so powerful. You can't buy that in your Mustafa or your Takashimaya.'[9]

As the chariots circled the jogging track, the *pandas* seated on them distributed little plastic packets of nuts and raisins as *prasad* (leftover of the gods). At designated points within the stadium, the chariots stopped to allow devotees to make offerings of fruits, flowers and Indian sweetmeats to the three deities and to receive blessings in return. There were also stalls offering free drinks and food to all present. The event was capped with an elaborate vegetarian buffet dinner and a cultural programme.

While the Singapore festival is modelled on the Puri event, there are obvious and inevitable differences between the two, something the local organizers are well aware of. They are also optimistic that the scale and popularity of the festival will grow in future years, despite the logistical problems and constraints under which the event is organized. It is significant that currently a majority of the participants at the festival are drawn from the Bengali and other North Indian communities in Singapore, with a small number of Tamil Hindu and Singaporean Chinese participants. In recent years, hundreds of young Bangladeshi men who work in Singapore have been conspicuous at the festival. While appreciative of the contributions made by the Bangladeshis towards creating the right atmosphere at the festival with their high energy levels, singing and dancing, the organizers admit that the festival needs to be 'localized' in order for it to be sustained and institutionalized in Singapore.

Ratha Urvalam (Kuul Vaarppu Festival)

In July 2006, the residents of Jurong West witnessed a rare sight – a Hindu chariot procession passing along the streets in their neighbourhood. This was made possible through the efforts of the Sri Samayapuram Mariamman[10] Pillaigal (SSMP; literally, 'the children of Sri Samayapuram Mariamman', an appropriate description given that the devotees refer to the deity affectionately as *amma* – 'mother'), a religious and welfare organization formally registered[11] under the Societies Act (Singapore) in February 2005. What is distinctive about this event is that in the recent history of chariot festivals in Singapore, this was the first time a 'non-temple' group had secured a police permit to organize such a procession. No registered temple exists for this deity in Singapore, but a consecrated image of Samayapuram Mariamman is housed in the twelfth-storey apartment of the Singaporean Tamil Hindu couple through whose efforts the society has been formalized in Singapore. Together with this couple, the management committee of this deity-centred organization proposed, initiated and organized the chariot festival. As such this is something of a historic moment in Singaporean Hinduism. What is also striking about this group is that its members consciously privilege what

they recognize as the 'ways of their ancestors', the folk customs, rituals and public festivals in honour of village deities they feel have, over the years, been 'forgotten' in Singapore. In an effort to reinstate and reinsert some of these lost traditions into everyday Hindu religiosity in Singapore, the group has worked very hard to organize the annual three-day Kuul Vaarppu Festival (now in its eighth year) in Singapore in honour of the deity Samayapuram Mariamman, during which folk ritual is consciously privileged (Sinha 2006). During the 2006 celebration of this festival the society members made a conscious decision to introduce 'something new' in the form of a *ratha urvalam*. They wanted was to take the image of the goddess Samayapuram Mariamman in procession in the western part of the island – their own neighbourhood.

Apart from attending to a series of administrative and bureaucratic formalities, holding such a festival entailed securing a chariot as the society does not own a *ratham*. This was made possible by a privately administered temple, the Sri Vadapathira Kaliamman Temple (SVKT, in Serangoon Road), which loaned a wooden chariot for a fee of S$500, together with a tow truck, the beams and platform upon which the deity is hoisted onto the chariot, together with the support and expertise of their own temple officials. The procession was scheduled for 28 July but the chariot was transported to Jurong West the day before, so that it could be decorated and readied for the festival. The chariot decorations cost around S$1,000 and the deity herself was decked in a gold-plated body covering and elaborate jewels, sari and hair piece. The aim was to produce a stunning and grand effect for the devotees who would turn out to see the deity when she made her rounds. Apart from producing this majestic effect for spectators, the decorations were also to please the deity and 'to make her want to come onto the chariot, to sit there and be taken on a procession'. On the second day of the three-day festival, the *panchalokam* (alloy of five metals) image of the deity was brought down from the home of the organizers and transported to the site of the festival where it was decorated and a series of rituals were performed before it was placed on the chariot. The schedule of rituals and ceremonies to be performed for the chariot procession festival had been decided upon by the main organizers following advice from the two priests who were overseeing the celebrations. The first *varisai* – the *veetu varisai* – was offered by the organizers' family before the chariot set off at 7.30 p.m. The processional route had been decided in advance and the organizers had included only one stopping point – the car park of a block of residential flats in Jurong West, Block 668B, where the guest of honour, Mr Tan Poi Eng, the Chairman of the Jurong Central Community Club, was honoured with a garland and silk robe. Some of the society's members had gone ahead to this stopping point to arrange for the reception of the chariot and to prepare the area by organizing the devotees who had gathered there to offer *varisai* – silver trays loaded with saris, bangles, fruits,

combs, camphor, betel leaves, areca nuts, flowers and coconut – to the deity. A total of 150 such trays were offered and this took 45 minutes. The priest accepted the tray from the devotee and placed it at the feet of the deity before returning it to the devotee. The latter also received the following in return: a garland used to decorate the deity, a small amount of turmeric root, *kumkumam*, glass bangles, flowers and sweetmeats, along with a small picture of Samayapuram Mariamman as a gift and thanksgiving from the Society to the people for their support and participation. The organizers were very aware that popular Hinduism was a distinct practice they had initiated, not encountered in other chariot processions in Singapore. After all the devotees had made their offerings, the chariot started back for Block 555 Jurong Street 42 at about 8.30 p.m., where another 80 trays of *varisai* were offered both by individual devotees and collectively by the female members of the Society and the Ayyan Boys[12] – a sub-group of the Society.

The staging of processions entails the intermingling of sacred and profane elements through the mediation of physical space. What does it mean for divinity to traverse the same space as vehicles, keeping to speed limits and stopping at red lights? Clearly those who see the deity en route are blessed. What happens to the deity when it temporarily leaves its dominions? A Brahmin priest I spoke to argued that the deity is in fact 'polluted' through contact with profane features of the landscape and there are ritual provisions for returning the deity to its original state.

Theoretical possibilities: making sense of chariot processions

Predictably, my fieldwork for this chapter generated rich ethnographic data about the religious significance of chariot processions in Hinduism. Despite their varied motivations for organizing chariot processions, the three groups report similar experiences and are certainly subject to the same directives and parameters. Of the three events, the organization of the MSV chariot procession is clearly the least problematic and the organizers report the highest comfort levels in accomplishing the task. This has to do with the long history of the procession at a HEB temple, the greatest familiarity with procedures and by now the routinization of the proceedings. The other two groups – the Shri Krishna Mandir, a relative latecomer, and the SSMP, a new player on the scene – are still in the process of trying to figure things out and are negotiating their way around bureaucratic and logistical imperatives. As such, their organizational experiences entail greater levels of anxiety and bear some degree of uncertainty. Also, as Younger (1995) argues, there is an obvious 'structure' and pattern to all three processions and its elements are shared across the three cases described here.

An internal comparison also allows me to reiterate that even the small minority Hindu community on the island is not a homogeneous one and that tensions exist among its members, something also noted by Kong (2005) in

her analysis of *tai pucam* in Singapore. The following discussion highlights some of the schisms and lines of disagreement that exist within the small Hindu community. For the Jurong West group, a prime motivation for holding the chariot procession had to do with the desire to bring the deity to 'our neighbourhood'. The organizers explained that they had been trying, unsuccessfully, to persuade the two Hindu temples nearest to them to include Jurong West in their chariot processional route. In any case, they felt that they were 'too far for temples from Serangoon Road[13] to come to them'. Therefore they decided to hold their own procession for the benefit of Hindus in the western part of the island. This perception of being located on the margins has led this group to express its desire for autonomy and self-direction. Apart from revealing a creative impulse, this also shows a drive for democratization and participation by all, coming from a sector of the Hindu community that sees itself on the periphery and thus 'left out and neglected'. This brings to light some hidden political dynamics of the local Hindu scene, particularly the attendant tensions between proponents of 'Official Hinduism' and those of 'Popular Hinduism' (Vertovec 1994). The latter style of religiosity is favoured by the SSMP which is deity centred, and many of its religious rituals and sentiments stand in stark contrast to the brand of Hinduism one finds in the Agamic temples.

The following narrative by one of the organizers of the Jagannatha Ratha Yatra Festival reveal yet a different kind of judgement about what sort of Hinduism and image are appropriate and legitimate for Singapore. The Shri Krishna Mandir's ultimate desire to enhance the scale of the festival in Singapore was explained to me thus:

> 'Yes, I think about 3,000 people showed up. And this was just the beginning. You can imagine if we were to do it every year it can go to . . . something very big. And that is our objective and aim, to bring this culture to the. . . . Because the Hinduism that is prevailing here is basically South Indian Hinduism, and that too, predominantly Tamil. And they are doing things which are not sanctioned by scripture. For example that Thaipusam thing is not authorized in scripture. You know, putting spears in and all, it is actually driving people away from Hinduism. People are frightened to see that. You see men walking on fire and all that. Tamil people have this kind of gross way of doing austerity. It's not in all parts of India. You know, it's not. So therefore to see the joyous the blissful thing . . . you'd be surprised in this festival you'll not see one policeman. And everything, you must have seen, is very orderly and disciplined and everybody is having a nice time. But this is unusual for an Indian festival because usually when you have an Indian festival, they bring in the riot squad. So you see, if you have discipline, you have law and order and you believe in God, then things become very nice.'

Embedded in this account is an explicit critique of a facet of Hinduism that has a long history in Singapore and has in fact become institutionalized and is now considered a legitimate part of the mainstream religion. In this reasoning, the attention to scriptural authority, the fear of austere practices and the 'grossness' of *tai pucam* and fire walking are contrasted with the simplicity, bliss, joy, order and discipline of the Ratha Yatra Festival. Furthermore, the narrative is reminiscent of the reformist tones of middle-class censure of folk Hinduism, encountered in both India and the Hindu diaspora. The Shri Krishna Mandir[14] is a deity-centred group and privileges devotion to Krishna above all else, locating itself in a Vaisnavite tradition. It does not see itself as part of Agamic Hinduism, but defines itself as an ancient movement, which is not bound by institutionalized, temple-based Hinduism, and transcending its hierarchy and excessive ritualism.

The incidence of motorized chariot processions along the streets of Singapore certainly puts religion on display in the public sphere. Like parades, carnivals and festivals, processions can be spectacular public rituals which have a performative dimension, in addition to their spiritual significance. The rationale offered by the head priest of the Sri Vadapathira Kaliamman Temple encapsulates the strong religious motive for organizing a chariot procession:

> 'It is important for every temple to have a *ratham*. . . . The annual temple festival is done to secure the well-being of all beings in the world. We pray that they must live happily. Then, when the purpose of the festival is to bless and pray for all the beings in the world, we have to think about those who, for whatever reason, may not be able to come to the temple and receive sight from the deity. Some people may be physically unable to come to the temple because they are unwell. Others may belong to different religions and thus not come to our temple. And then there are other living beings, animals and birds, which are also not able to come to the temple. Although science may not yet have shown animals to relate to religions, who knows whether they can or cannot relate to God? . . . That is why the *ratham* is there, to bring God out to these living beings and give them His/Her 'sight'. That is why God goes out. The *ratham* is then like a mobile temple, encasing God and bringing Him/Her to the people. The *ratham* is built like a temple because God must always be placed inside a temple. In fact the *ratham* is referred to as a *nadamaadum kovil* – walking temple.'

The level of universal inclusiveness expressed in this statement incorporates in its religious worldview all living beings, human and non-human, and asserts the importance of facilitating contact with divinity and spreading sacred divine power to all. In such a discourse, the fact that the processions occur

in a largely non-Indian, non-Hindu context and are viewed by non-Hindus would not be a problem. Yet the fact remains that the multi-ethnic, multi-religious, urban and secular environment and its sensibilities are operative factors and mean that a certain structure and order has to be imposed on public displays of religiosity. Furthermore, these processions are enacted in a non-Hindu, non-Indian space. So questions about who the audience is and who benefits from witnessing and participating in the festival naturally surface. My data suggest that the processions are seen to serve a dual purpose: to please the deity and for the benefit of spectators who imbibe the sacred and divine power emanating from the deity. In the Hindu scheme of things, deities are anthropomorphized and deemed to have needs, desires and preferences similar to humans: thus they are awakened, bathed, adorned, fed, put to bed and taken out on rides for entertainment. In the local context, the spectators are a mixed lot – Hindu devotees, non-Hindu and non-Indian Singaporeans as well as tourists. As such the people consume processions in a variety of ways, from appreciating their religious value, to seeing them as an object of curiosity or as an extraordinary photo opportunity. A procession on the roads of Singapore certainly reconfigures the visual terrain of the island, however temporarily. It is also not lost on the minority Hindu community that its presence on the island is marked and made conspicuous through such public displays.

Interestingly, my data also reveal the tremendous amount of 'secular labour' that goes into the successful performance of these processions, in the administrative and bureaucratic formalities and work their organizers and planners inevitably face. As the presented ethnographic material reveals, the organization of these processions involves the energies and efforts of a large group that has to start what I call 'secular labour' (organizational, financial, administrative) months before the actual date of the festival. It would not be an exaggeration to describe the raising of adequate funds and the level of labour, knowledge, co-ordination and industry required for the successful organization of this event as colossal tasks. The enhanced scale of these processions on public roads, where vehicular and human traffic have to be managed, requires manpower and organizational support from a number of parties, including members of the police force, whose services have to be paid for. Furthermore, co-operation and understanding must be solicited from members of the public who have to contend with slow-moving traffic along affected roads.

However, before the organizational work can begin, knowledge about what needs to be done to stage a procession is even more crucial, especially for a newcomer such as the Jurong West group. It is important, for example, to know the procedures that have to be followed in order to secure a police permit. The organizers of this first ever chariot procession for Samayapuram Mariamman have mastered the knowledge that is required for success. In fact all three groups accept that these rules have to be

observed and so rather than lament, critique and bemoan the existence of a bureaucratic framework which regulates all religious processions, the organizers have faced this challenge head on and made strategic use of it. We have seen that in order for the processions to be held, a number of 'clearances' are required, the most important of which is the police permit. A notification has also to be made to the Singapore Police Force to obtain a public entertainment licence if music is to be played at the stopping points. The large-scale organization of the festivals also means that funding is a big concern, especially for the Shri Krishna Mandir and the Samayapuram Mariamman Society,[15] both of which rely on individual donations and sponsorships to stage the processions. Fund raising is thus a major venture that concerns organizers. In addition, the processional route has to be planned bearing in mind the need for it to travel the shortest possible distance and to go through areas with little traffic, with stopping points that are compatible with traffic flow. Obtaining the chariot itself, and transformating it into a 'moving temple' – fit for divinity – are no mean feats, not to mention the skills (physical strength and elegance) involved in successfully hoisting the deity on to it. Finally, all the careful planning on paper has to be executed precisely, which means above all negotiating the processional route and making sure that everything goes according to plan. The organizers admit that inevitably there are many anxious moments during the proceedings, as once the chariot is on the roads, it is 'out of our hands and we don't know what people will do'.

By and large, the organizers of the processions told me that going through the endeavour had been a 'learning experience', a 'journey of discovery', for them in that they had learnt how the world of permits, licences and approvals frames what is permissible and what is not, what can and cannot be done in the public domain as far as religion is concerned. Clearly, the demands and constraints of urban living in a modern secular space, the day-to-day working of industrial, capitalism and the presence of a particular mode of governance with regard to religion are not easily compatible with reproducing the processional dimension of Hinduism. The eventual shaping of practices and discourses within this domain, as well as in other religious arenas, is affected by the influence of a pervasive pragmatic ideology (Chua 1985) and the broader processes of rationalization, standardization and bureaucratization that typify features of Singaporean social life. Specifically, the successful enactment of processions in the local context entails what Kong (2005) has accurately labelled the 'negotiation of sacred pathways, time and space'.

While the organizers of the processions accept the necessity and inevitability of rules and regulations, many participants and observers note that such bureaucratization of religious life has meant a move from 'festivals' to 'managed events', lacking in spontaneity and a mood of celebration and enjoyment. An overtly critical tone is discernible in such judgements. Of the

three cases I examined, only the Shri Krishna Mandir is able to prioritize and retain the festive flavour of the Ratha Yatra, largely because it is held in an enclosed space where there are no issues of traffic management, congestion or noise pollution – things that the other two organizers have to be cognizant of and deal with. With the two vehicular chariot processions, the options for reproducing elements of 'festival Hinduism' (Younger 1995) are reduced to nothing as the chariot moves in an orderly convoy of cars, vans and tow trucks along a predetermined route, guided by marshals and traffic police, only making scheduled stops at specific points. The ritual activities at these stopping points are also laid down, routinized and above all regulated, and have to be concluded within a specified schedule, to ensure that the chariot procession will be over by the time specified in the permit, typically before midnight.

Despite all the regulation and containment of religious and political activities in the public domain, processional Hinduism continues on the roads of Singapore and certainly within temple grounds.[16] Needless to say, several shifts in how they are staged have had to occur: first in the original move from India to the Singapore diaspora and then, since 1964, in the increased regulation. This submission to regulation, my respondents explained, is the condition for the right to hold the processions at all. They are well aware that any infringement would not only be punishable by law but, more importantly, would lead to a warning from the police and then refusal to grant a permit, making it impossible for the procession to be held at all. These pragmatic considerations ensure self-policing and discipline such that the rules are strictly adhered to. Differences between chariot processions at 'home' and in Singapore were noted by several of the Brahmin priests I spoke to. Yet these differences seem to have been accepted good-naturedly and are in fact rationalized by priests and members of the organizing committees who find it remarkable that such events are possible at all in a modern, urban, secular, non-Indian and non-Hindu context. The altered context and conditions are not found to be debilitating and, as my data indicate, have certainly not diminished the enthusiasm and zeal for holding these chariot processions in an effort to reproduce, albeit within stated parameters, this brand of Hindu religiosity in Singapore.

Notes

1 Singapore Census of Population, 2000.
2 I have used the description 'Singaporean Hinduism' to mean the following:

> [it] denotes a particular configuration of substantive elements that constitute what is labeled 'Hinduism' amongst the migrant, Hindu community on the island nation-state of Singapore. The diversity of the local Indian, Hindu population, the principle of secular, bureaucratic governance and the multi-religiosity of social life here make it possible to speak of the making of

'Singaporean Hinduism' which, not surprisingly, is a process that reflects multitude positions and hence disagreements about what constitutes 'proper' Hinduism.

(Sinha 2006)

3 All these examples are drawn from the photographs in the collection of the Picture Archives of Singapore on the official website of the National Archives of Singapore (www.nhb.gov.sg).

4 This textual description appended to the photograph of a procession on the occasion of the Prophet Mohammad's Birthday Celebrations on 15 September 1959 is revealing:

A 3-mile long procession was the highlight of Singapore's celebrations of the Prophet Mohammad's Birthday. The celebrations began early in the morning with prayers and recitation of the holy Koran. Hundreds lined the streets. Veiled Arab women peered through windows and traffic piled-up as the prayer-chanting, banner-carrying procession marched by.

(http://picas.nhb.gov.sg/picas)

5 Part II, Section 5 of the Miscellaneous Offences (Public Order and Nuisance) Act, entitled 'Assemblies and Processions', makes stipulations in a series of statements that allow for formulation of rules by the Minister for the purpose of regulating assemblies and processions in public roads, public places and places of public resort, granting of permits (for a fee) for holding the same, keeping order and preventing obstruction or inconvenience in these public spaces and for prescribing punishment for contravening any rule pertaining to assemblies and processions. Sub-section 3 under Section 5 of the same Act also reads thus:

A Deputy Commissioner of Police may, with the concurrence of the Minister, prohibit or restrict the holding of any assembly or procession in any specified public road, public place or place of public resort in any particular case where the Deputy Commissioner is satisfied that the holding of such assembly or procession may result in public disorder, damage to property or disruption to the life of the community.

6 One of the functions and duties of the police force includes 'regulating processions and assemblies in public roads, public places and places of public resort' (Police Force Act, Section 4(2)(d)). Hence the presence of large numbers of police on the occasion of street processions.

7 The Hindu Endowments Board (HEB) is a government-affiliated body that was established by the British to manage the affairs of the local Hindu community. The Hindu Endowments Board existed previously as part of the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowment Board (MHEB), created in 1905, but has existed separately since 1969.

8 The use of 'secular' spaces for religious events is not recent in Singapore. We know of various religious festivals, for example, that have moved into sports stadiums upon the institution of restrictions on foot processions along public roads. But new spaces are colonized for religious events: the Shri Krishna Mandir organized the 'Boat Festival – Boat Ride of Sri Sri Radha Madana Mohan' – on 3 September 2006 at the Jalan Besar Swimming Complex.

9 These are the names of two popular shopping centres in Singapore.

10 Samayapuram is the name of a village in Tamilnadu, India, made famous by its temple for the Hindu goddess Mariamman. The deity has taken on the geographic descriptor and is recognized as Samayapuram Mariamman by Hindu devotees the world over. Mariamman is today no longer viewed as just a village deity. She has been moved into temples built for her in cities in Tamilnadu, such as Chennai. With her devotees she has travelled far and wide, outside India, and can now be found in such places as Fiji, Mauritius, Trinidad and Tobago, parts of East Africa and certainly in Malaysia and Singapore – all those places where Tamil populations have settled.

11 The society was formed with an executive committee of 15 members, now has a total of 30 members, and enjoys widespread informal popular support. The group sees this as an important step in advancing the broader aims and objectives of the collectivity. The constitution of the society lists the following as its three main objectives: to conduct annual religious and cultural activities, to provide voluntary assistance to social and community organizations and to organize programmes and activities to support needy families.

12 The term *ayyan* refers generically to male guardian deities such as Muneeswaran, Muniyandi, Madurai Veeran and Karuppan – whose worship is popular with young Tamil men, who in this instance have organized themselves as Ayyan Boys.

13 It is no accident that the name of this road marks a particular portion of Singapore as 'Indian' and/or 'Hindu'. It reflects early patterns of settlement, determined by the larger politico-economic logic of the British colonial government which planned to apportion parts of the island for occupation by different groups of 'natives' Residential and employment segregation by race resulted in specific concentrations of racial groups across the island. For instance, the designation of what is known today as 'Little India' as an Indian space has deep historical roots. The belt of Hindu temples in the area is a function of the early, selective presence of caste groupings there (Siddique and Shotam 1980).

14 Elsewhere I have treated this as a 'new religious movement' of a Hindu variety (Sinha 2007a), which prioritizes *seva* (service) as devotion at a spiritual level and extends it to encompass social service and charitable work in a real, societal context.

15 The cost of holding the chariot procession for Samayapuram Mariamman was about S$5000.

16 This is true of other processions as well. For example processions for the Vesak day and Good Friday celebrations have been held in sports stadiums.

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12

PARADING HINDU
GODS IN PUBLIC

New festival traditions of Tamil
Hindus in Germany

Brigitte Luchesi

Since the 1980s, refugees from Sri Lanka have been living in Germany, high percentages of them being Tamil Hindus. Whereas the early immigrants had no public religious institutions at all, over time Tamil Hindus have created possibilities to practise their faith outside their homes. They have set up prayer halls and temples in converted basements and industrial sites and have even started to construct new buildings. The establishment of temples has enabled the celebration of yearly temple festivals and other main religious events which in turn have created a demand for special festival activities in the South Asian tradition. The most important are public processions which since the early 1990s have been organised ever more frequently by a number of temple committees. This chapter concentrates on these public phenomena, looking at the patterns of Hindu Tamil processions in several German cities. Attention is paid to the self-interpretation of the organisers and participants but also to the reactions of the host society. The history of one of the processions is explored to reveal the negotiations that took place with regard to the contested public space.

Berlin-Kreuzberg, Tuesday, 26 August 2003, 14:30 p.m.: more than 300 people have gathered in front of no. 176 Urbanstrasse, one of the main streets in this part of the German capital. Kreuzberg citizens form the outer ring, among them TV reporters with cameras, photographers, policemen and officials from the local transport services. They taste the spicy dishes offered to them while watching what is going on in the centre of the crowd: women in colourful saris and men in white sarongs have gathered round a richly decorated cart, on which – between masses of flowers – the faces of three

brass figures can be discerned. Some of the men hold coconuts in their raised right hands and suddenly throw them down in front of the cart. Broken pieces fly in all directions and are quickly picked up by the participants. Several men and women grab the two ropes fixed to the cart and start the vehicle moving. Musicians with drums and flutes walk in front together with half a dozen men who carry frames decorated with feathers on their shoulders. A group of women gather behind the cart and start singing; other participants assemble behind them. The procession of Tamil Hindu members of the Mayoorapathy Sri Murugan Temple[1] in Berlin, has begun. It is in honour of the presiding god of the temple, Sri Murukan. His image and those of his wives are escorted through the neighbouring streets. The cart stops several times while priest and devotees show their reverence. The route ends where it began, outside the above-mentioned building in the basement of which the temple has been housed for several years.

Nowadays scenes like this are not restricted to Berlin; they may be witnessed in several German cities. In nearly all cases they are part of religious festivals celebrated by Tamil Hindus from Sri Lanka. The only other Hindu processions known to me are those occasionally organised by members of ISKCON (Krishna Consciousness) for God Krishna.

Hindu Tamils in Germany and their places of worship

Sri Lankans form the majority of Hindus in Germany whose number is said to total between 90,000 and 98,000.[2] They are among the approximately 60,000 Tamils living in Germany at present. Most of these Tamils came as refugees from the early 1980s on, fleeing the escalating civil war in their homeland Sri Lanka. In the beginning they were mainly young men, but in the course of time their wives and children as well as older family members were able to join them.

The asylum seekers were sent all over Germany by the German authorities in order to prevent clustering in certain areas and cities. Nevertheless, most probably because the local jurisdiction was less rigid than in other German states, about 45 per cent of all Sri Lankan immigrants are concentrated in the West German state of North Rhine-Westphalia. It must be noted that not all Tamils living in Germany are Hindus – in fact about a quarter are Christians.[3] The remaining 45,000 or so may be considered Hindus.

Until recently only a relatively small percentage of the German population knew where and how Sri Lankan Hindus practised their faith because Hindu public religious institutions were virtually non-existent when the first immigrants arrived. In the early 1980s rooms or halls were sometimes hired for a day or two for the communal celebration of certain festivals. Such places of worship were by necessity only temporary. The first permanent places of worship appeared in the late 1980s. In several towns Tamil Hindus established religious organisations; they elected temple committees and

collected money so that they could rent places on a permanent basis. In most cases this was just enough to rent a basement or part of a former industrial building, that is, somewhere modest and inconspicuous. Although the interior was usually equipped as authentically as possible, there was normally no indication outside, except maybe an unobtrusive sign, of what the site was being used for.

This changed in the 1990s when a number of bigger, better-situated and more prestigious premises were rented or even bought for use as temples. Some of them had boards and decorations outside indicating what they were being used for. In 2003 there were 25, mostly in western Germany (North Rhine-Westphalia) (Baumann 2003a: 66). It was in this region, on the outskirts of the city of Hamm, that the new Sri Kamadchi Ampal Temple was inaugurated in 2002. It is notable as the only Tamil Hindu place of worship so far in Germany – in fact in Continental Europe – which was planned and constructed as a temple right from the beginning. Among its main external features are the two temple towers (*gopuram*) which are covered with a multitude of images representing Hindu goddesses.[4] Thus, even from quite a distance, this building clearly announces its purpose.

Several of the new abodes of the Hindu Tamil gods and goddesses are highly conspicuous. They are meant to be seen and recognised by the surrounding German public. When describing this development in earlier papers I have called it the process of 'leaving invisibility' (Luchesi 2004a, 2004b, 2005). Places which formerly tended to remain hidden and inconspicuous, with barely any indication of the people who used them, become increasingly visible. The Hindu Tamil minority has begun to make clear that they want to present their religious orientations and practice to the outside world. In doing so they are claiming their own place in German religious plurality.

Religious festivals and processions

A parallel development can be noted with regard to religious activities, especially those connected with religious festivals. Several temples started to celebrate large-scale temple festivals soon after they had established permanent places of worship and to organise public processions as part of these festive events. This seems to follow a certain logic: as long as there were no permanent temples with properly established images to house the revered gods and goddesses there were no temple festivals and also no processions to bring the festival images into the public sphere.

The first public Hindu Tamil procession in Germany was organised in 1993 by the above-mentioned Sri Kamadchi Temple in Hamm, at that time still housed in an inconspicuous location opened in 1992. Between 200 and 300 Tamil devotees from Hamm and surrounding towns accompanied the splendidly decorated image of the goddess Kamadchi (Tamil: Kamatci; Sanskrit: Kamakshi) which was carried on the shoulders of male devotees through the

Figure 12.1 Images of gods are carried through the neighbourhood of the Sri Sithivinayagar Temple in Hamm. Interested residents watch the procession from their windows. Photo: B. Luchesi

streets surrounding the temple. The following year a special processional cart (*ter*) was used to transport the image, pulled with ropes by men and women along the processional route (Baumann 2000: 149). The number of participants grew steadily: in 1996 it was estimated at between 3,000 and 4,000, then, after the Kamdachi Temple was moved to an industrial area on the outskirts of the city, up to 10,000 visitors were reported. In 2000–2005 the main day of the yearly temple festival saw between 12,000 and 15,000 visitors, and the numbers given for 2006 and 2007 were 20,000.

Other Tamil temples also started to organise public processions soon after the Kamadchi Temple but have never attracted as many people. The following temples are known to organise processions:

- the Murukan Temple in Gummersbach (Sri Kurinsi Kumaran) which was opened in 1993 and had its first public procession with three carts through central parts of the town in 1995;
- the Ganesa Temple (Sri Sithivinayagar) in the city of Hamm near the main station, which moved to its present location in 1994 and has been organising yearly processions through the adjacent streets since 1996;

- the Murukan Temple (Mayoorapathy Sri Murugan) in Berlin-Kreuzberg which holds a procession in August around the neighbourhood (see p. 178f.); the temple was founded in 1991 and its location was bought in 1998;
- the Sri Muthumariamman Temple in the suburbs of Hanover, housed since 1995 in the premises of a former small factory, which started to take out the processional image of the goddess on a comparatively short round in 1996, with participants from Hanover itself and its environs in Lower Saxony numbering between 200 and 700;
- the most recent of the three Tamil temples in the Hamm area, the Murukan Temple (Thiru Nallur Sri Arumuka Velalakan Temple), since 2001 located not far from the Ganesa Temple, near the railway station, which started processions on 28 July 2002.

Processions are also reported from the goddess temple in Frankfurt/Main (Sri Nagapooshani Amman Thevastaanam) and from Stuttgart where the Sri Sithivinayagar Temple held its first on 4 August 2003.

The various processions share a number of characteristics but also show certain differences.

All the events had – as is to be expected – the same central event in common: the parading of the image of the presiding goddess or god of the temple. As is the case in the homeland of the devotees – or for that matter the Hindu regions of South Asia in general – processions are understood as occasions to bring a deity out of his or her normal abode, i.e. the sacred interior of the temple, into the profane everyday world. In all cases the deities are represented by special processional images which, too, is in accordance with the South Asian tradition. These moveable images, called *utsava murti* in Sanskrit, are transported either on the shoulders of devotees or on special carts which may be pushed but are more often pulled with ropes, a method which allows more people to take part in the highly auspicious function of moving the deity. Men and women alike volunteer for it; most often there is one rope for male and one for female devotees. The palanquins and chariots of the deities are either imported from South Asia or manufactured in Germany. In size and quality they cannot be compared with the huge, elaborate and costly temple chariots of the major Sri Lankan or South Indian temples. But great care is always taken to decorate them as elaborately as possible to provide a fitting vehicle for the illustrious passengers. The chariot (*ter*) of Kamadchi Devi in Hamm-Uentrop and Sri Murukan in Hamm, as well as those of the gods in Gummersbach, were clearly built with traditional chariots in mind. Like temple towers, they have several discernible layers; this underlines their function as mobile temples.

The people who carry or pull the chariots and carts (that is, are in direct contact with them) are specially dressed and walk barefoot, both signs of respect for the sacred presence. The men normally take off their shirts and

put on a *vetti* (Tam.)/ *vesti*, a type of sarong, while the women are dressed in South Asian style, i.e. in festive saris, long skirts and blouses, or more rarely in North Indian-style *salvar-kamiz* with rich jewellery. Many Western onlookers and newspaper reporters find this colourful and, in Germany, unusual style of dressing especially remarkable.

In some cases the image of the main deity is accompanied by one or more other images either in front of it or immediately behind it. In Hamm-Uentrop, Ganesa leads the way and Candesvara is carried behind the deity. In the city of Hamm, Murukan and wives ride behind the main deity. The central image is accompanied by the temple priest (or priests) who walks in front of it or rides with the images on the chariot (as for instance in Berlin or Gummersbach). At certain points the cart is brought to a halt and the priests perform a short ceremony (*puja*) with camphor flames, flowers and other items in front of the image. Continuous respect is paid by one or two persons who wave whisks in front of the image. This service clearly belongs to a set of activities and insignia taken from traditional South Asian royal rituals. Other such features include a door-like strip of cloth, carried on rods in front of the chariot (*torana*); drummers and other musicians – also walking in front – proclaiming the coming of the god; banners, special signs and ceremonial umbrellas. The deity is thus presented as a high-ranking ruler surrounded by devoted servants. In accordance with this concept, the majority of participants walk *behind* the chariot(s). In Germany the mass of laypersons is normally headed by a group of women who are guided by a professional lead vocalist continuously singing devotional songs.

The routes of the processions always describe a circle or square through the neighbouring area back to the temple. Moving in a clockwise direction they perform what is known as *pradaksina* (in Sanskrit) or circumambulation. The importance given to the correct trajectory can be seen in Hamm-Uentrop: when the provisional temple was being used while the new one was under construction, the route was only about 1 km, but since the inauguration of the new building on the opposite side of the street a much longer route has to be taken because there are no adequate roads nearby. The procession goes past either huge industrial buildings or agricultural fields, that is, fairly uninhabited areas. This differs from the other processions, which lead through urban areas, most of them densely inhabited and with busy traffic on work days. That is the main reason why the authorities in nearly all the areas concerned allow big processions at weekends only, when traffic is the lightest. The only exception known to me is the *rathayatra* of the temple in Berlin-Kreuzberg which in 2003–2007 took place on a weekday afternoon – at the same time as the Eelanallur Thiruvila in their homeland, as the organisers write in a leaflet.

In all cases it is emphasised by the spokesmen of the temples that the processions are held not only for the benefit of the Tamil devotees of the deity concerned but also for the wider public. The travelling gods and goddesses

are believed to see and thereby bless everything in sight – people, animals, land, water and buildings. The entire space they pass through is sanctified by their divine presence. At the same time the participants and onlookers are given the opportunity to have the highly auspicious and beneficent sight (*darsan*) of the deities without entering the temples (Eck 1985). This applies to non-Tamils, too – Christians, Muslims, members of other religions, non-believers. The motto of the temple festival in Hamm-Uentrop is given in the leaflet as: 'People all over the world are to become happy' or 'According to our faith all this is done to ask the goddess Kamadchi Ampal's blessing upon all mankind.'

In a number of processions the devotees taking part undergo various forms of self-castigation, either out of extreme devotion but most often because of a vow to the deity. Vows, called *vrata* in Sanskrit and *nertti* in Tamil, are well-known and widely practised features of Hindu religiosity all over the Indian subcontinent. Certain public manifestations of vows have entered the celebrations of temple festivals in German cities.[5] The most important are the following:

1   Women may carry clay pots filled with sand on their heads. All along the route camphor provided by the devotee and her family is burned. It is said that the camphor cleans the air.
2   Married and unmarried women may carry metal pots on their heads. They are filled with sanctified water and are said to represent the deity (*karakam atutal*).

Both types of vessels are carried in front of the deity.

3   Much more exhausting is circumambulation by prostration, i.e. kneeling down every two or three steps, touching the ground with one's forehead, getting up and repeating the movement after the next three steps. This exercise, called *ati piratatcinam*,[6] is only done by women who *follow* the chariot of the deity.

More impressive are the following practices which all can be seen at one or another temple in Germany:

4   'Body rolling' or rolling along the processional route (*anka-p-piratatcinam*): it was practised for the first time in 1994, at the procession of the old Kamadchi Temple in the city of Hamm. Since then there have always been a certain number of devotees, usually between 20 and 35, determined to do the circumambulation in this way. This vow fulfilment is done only by men. It is said not to be suitable for women, whose clothes might be disarranged. Body rolling is also practised in other places, for instance in Gummersbach, at the procession of Ganesa in Hamm and

in Stuttgart.[7] In Hanover men who applied to do body rolling were discouraged. One explanation for this was that they would slow down the pace of the procession; another was that they encountered certain difficulties with the German authorities.

5   A practice becoming increasingly popular is carrying a *kavati*, a wooden structure decorated with flowers and peacock feathers, the *vahana* of God Murukan (*kavati-y-attam* = 'dancing with *kavati*'). The *kavatis* are held on the shoulders of the carriers who dance to the beat and tune of drums and flutes. They always move in front of the procession. At certain points, when the procession comes to a halt, the dance becomes so intense that some performers fall into a trance. This state is said to be desired; it is considered a sign that the deity has accepted the vow. In his book on the Tamil temple in Stockholm Schalk calls it a 'dance under obsession' with a god (2004: 200). It was the Kamadchi Temple again which attracted the first so-called *kavati* dancers, but now they also appear at other temples, e.g. in Berlin and in Gummersbach. In Germany only male devotees carry *kavatis*; this is different from the procession in Paris, where women with *kavatis* have also been reported (Ethnological Museum Berlin Dahlem, photo exhibition 2003). Most *kavati* dancers are younger men but occasionally there are young boys. In the latter case, their parents are thought to have vowed to make them carry *kavatis*.

Since 1999 increasing numbers of *kavati* dancers have been seen with face and body pierced (*tulaittal*) with needles, hooks and spears (*vel*), the latter being known as the weapon of God Murukan. A number of them also have hooks put into their back to which ropes are fixed so that a second person can lead the dancer like an animal on a leash – increasing the impression of an excited peacock dancing. The needles and hooks are inserted by experts near or at the temple in question. Until 2004 only men were seen with piercings but in 2005 and again in 2006 a woman was seen with her cheeks pierced in the Hamm-Uentrop temple procession. *Kavati* dancers – whether pierced or not – always attract the attention of the public and the media.

6   Even more media attention was directed to the first 'hook swinger' or 'post swinger' (Tamil: *cetilattam*) on a truck in Hamm-Uentrop in 2003. Fixed to hooks and ropes, he was suspended from a special wooden structure mounted on a vehicle which had been brought all the way from Switzerland where similar performances have been part of the Adliswil Temple festival since 2001. In June 2004 two 'hook swingers' had prepared themselves for the Hamm-Uentrop event. Unfortunately one of the wooden structures broke causing a severe accident. According to the priests of the Kamadchi Temple this form of ascetic exercise is now discouraged.

In summary, people who use processions to fulfil vows in public, including those who practise severe self-mortification, are found in several places.

But except in Hamm-Uentrop not all of them were found together. The most widespread practices are body rolling and the carrying of *kavatis*; less common are prostration and the carrying of camphor pots. Hook swinging was restricted to Hamm-Uentrop.

Differences are also to be noted as regards the number of devotees taking part in the processions. Participation depends first of all on the number of active members of a temple. To my knowledge, the numbers are not high, normally between 100 and 200 participants. To organise an impressive public event, people from surrounding cities as well as more distant places have to be mobilised. In this respect North Rhine-Westphalia, with its concentration of immigrants in the densely inhabited Ruhr area, is much better off than other German regions, for instance Baden Württemberg (Stuttgart) or Lower Saxony (Hanover). The size and location of a temple also play a decisive part. Are the surrounding streets suitable for a procession? Is there enough space to meet and to rest and take refreshments? The Ganesa Temple in Hamm for instance has a kitchen with an attached space for eating; the Gummersbach one has a garden and courtyard; in Hanover another floor has to be hired for special occasions; the Berlin temple has practically no additional space. The ground around the Kamadchi Temple in Hamm-Uentrop, however, is big enough to accommodate tents, temporary huts and trailers. The space for a bazaar or market has been extended year by year. The market ground covers a huge area offering visitors an extraordinary choice: snacks and drinks, South Asian clothes and cosmetics, household goods and food items, music, CDs, books and objects for religious use. All this adds to the attractiveness of the temple, which is apparent in the high number of visitors who come from all over Germany and neighbouring countries. Moreover, it is the largest and architecturally most appealing in Germany and is held in high esteem by many devotees because of the power of the residing goddess.

Finally, the date of processions seems important: weekends suit most of the working devotees and those who come from far away and would not be able to join on a weekday. This can be substantiated by looking at the number of participants in the processions taking place on the remaining days of the festival sequence. They normally do not exceed 150–200 people, even on the extremely auspicious occasion – which falls on a Monday – when the goddess in Hamm-Uentrop is taken to the nearby Datteln-Hamm canal to have a bath.

Reactions by the non-Hindu environment

Processions are always public events. People use their bodies and a number of objects to openly demonstrate their religiosity in the streets.[8] In doing this they lay claim to public space: they temporarily occupy it, sometimes to the disadvantage of other citizens like car drivers and tram passengers; they fill

it with their bodies, voices, instruments and odours; even the waste they leave behind attests to their presence. The German public have reacted in different ways, sometimes with complaints. In 1996 neighbours of the Kamadchi Temple, at that time still in the city of Hamm, complained about blocked streets, noise and litter. The authorities were informed that the situation in the temple in no way conformed to German security regulations. In the long run this led to the temple being moved to the outskirts of the town and the erection of the new building.[9] The new location among industrial buildings closed in the evenings and at weekends reduced the possibility of friction considerably. Dates for what are regarded as large processions not only in Uentrop but in most other places have been moved to weekends, i.e. the days with least traffic, and provisions have been made by the organisers for removing litter immediately. Some temples distribute flyers which announce the processions and apologise for possible disturbances. This has eased the situation everywhere. Nowadays processions can take place quite undisturbed. They have even become something of an attraction for non-Hindu spectators. The procession of the Kamadchi Temple in Hamm-Uentrop, for instance, could always count on interested Germans to visit its main temple festival. Their number has risen quite remarkably since the inauguration of the new building in 2002 – probably because of all the reports about the temple in magazines and on television. After the accident in 2004 (see p. 185) the mayor of the city of Hamm spoke about the 'deeply impressive course' of that year's large procession and warned that the accident should not change positive attitudes towards the temple festival. The newspaper which printed his comments published an article entitled: 'Procession is turning more and more into a magnet for visitors'.[10] In Berlin spectators and policemen whom I interviewed consider the public processions of the Tamil temple as part of the multicultural activities of this part of the town.

Summary

Since the early 1990s a number of Tamil temples in Germany have started to organise annual public processions as part of their temple festivals. In the course of my research I have not found any that have stopped this practice: they have so far proved to be successful events. Some other temples are keen to take out their deity, but still lack the necessary prerequisites. Until they are able to have a formal procession they mount the moveable images of their deities on palanquins and take them on a tour within the temple.

In South Asia processions are traditionally part of temple festivals which are by definition public events. The various festivities and rituals go beyond normal priestly activities inside the temple precincts. They are characterised by the participation of a mass of laymen who are particularly actively involved in the events: as devotees with a number of obligations and defined tasks, as sponsors, welcoming spectators. Introducing processions in a

non-Hindu setting requires the combined efforts of many people willing to accomplish the task together. It must be remembered here that the Tamils living in Germany have few traditional family, caste or local ties. It is religious affiliation which may connect the many migrants living dispersed in alien surroundings. The group processes involved certainly help to arouse feelings of unity and identity. By remembering the festive occasions in their homeland and trying to revive them, the participants assure themselves of their common beliefs and traditions which in turn helps to give meaning to their lives. An important motive, often voiced by Tamil informants, is the wish to make the rituals and festivals they used to practise at home known to their children and to pass on the beliefs they grew up with to this second generation in Germany.

It is obvious that processions in Germany are no exact replica of those in Sri Lanka or South India. Of the many differences, I wish to emphasise two: (1) their dates in the diaspora do not follow the traditional ritual calendar based on the planetary movements but comply with official regulations of the host country; (2) the processions do not take place in a setting characterised by the presence of a devoted public waiting near their houses and in the streets to receive and worship the deity, as is the case in many parts of South Asia where the whole neighbourhood – if not the whole city – is 'playing host to deity', as Younger (2002: 13f.) puts it in a description of the religious experience of festivals and processions in the South Indian tradition.

The more or less passive stance of the wider German public does not seem to discourage the organisers and participants of processions. In their under-standing, processions are means to pay special homage to a deity resulting in positive rewards for the actors. At the same time they consider them to be occasions from which not only they themselves but the entire surround-ing area may benefit. As in their homeland, deities who are taken out in processions are believed to distribute blessings to each and everybody. The English text of one of the leaflets distributed by the Berlin temple reads: 'As a great blessing Lord Muruga goes around the temple on that day in a parade along the streets around the temple to bless one and all.' It is a proud statement: it promises something extremely positive for the whole society, accomplished by the efforts of the Hindu Tamil community. It means that the entire host society is made a part of the event as virtually all non-Hindus are included in it as receivers of divine favours.

They are also made witness of various Hindu beliefs and actions usually hitherto unknown to them. Taking their gods out, the Hindu devotees introduce them to the wider public. At the same time they display the kind of relationship they have with these deities. They present themselves as servants and subordinates of mighty rulers whose high status is made visi-ble by the entire performance – be it the splendid chariots or the various expressions of reverence. Although the symbolism has its roots in South Asian royal rituals, Western onlookers seem to understand it – at least according

to TV and newspaper reports. Intricately connected with the presentation of their religion is the wish of Tamil Hindus to be recognised by the public as a genuine religious group.

Most of the Tamil processions in Germany include certain features which – unlike the royal symbolism – are not so easily understood by Westerners: the practices of fulfilment of vows and self-mortification. In Sri Lanka and South India they are long-standing practices: rolling along the procession route or doing the entire circumambulation by prostration, piercing the face and body with needles and hooks, dancing with *kavatis* or carrying burning camphor are features of the festivals of many temples. Most of these practices do not belong to the traditions handed down by brahminical theologians. The fact that they are steadily gaining ground in the German setting seems to me important. It indicates that among the Tamil migrants a specific religious festival culture is developing comparable to the *public* religious festivals in the South Asian tradition. In Sri Lanka and South India these religious festivals provide a recognised place for practices which are part neither of private *pujas* (devotional rituals) nor of the daily temple worship nor of celebrations following purely Sanskritic prescriptions. Processions in the West seem to offer a comparable arena for diverse ritual activities of this kind. The very fact that ascetic and other harsh practices are ever more often incorporated into public expressions of Hindu religiosity in Germany points to the efforts of Tamil Hindus to continue, adapt and reinvent their religious heritage fully even in alien surroundings.

Notes

1 The spelling of temple names follows the transcription the temples themselves use in German texts.

2 Hindus from India number about 35–40,000; Hindus from Afghanistan about 5,000; Hindus belonging to so-called neo-Hinduistic groups about 7,500 (www.remid.de/remid_info_zahlen.htm#hindu).

3 Of the Tamils, 18.4 per cent are said to be Catholics and 8.7 per cent Protestants of various denominations (Baumann 2003a: 49, 50–53). Germans have not always been aware that the majority of the Tamil immigrants are Hindus; they often were thought to be Christians (cf. Jacobsen 2003 for the situation in Norway).

4 See Luchesi (2003) for a detailed description.

5 Cf. Baumann (2003b).

6 Schalk (2004: 199) calls the posture on hands, knees and forehead *panca anga namaskaram* = 'adoration on five limbs'.

7 There were two 'rollers' present at the first procession on 2 August 2003 (*Stuttgarter Zeitung* 4 August 2003).

8 Metcalf (1996: 18) discusses this phenomenon with regard to Muslim processions in England and North America.

9 Cf. Baumann (2000: 149–152).

10 'Umzug wird mehr und mehr zu einem Besuchermagnet', *Westfälische Nachrichten*, 7 June 2004.

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13

PROCESSIONS, PUBLIC SPACE AND SACRED SPACE IN THE SOUTH ASIAN DIASPORAS IN NORWAY

Knut A. Jacobsen

Religious procession is a significant dimension of religious life in South Asia and this ritual tradition is perpetuated in the South Asian diasporas. Processions have become important occasions for large groups of several different South Asian religious communities to gather together for a religious purpose. These processions bring people together in order to put religion and religious identity on display. People moving with sacred objects on public streets make their religious traditions, their identities and their concerns visible to each other and to an audience. Processions also make visible the size of the groups and in this way confirm collective identities and ambitions for influence and power. Procession is a phenomenon of increasing importance in the South Asian diasporas, including the diasporas in Norway. Since the mid-1990s several procession rituals have been institutionalized with great success.

Several South Asian religious groups in Norway organize annual processions. Around sixty thousand people from South Asia live in Norway, of whom Pakistanis and Tamils from Sri Lanka are the largest groups. Around half of the South Asians are Pakistani Muslims and a quarter are Tamils from Sri Lanka. Of around thirteen thousand Tamils, more than 75 per cent are Hindus, the majority of the rest being Roman Catholics. Around seven to eight thousand of the South Asians are Indians and more than 50 per cent of the Indians in Norway are Sikhs. The Tamils from Sri Lanka make the biggest group of Hindus in Norway. In the South Asian diasporas in Norway, religious processions have become the main events in the annual ritual calendar of the Hindus, Sikhs and Roman Catholics. The largest and

most elaborate of these processions is the annual twelve-day temple procession festival (*mahotsava*) of the Hindu temple Sivasubramanyar Alayam in Oslo. No other procession in Norway can compare in terms of the quality and number of elements of religious life put on display or in terms of the number of people participating. The amount of work invested and ritual expertise employed is, likewise, beyond comparison with any other Hindu ritual in Norway. But also the annual procession ritual of the Sikhs that goes through the main parade street of the capital Oslo requires a lot of planning and attracts many participants. The South Asian Roman Catholics in Norway hold one large procession ritual annually in a Catholic retreat centre in eastern Norway one hour's drive from Oslo. The rituals of the South Asian Hindus, Sikhs and Catholics in Norway are remarkably different and have different aims and functions.

The Baisakhi processions of the Sikhs

The majority of Indians in Norway are Sikhs. They have a gurdwara in Oslo (Gurduara Sri Nanak Dev Ji) that was established in 1986, and a second one is being built in Lier between Oslo and Drammen (Gurduara Sri Guru Nanak Niwas). The Hindus from North India have a temple outside Oslo, but have no procession rituals. The Sikhs, however, are well known for their processions, and organize an annual Baisakhi procession through the main parade and shopping street of Oslo. The annual Sikh procession combines religious symbols and statements about identity issues. In spring 2006, around one thousand Sikhs participated in the Baisakhi festival procession. An equal number of women and men participated. Most had their heads covered as they would when visiting a gurdwara. Baisakhi is also a Hindu festival, but for the Sikhs, it celebrates the foundation of the Khalsa in 1699. This is symbolized in the procession by five persons dressed as the 'five beloved ones' (*panj pyare*) walking in front. They symbolize the five people who volunteered when Guru Gobind Singh asked for people willing to die for the Sikh faith. The five men's symbolic beheading and their initiation into the Khalsa by drinking the *amrita* mark the origin of the Sikh Khalsa. In the procession the five beloved wear orange clothes and carry swords. Five women dressed in blue uniforms also walk together near the front of the procession, behind the 'five beloved ones', symbolizing the female Khalsa identity. Blue is the colour of Gobind Singh's army. One main focus of the procession is to display the Khalsa as the true Sikh identity.

Musicians march in front, just before the 'five beloved ones'. The music designates the area of the procession as sacred. It also functions to make people aware of the procession and sends a signal that a special event is taking place.

The 'five beloved ones', their clothes and their swords, the turbans and the five women in blue uniforms function to display the Khalsa. But the main

items carried in the procession are banners. These are non-religious objects displaying verbal statements, in Norwegian, describing the good qualities of the Sikhs. The banners state that Sikhs believe in peace, justice and equality between men and women, that it is part of the Sikh religion to earn a living from hard and honest work, that the Sikhs have to deal with racial prejudice and discrimination based on gender, and that a Sikh prays every day for global peace and welfare for all (see Figure 13.1). During the procession, some participants distribute flyers about the teaching of Sikhism, written in Norwegian, to onlookers. The banners and the flyers show that an important objective of the procession is the display of Sikhs and Sikhism and the dissemination of information about the Sikh tradition to the Norwegian public.

Thus the procession has several purposes: it celebrates the presence of the Sikhs in Norway and laments the lack of knowledge about Sikhism among Norwegians. The procession signals that the Sikhs constitute a significant minority. They should be taken seriously. The flyers they distribute complain about their invisibility. The Norwegian public does not know who they are; the Sikhs believe that they are often mistakenly identified as Muslims. Religions are taught in schools but Sikhism has not gained enough recognition as a world religion to be included in the curriculum. The Sikhs think the Norwegians know nothing about them and this ignorance is perceived as a source of discrimination. The aim of the procession through the main

Figure 13.1 Display of banners stating who the Sikhs are and what they believe in.

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parade street of Oslo is to give the Sikhs visibility, to exhibit their own identity to the 'Other'. Of course, the procession brings the Sikhs in Oslo together for a common purpose and this has some value for them, strengthening their identity and unity and promoting the Khalsa identity. The procession is clearly about making Sikhs and Sikhism visible to the Norwegian public and shaping their views on Sikhism. The procession creates public awareness of the Sikhs and shows that they are a distinct group that people should know about. The banners are directed at prejudices among Norwegians about immigrants and address the Sikhs' correct perception that their religion is invisible in Norwegian public life and that they are not recognized as an important religious group. The Sikhs are hardly ever mentioned on Norwegian television or in newspapers. If Norwegians see someone wearing a turban or looking South Asian they generally assume he is a Muslim or a Hindu.

The display along the route of the procession is itself the goal. There are no ritual events at the place where the procession starts and ends. When it arrives at the end of the parade street, the participants disperse. However, for the first time in the Baisakhi of 2007, a meeting was organized where the procession ended and invited speakers gave speeches in which they recognized the importance of the Sikhs in Norwegian society and among world religions. Thus the goal of the procession was restated verbally at the meeting afterwards. Understandably, new elements are added to the processions. Another new element in 2007 was a Sikh gatka (martial art) performance. New elements are also added every year to other South Asian processions in Norway. This is an indication of the continuing importance of the processions.

Processions of Sri Lankan Tamil Catholics

The Sri Lankan Tamils in Norway are mostly Hindus (more than 75 per cent) and Catholics (less than 25 per cent). The Tamils are well known for their skills in organizing religion in the diaspora (Baumann *et al.* 2003). Among the Sri Lankan Tamils in the diaspora, ritualization is used to negotiate identity and transmit tradition. On this, Fred W. Clothey writes:

> Tamils settling outside their ancestral homes have used a variety of strategies by which they negotiate their identities and transmit their heritage in not always hospitable cities. One of these strategies is ritualization in its various forms. In fact, even the casual observer cannot but notice the proliferation of ritual events, especially in the temples of overseas South Indian Tamils . . . these events are part of a larger strategy by which temples become cultural spaces and the venues for a pragmatic ritualism . . . ritual expresses and purveys the essence of Hindu (or for that matter, Muslim or Christian) identity. Rituals also serve to maintain and restate historical identities

at the same time that they are expected to ease transition into new situations.

(Clothey 2006: 13–14)

The Tamil Catholics in Norway have created a separate Tamil space in the Catholic Church in Norway (Jacobsen forthcoming). Church attendance by Tamils has varied. Tamils go to church mainly if the rituals are recognizably Tamil (Jacobsen forthcoming). Most Tamils attend Mass regularly only when there is a Tamil priest to celebrate it. Four Tamil priests work in the Catholic Church in Norway and they arrange special ritual events for their congregation. Such events restate Tamil identities and help the Tamils to adapt to life in Norway. Procession is a central part of Tamil culture and religious life in Norway. The Tamil procession functions to celebrate Tamil identities, but from the point of view of the priests, an important purpose is to attract the Tamils to the Church. In 2005, the Catholic Tamils in Norway institutionalized the first large Tamil Catholic procession ritual.

The Christian Tamils in Sri Lanka have many annual processions. Most villages with a predominantly Christian population have a saint who is celebrated with an annual procession. The most popular saint for the Tamil Catholics is St Anthony, but different villages have different saints. There are also processions on Good Friday when the cross is carried through the villages. The most important Catholic pilgrimage in Sri Lanka is to Our Lady of Madhu.

The processions of St Anthony, of Our Lady of Madhu and of Good Friday are performed by Christian Tamils from Sri Lanka in Norway. Most of these processions, however, are only staged inside the church and are events organized for Tamil Catholics. They show that the Catholic Church of Norway accepts the Tamil Catholic tradition. In the church, the priest and a few participants perform the procession and most of the group participates as audience. After the procession, they pray in front of the statue and offer lighted candles. The processions confirm that Tamil Catholicism is a part of the Catholic Church of Norway.

However, one annual procession is staged outside the church. This celebrates Our Lady of Madhu, the most important Catholic shrine in Sri Lanka. Our Lady of Madhu is to the Catholics of Sri Lanka what the Virgin of Velankanni is to the Catholics of India. The procession was first performed in 2005 and has become an annual event. This is the largest gathering of Tamil Catholics in Norway. The procession is organized by the Tamil Catholic priest in Oslo at the request of the Tamil community. The first Tamil priest of St Olav's Catholic church in Oslo, Father Pethuruppilai, had placed the image of St Anthony in the church every Tuesday to be available to Tamil Christians the whole day. He did this in order to show that the church accepted the Tamil form of Catholicism and to attract greater attendance by Tamils. With this action, Father Pethuruppilai created Tamil Catholic space in

the church. However, in 2004, after a conflict that caused a majority of the Tamils to stop going to the church, Father Pethuruppilai was transferred to St Magnus church in Lillestrøm. The new Tamil priest, Clement Inpanathan Amirthanathan, had a different view of the worship of St Anthony. He realized, he says, that many Tamils considered St Anthony to be a god, and worshipped him just as Hindus pray to Hindu gods. 'They worshipped St Anthony instead of Jesus', he explained[1] and the worship of St Anthony was stopped in the church. After consulting with the Tamils in Oslo, an annual feast and procession for Our Lady of Madhu was organized instead. So even though the worship of St Anthony was stopped, the Tamil Catholic tradition was nevertheless accepted as part of the Catholic Church in Norway. This procession is arranged at a centre owned by the Catholic Church, Mariaholm in Spydberg, on the weekend closest to 15 August, the day that Catholics celebrate the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, her departure from this life by her death and her bodily assumption into heaven. The Mariaholm Centre is in an area of natural beauty and provides scenic surroundings for the procession. For the last two years, the Tamil Catholics have arranged this celebration of Our Lady of Madhu with a procession of her statue. Two Tamil priests come from Rome to assist in this annual festival (Jacobsen forthcoming).

In Sri Lanka, the procession would pass by the houses or neighbourhoods of all the Christians in the village. In Norway and often in the diaspora, this is not possible. In Oslo the procession takes place in an area of natural beauty. In Bergen, the priest from the city's St Paul's church transports the statue of Our Lady of Madhu in his car to each and every Tamil Catholic family in the city and performs the ritual in their living rooms. On the day of the ritual the statue is carried in procession inside the church instead of through the village, but only the priest and selected members of the Tamil church leadership take part in it. Most members function as audience. Then, instead of the group walking together and stopping at houses along the route for people to venerate the Virgin, the priest drives to every household. When asked why an outdoor procession is not arranged, the priest gave two reasons. First, it is too cold and too rainy, and second, the point would be to visit the Catholic Tamil areas. A procession could not do this.[2] The priest displays the statue to each Tamil Catholic family individually and then collectively inside the church. One purpose of the display is to show that the Church accepts Tamil Catholicism.

When asked why they go to church, Tamil Catholics in Norway emphasize the rituals. They also emphasize that these rituals should be as similar as possible to those in Sri Lanka. They emphasize that the importance of the Church is not that it brings Tamils together – there are other non-religious organizations for this – but that it is an arena for Roman Catholic rituals (Jacobsen forthcoming). Tamils began to attend Catholic churches regularly only when the Tamil way of practising Catholicism was introduced,

but not all Tamil Catholics go to Mass regularly. By participating in the procession for Our Lady of Madhu, those Tamils can confirm their Catholic identity once a year. They can remain Catholics without going to church regularly or participating in other ways in the Catholic religion. The procession of Our Lady of Madhu functions to confirm the identity of the Catholics and to make Roman Catholicism in Norway recognizably Tamil Catholicism.

Processions of Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus

The main Sri Lankan Tamil Hindu temple in Norway, the Sivasubramanyar Alayam, was officially opened in Oslo in 1998. The procession rituals are its most important annual event. The festival lasts for twelve days but the high points in terms of ritual importance and the number of people attending are the two processions, the chariot procession on the tenth day and the procession to the sacred bathing place on the eleventh. The procession ritual was organized for the first time in the year the temple opened, 1998. But the processions have changed over the years. The number of elements included and the quality have increased. Each year new elements have been added. Three new chariots were brought from Sri Lanka to replace those used in the early years. The procession to the sacred bathing place was organized on the parking lot outside the temple in the early years, and then to a sacred lake in a procession half an hour's walk from it.[3]

The hoisting of the flag at the Sivasubramanyar Alayam marks the beginning of the main festival, the *mahotsava*. This is normal for this type of South Asian temple festival. The flag is of the vehicle (*vahana*) of the main god of the temple. In the Sivasubramanyar Alayam the flag depicts a cock, the symbol of Murugan and his vehicle. The twelve-day temple festival is held in late July and early August. Usually the annual temple festival is celebrated to mark the star-day of the temple image or to commemorate when the temple was consecrated (Smith 1982). The consecration day of this temple, the *kumbhabhishekam*, is 26 April. The reason why the festival is held in July and August is the Norwegian climate, these being the days most likely not to be cold. However, in general the pattern of Sri Lanka is followed as much as possible in the temple.

In the procession festival, the festival *utsava murtis* (festival statues) of Murugan, Ganesha and Amman (a new god was added in 2006 when a new priest notified them that one more god, Saneshvar, should be included in the *tirthotsava* (festival of sacred bathing place) procession) are taken out of the temple and onto the streets. Often a different *vahana* or vehicle is used for each festival day; chariots, a bathing festival and hunting trip for Murugan are part of the *mahotsava* of the Sivasubramanyar temple in Oslo.

The most important day in terms of people visiting, work invested and objects displayed, is the *rathotsava* (car festival). On the *rathotsava*, the *utsava murti*s of the three most important gods of the temple, Murugan, Ganesha

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(Vinayaka) and Durga (Amman), are transported on three festival carts on the streets in a circle around the temple. Around five thousand participate in the procession ritual and it is the biggest annual gathering of Tamils in Norway. The temple is in an industrial building and quite ugly from the outside. The Tamils have not yet built a traditional stone temple, but they have invested in traditional chariots of top quality.

The Tamil processions in Norway are typically characterized by a happy atmosphere. The procession is a time for Tamils to come together and be 100 per cent Tamil for a few hours. Everyone wears Tamil dress, speaks Tamil and enjoys Tamil food, etc. The group celebrates itself, its unity and identity. This changed in the summer of 2006, when in the chariot festival, for the first time in Norway, penance and pain were displayed in the procession. Some participants had small spears put through their tongues. About ten of the *kavati* dancers in front of the cars had hooks in the skin on their backs that were connected to ropes. These ropes were pulled to cause pain. One person, in addition to having his tongue pierced by a small spear, walked the whole distance of the procession on wooden sandals dotted with nails. The pain was unbearable and he almost fainted. Several people had to support him to enable him to walk. The steep road around the temple made the walk particularly painful. This added a quite dramatic element to the procession. The reason given for this added feature was that some young men had asked to be allowed to do penance because they had given vows (*vratas*) to a god. Wishes had been fulfilled and the promised penance had to be performed. This element is present in the Tamil processions in Sri Lanka and in a number of diaspora countries. Rolling is also common, but cannot be performed in the *rathotsava* in Oslo because the road around the temple is too steep.[4]

The procession is led by musicians who create and enclose a sacred space with their sound. Next in the procession are those who perform *vrata* to Murugan by piercing their bodies with hooks and small spears. This penance also creates a sacred space. By performing acts that are never performed in profane space, sacred space is confirmed. What did these *kavati* dancers display? Extreme devotion to their religion and to their cultural tradition, of course. They gave the impression of being totally devoted to their god. It was important for each individual to be able to show this devotedness to the group, it was important for the group to have these devoted persons to perform penance as a symbol of the devotedness of the whole community, and it was important for the Tamil community to show this devotedness to the Norwegian public. By adding the element of penance, another element of Tamil religiosity had been successfully imported to Norway and displayed on parade. The penance added an important element to make the procession an authentic Tamil festival and completeness is a sign of authenticity. The festival competes with other diaspora communities to have the most complete procession. During the spring of 2006, the situation for the Tamils

in Sri Lanka worsened, and perhaps the penance also displayed some of the pain the Tamils feel about the tragic situation in their country of origin.

The day after the *rathotsava* procession is the *tirthotsava* procession. The temple is situated close to the wilderness outside Oslo. Just inside the forest is a beautiful lake that is used for recreation. For the first years of the *tirthotsava*, a children's swimming pool was filled with water on the parking lot outside the temple. Then a member of the temple organization who lived in the area between the lake and the temple suggested that the *tirthotsava* procession should go to the lake. It was decided to arrange the *tirthotsava* procession and have the weapon of Murugan given a sacred bath in the lake. This procession involves walking in the forest – the great pastime of Norwegians. Thus the event gives an impression of doing something Norwegian: walking in the forest to take a swim in a lake. It is clear from observing the procession that people really enjoy themselves, perhaps more than in the *rathotsava* that involves the difficulty of moving the chariots up and down the hill of the Murugan temple and also seeing the penance of the *kavati* dancers. The statues are carried to the lake in a procession led by musicians who create the sacred soundscape that marks the area as sacred. At some places, the procession stops and the gods are moved from side to side as a way of honouring them. At the lake, they are placed on a platform prepared the day before. The spear of Murugan is given a bath and the lake becomes sacred water. Males and a few women bathe and splash water on the spectators, who are mainly Tamils. Since the procession is performed during the school holidays, there are generally other non-Tamil families bathing in the water, but usually not many. They just take a glance at the arriving procession and then continue with what they were doing. The Tamils serve drinks and food. The final ritual at the lake is the performance of the *shraddha* (a ritual performed for dead parents) by three or four Brahmins. Few Tamil families have brought their parents to Norway but that the *shraddha* is being performed is a source of comfort.

Neither the *rathotsava* procession nor the *tirthotsava* procession passes through areas in which many people live. In fact few people outside the Tamil community watch them. In what sense are the processions display rituals? Here the Tamil temple committee is dependent on journalists to show the ritual in newspapers and on the radio and TV. The temple also uses the web for publicity. Every year much energy is invested in trying to get journalists to cover the events. Surprisingly few show up. Considering that for several years, Norway has been involved in peace negotiations between the Sri Lankan Tamils and the Sinhalese, and that the Tamils are well known in Norway because war is an event that typically gains much media attention, it is somewhat surprising that the media are not more interested. One reason may be that journalists do not understand the meaning of the events. Journalists not trained in religion are often quite secular and unable to write about religious events. The temple committee is also eager to have leading politicians come

to the event as guests of honour. The prime minister came to the festival in the last election year, but there is a marked difference between the number of politicians showing up during election years and non-election years. The question then becomes who is displaying to whom. The politicians want to display themselves to the Tamils to attract votes. But the Tamils are able to show the politicians that they constitute a large community, that they have successfully integrated themselves into Norwegian society and that they should be considered an important group and a unique community. Their religion makes them unique and sets them apart from other immigrant groups. No other group has a religious display ritual that can match the Tamil chariot procession.

Comparison between the South Asian procession rituals in the diaspora in Norway

In the diaspora, much work and energy are spent in preserving and institutionalizing cultural heritage. This is true in particular of the religious traditions of the diaspora groups and these traditions often attain new functions in the diaspora. An important function of religion in the diaspora is to secure emotional attachment to the culture of origin. Religion helps preserve other features of this culture such as language, aesthetic traditions and normative social traditions. Religions often function as preservers of traditions inherited from the past notably because their rituals are repeated and their norms considered eternal or transcendent. In the diaspora, processions often become ritual events of celebration of the religious tradition of the country of origin that confirm identity and transfer it to the next generation. Processions also function to display this tradition to others in a pluralist environment.

There are some important differences between these South Asian religious processions. In marked contrast to the Catholic Tamils, the Baisakhi processions of the Sikhs in Oslo are mainly aimed at exhibiting Sikh identity to the 'Other'. The procession, of course, also functions to bring Sikhs together and creates a sense of unity, but there is a strong emphasis on exhibiting the Sikhs to the Norwegian public. The Tamil Hindu chariot procession is a celebration of Tamil Hindu identity and both a deeply religious ritual and a multicultural festival. The audience mostly comprises the Tamil Hindus themselves, who also function as participants. However, the representatives of the mass media constitute an audience whom the Tamils are eager to attract, showing that the procession also aims to display Tamil culture to the 'Other'.

The Tamil Hindu chariot procession is circular, the Sikh procession linear. The Tamil *tirtha* procession is linear but the emphasis is on the place of arrival. In the Sikh procession the emphasis is on the procession itself; when it reaches the end of the parade street it more or less dissolves or a short meeting is held. The circular procession has a different function from

the linear. The circumambulation marks off space around an object as sacred. The area around the temple is marked as the territory of the god. In the circumambulation of the temple, the audience watching the procession merges with it more easily.

Much work is invested to make the Tamil processions in Norway as similar as possible to those in Sri Lanka. This is the case with both the Tamil Catholic and Tamil Hindu processions. No element is added to make them Norwegian. This is understood as a sign of authenticity. The Sikh procession, however, displays banners written in Norwegian directed at the Norwegian public to correct their perceived views of Sikhism. The Sikh processions also seem to be more open to innovations. The Tamils are not interested in moving their procession to the main parade street of Oslo since it would be considered wrong. In the *rathotsava* the procession is supposed to circumambulate the temple.

A main function of the processions in the diaspora is to exhibit one's own religious culture in a multicultural context. Religion has, for many communities, become a marker for cultural uniqueness. It can also become a symbol of spiritual superiority (Kurien 2005). Religion becomes a way of celebrating cultural identity, of bringing together people with the same cultural background and also of celebrating the culture of the place of origin. One researcher has argued, and most agree, that 'religions and religious organizations increase in salience for immigrants because of the disruption and disorientation caused by the immigration experience and because religious organizations become the means to form ethnic communities and identities in the immigrant context' (Kurien 2005: 150). The processions become a means to bring the community together. They define the group as a group and function to display ethnic identity and the culture of the place of origin. In the diaspora it is important for the rituals to provide a setting for a gathering of the people living in different areas of the new country.

In the diaspora, religious processions acquire functions similar to those of so-called multicultural festivals. In pluralistic societies, celebration of cultural difference has become institutionalized in ethnic or cultural festivals. In August every year, the Pakistani community organize a Mela, a secular event, the biggest multicultural festival in Norway, on one of the main plazas in Oslo. The procession ritual of the Tamil Hindus can also be seen as a Sri Lankan Tamil multicultural festival. For this reason, much emphasis is put on the display part of the ritual. In contrast, in Norway, the Great Heroes' Day, the ritual celebration of the martyrs of LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam), is mainly closed to outsiders. Journalists are not welcomed or not allowed in (Eraker 2007). The Great Heroes' Day is not a display ritual. For the *mahotsava*, on the other hand, which is a public display ritual, the temple leadership takes trouble to get TV stations and newspapers to cover the event. In this ritual, Tamil culture and ethnic identity are on display.

The Great Heroes' Day is a political event, a day arranged by the LTTE to secure support from the Tamils, not to display LTTE or Tamil culture to a multicultural audience. Multicultural festivals have a double function: they are a means for a group to mobilize resources and people and a means to attract public attention. Such cultural festivals are often not religious although religious elements might be involved but probably with an emphasis on their aesthetic quality, on religion as art. Often music with a background in religion is presented, or film music and modern popular music. This is a way to make the diaspora group proud of their cultural heritage and to show the wider public their positive contribution to society at large and thus counteract the usual mass media focus on negative criminal elements and political extremists. Multicultural festivals in general often have a focus on food, clothes, music, sports and art and provide a way of celebrating and displaying ethnic identity. They bring together people from one or several ethnic groups and an audience to witness the celebration. The religious processions of the Sikhs and the Tamils have many features in common with multicultural festivals. The religious procession festivals are ways of celebrating group identity and ways of exhibiting and displaying religious and ethnic identity and culture in front of an audience. In the area where the religious processions end, there are often stalls selling food and cultural artefacts such as music CDs and books; a procession often ends with sharing of food.

The processions should also be understood as a way of propagating the diasporic project. This means that to preserve a diasporic identity, the collective identity of the group is dependent on a lasting relationship with the country of origin. The term diaspora indicates that the collective identity of the group depends on this relationship to last. For the Tamil Hindus, the Tamil Catholics and the Sikhs, the main weekly rituals attract only a small percentage of the total population. On the other festival days, such as Mahashivaratra or the festival of St Anthony there will be more people, but nowhere near the number participating in the processions on Baisakhi, *rathotsava* or for Our Lady of Madhu. The Hindu temple is small. With three to four hundred persons, it is full. The procession is the only ritual that attracts the majority of the Tamil Hindu population. It is the only ritual that is able to bring the Tamils together in a common religious event. The Baisakhi procession and the procession for Our Lady of Madhu have a similar function.

Display events require the participation of a large number of people and an audience for whom the rituals is displayed. To be an audience is one way of participating in a ritual. For the Tamils in Oslo, the audience present at the ritual procession mainly comprises other Tamils. The number of people participating from outside the Tamil population is very small, around twenty or thirty. Some of those present are important politicians. Famous politicians showed up for the procession in 2005, an election year, probably perceiving their own presence as a display event to collect votes. The

procession ritual is a Tamil religious event, a display ritual for the Tamils, a celebration of Tamil religion and their diasporic project. Although they would like to have an audience, few non-Tamils come to the temple area. Nevertheless, the aim is to have the mass media as an audience. The 'Other' would then be present through representatives of the mass media. Journalists and photographers are most welcome. Every year a larger number of journalists, staff from museums and academics attend. For the Sikhs, the audience is clearly mainly the Norwegian public. Their procession is primarily aimed at the 'Other' and it therefore moves through the main parade street of Oslo with banners.

Processions are among the most visible of religious activities in public spaces and as public rituals they are typically aimed at 'Others'. The strengthening of the tradition of processions in recent years, therefore, may be a function of specific aspects of religious pluralism: it might be related to generation and reinforcement of religious identities, to religious rivalry, religious pluralism and to religious boundaries.

Notes

1 Interview with Inpanathan Amirthanathan, 9 February 2007.
2 Interview with Jagath Premanath Gunapala, February 2006.
3 I have previously published some of the material on this festival in Jacobsen (2006: 163–173) and Jacobsen (2004: 134–148).
4 For rolling in the Hindu diaspora, see Baumann (2007).

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14

RATHAYATRA OF THE HARE KRISHNAS IN DURBAN

Inventing strategies to transmit religious ideas in modern society

P. Pratap Kumar

Introduction

Conventional methods of transmitting religious ideas depend on a number of social factors. Extended family structure, social and cultural homogeneity, and religious institutional structures are some of the factors necessary to ensure a sustained transmission of religious ideas from one generation to the next. When such support structures fail to survive in modern society, especially in the context of migration and resettlement in places far away from the original homeland, either new strategies need to be invented or old ideas and values allowed to decline. In the case of the modern West, a transmission of religious ideas has not been sustained. This has been attributed by scholars to gradual secularization and the tendency of people to stop going to religious centres and institutions for their spiritual nourishment and religious growth (Bruce 1992). Some scholars have wondered whether in a sense Europe with its secular tendencies is a special case (Davie 2000), since, while different types of secularisms have emerged in different parts of the world (Martin 1995), in some areas religions and their ideas have become even more powerful instruments shaping societies. The combination of religious ideas with global politics has become a recipe for serious conflict. We have witnessed this in India, the Middle East and many other places. One question that has relentlessly caught my attention is why religion has mattered so much in global conflicts. What is it in religious ideas that renders people unable to make compromises? Or, why are religious ideas such powerful weapons in conflict situations?

One might wish to look at the most conflict-ridden places where religious ideas have been deployed in order to analyse what is happening there or to explain the role of religion in modern society. These would perhaps be the most obvious places to go to. Nevertheless, I turned my attention to the most ordinary religious event that occurs every year with a great deal of fanfare. My intention is to see how religious ideas are played out in society in the course of regular religious festivals and ceremonies and to see how they shape or reshape the social and cultural landscape. Furthermore, it is also my intention to find out if the transmission of religious ideas is linked to matters other than spiritual or religious concerns. Since transmission of religious ideas is generally seen to be for purposes of religious growth, my concern is whether religious acts are also about organizing one's social and cultural world. Much research already exists concerning the role of religion in social and cultural organization. I, therefore, want to concern myself with the implications of the social and cultural role of religion. Put differently, what happens when the transmission of religious ideas is prohibited or hampered by external forces, and how far do people go in order to ensure that their religious ideas are transmitted without hindrance? Besides, or perhaps more importantly, why is it that religious processions, which are used as vehicles of religious ideas, are often inaugurated by secular or civil authorities? There is certainly no special salvific gain for religious people in having their events inaugurated or even attended by civil authorities. So, why then is their presence needed at a seemingly religious act? Let me turn to the procession itself.

Background to the festival of chariots

Durban city has a strong population of Hindus (estimated at around 600,000) who are more or less fifth-generation immigrants. They consider themselves South Africans first and Indians second. However, their Hindu identity seems very strong, as is attested by the number of Hindu temples and shrines that have been built during the last century and a half throughout South Africa. The festivals and ceremonies associated with many local temples in Durban alone can testify to their presence. Many of those festivals have even acquired the status of being recognized by the city for tourism purposes. The festival of chariots is certainly one of them.

What began in the sixteenth-century Bengal as the Caitanya movement and became popularized by Swami Prabhupada in the modern West as the Hare Krishna movement (officially known as the International Society for Krishna Consciousness – ISKCON) arrived in South Africa in the early 1970s. Soon it established a vibrant following throughout the country and especially in Durban. In the 1980s the devotees built a temple on a grand scale in the Indian township called Chatsworth. It gradually became the centre of their activities and the national headquarters. Since 1988 they have begun an innovative way of spreading their message in Durban. A festival of chariots, akin

to the one held in India in the famous temple town of Puri, is held every year on the beachfront in Durban. It was held initially during Christmas but was moved to Easter in 1999 (Kumar 2000: 182). The festival received tremendous support from the local public as well as the municipal authorities and the tourism authority. The local print media profile it as a major tourism event. Hundreds of wealthy devotees offer help both in kind and in cash to organize the event.

The selection of the beachfront over Easter, beginning on Good Friday, is interesting. The beachfront becomes a hive of many sporting activities sponsored by a major cell phone industry. The television coverage of these events is extensive. ISKCON locates its festival of chariots in the very midst of these activities in an effort to bring people what it calls Krishna consciousness. It boldly advertises on the billboards the focus of the festival. One banner reads 'Yoga, Mantra, Astrology and Philosophy'. Another reads 'Food, Fashion, Vedic art and Meditation'. The classical and the ancient on the one side, the modern and contemporary on the other, seem to indicate its ability to make itself relevant to contemporary society. It is a blend that is reflected in the festival's opening dance performances which include the classical Indian dance form, the modern fusion dance and African rhythm. Various stalls are set up to cover a range of activities from spiritual aspects to material products – stalls for meditation, arts connected to Krishna, question and answer sessions, a devotional music stall, stalls for food and drinks, eastern dress, gifts and souvenirs, Krishna Seva (service to Krishna) and free food – all these are seemingly put together to produce heightened consciousness of Krishna. The sacred chant of 'Hare Krishna and Hare Rama' is boldly announced on the banners at the entrance and it is chanted continuously to the accompanying music relayed on a public address system.

The festival begins on Good Friday evening with the gathering of some of the high-ranking monks of ISKCON from around the world. Their spiritual addresses are followed by the local Minister of Arts and Culture's speech in which he strongly identifies himself as a follower of the movement. Amidst various activities and celebrations, the crowds that are continuously pouring in are entertained. Some are hard-core devotees, some are visitors, some are tourists who happen to be on the beach and some are homeless people who come for the free food. Everyone is encouraged to partake in the free food offered in the name of Krishna.

On the Saturday, the procession carrying the chariot of Krishna begins at the City Hall with the city manager opening the event. The procession's route has been marked out and the local police and traffic department are on hand to ensure that it proceeds smoothly. The chariot is decorated with the symbols associated with Krishna worship and the image of Swami Prabhupada is seated in the chariot. Singers and dancers accompanied by hundreds of devotees pull the chariot along the streets of the city on the demarcated route.

Ahead of the main chariot is a smaller cart carrying the image of Lord Caitanya, who began the movement of Krishna devotion in Bengal back in the sixteenth century.

The chariot is eventually carried to the main festival location on the beachfront where there are various activities, such as the singing and music of the Hare Krishnas, sale of books and food, and free distribution of food (*prasad*). On the stage the main programme of activities includes speeches and dance. These continue through the three days from Good Friday to Easter Sunday. The programme is attended not only by the high-ranking monks of ISKCON from around the world, but also by many local dignitaries including politicians.

Setting the festival boundaries in the city centre

The festival procession from the City Hall to the beachfront, passing through the centre of town accompanied by not only the Hare Krishna monks and devotees singing the sacred chants, but also the many local civic authorities and onlookers and tourists who happen to be there, creates an interesting scenario for our analysis. One way to interpret the route is to suggest that the festival of chariots procession turns the ordinary city centre into a sacred route through which devotees pass to reach the festival destination where sacred acts are performed by the monks to celebrate the salvific acts of Krishna and his consort Radha. It is meant to heighten consciousness of Krishna. Writing about festival processions in Norway, Jacobsen suggested that such processions in the diaspora indeed create new sacred spaces challenging the old notions that sacred places are fixed permanently in the land of its origin.

> One of the common explanations of the function of Hindu processions in India is that they are statements of devotion that make a claim on territory, the gods circle their realm, which also means that the site of the procession is the borderline of their area and is public space that no single deity can claim. In the diaspora, certainly the processions do make sacred the larger surroundings of the temple. But they also raise interesting questions about territorial claims and public space in pluralistic societies. In the diaspora in Norway, processions make Norwegian space Hindu and Hinduism a Norwegian religion in particular ways.
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> (Jacobsen 2006: 165)

In other words, sacred space may be construed as dynamic and ever changing. This may apply to the Durban festival of chariots as well. Thus, the ordinary streets in the city centre are turned into a sacred route along which the festival of chariots proceeds. The city manager's inauguration of

the procession is indeed a sacred act turning him into the role of ritual officiant. In other words, the sacred steps into the secular path, halting ordinary life while the festival procession moves forward uninterrupted. For this uninterrupted sacred procession to continue, the city manager, the local police and all the other officials involved temporarily function as ritual officiants, albeit without being ritually installed for the purpose.

Nevertheless, such sacralization of the mundane and the secular is only one of the ways to provide religious explanations of the social transformations that take place during such events. Seen from a different perspective, the festival itself seems to have been transformed into a public event that had to conform to secular norms. By locating it at the beachfront, the festival officials have allowed it to become an event that has many secular roles to perform. To begin with, it creates a contrast between the ordinary beach activities such as surfing and other water sports and the idealized spiritual activities that the devotees at the festival perform, such as singing sacred chants in an effort to generate a sense of Krishna consciousness. The staging of the procession does require specific permission of civic authorities such as the city manager and the local police and the consent of local businesses for the temporary disruption it causes. Of course, all of them give their permission or consent in view of the larger benefit brought to the city in the form of increased number of tourists and business opportunities. More than 100,000 people pass through the festival arena during the three-day period. Participants include not only devotees and monks but ordinary tourists and other beach goers who happen to be there and even partake of the sacred food (*prasad*) that is offered by the festival organizers. Feeding the poor may have a religious motive but it certainly helps the local homeless people during the three days of the festival. While the festival organizers may claim that more than 100,000 people have attended their festival, it is hard to ignore the fact that many of them are there for reasons other than what the organizers anticipated, namely to gain Krishna consciousness. Instead, some are there, especially the homeless, to have food, and others are there to enjoy the dances and other entertainment activities and the chance to buy eastern garments and eat vegetarian pizza. The speeches are intended not only to deliver spiritual messages, but equally importantly to emphasize the good work that ISKCON as an organization is doing in the city and why it deserves the support of the public.

Books, food and feeding the poor

Most visible to anyone who is present at the festival venue is the roaring business that goes on at the book stalls and the food stalls and the enormous queues of people waiting to receive free food that is offered by the organization as part of Krishna's *prasad*. The book store is filled with literature mostly produced by Swami Prabhupada. The most popular is his

translation of the Gita. Glossy-covered books and most persuasive saleswomen appeal to the devotees who are willing to buy with a view to supporting the organization. While most are happy to browse, a handful of devotees purchase the easily accessible literature produced by the ISKCON monks. They are certainly a very useful tool to transmit their ideas to the public, most of whom are already seemingly in tune with the messages. ISKCON has its own publishing industry that publishes and distributes its literature throughout the world. It raises a huge amount of funding to sustain its various activities through a large network of international organizations.

Govinda's restaurant is busy with the sale of vegetarian snacks, pizzas and meals cooked according to the rules and recipes approved by ISKCON spiritual practice. Most of these were personally approved by Swami Prabhupada, including the restrictions such as not eating garlic or onion. Food is an important aspect of ISKCON spiritual practice. When individuals convert to ISKCON practice, they are initially encouraged to give up non-vegetarian foods and once they are initiated into the tradition, they are required to avoid eating certain foods during certain seasons. All of these food-related restrictions set them apart from the rest of the society, even including many Hindus who eat non-vegetarian foods. This is certainly striking as an important phenomenon at the festival of chariots.

The feeding of the poor, known as the Food for Life Programme, is another important phenomenon that one notices at the festival. It is food offered to Krishna and distributed to people as spiritual nourishment. Although intended for the poor, almost all the visitors to the festival take part in the free meal. Whether they believe in ISKCON's religious views or not, the people who participate in the communal meal certainly appreciate it as it is tasty and free. The books and the food are a most important means of transmitting ISKCON religious ideas. They are certainly very effective in drawing large crowds to the venue.

Music, bhajans and discourses

The Hare Krishnas are well known for their chanting to music on the street corners of the city centre. Since the successful organization of the festival of chariots, the focus seems to have shifted from street corners to the annual festival event where their special genre of music and *bhajans* (devotional songs) are performed. It certainly creates the atmosphere for the festival and attracts crowds to gather around the stage during the performances. While such music and *bhajans* generally attract devotees and non-devotees alike, the more seriously inclined attend the special lectures given by specialists and monks who are more focused on ISKCON's core message. These are intended to instruct lay devotees and newcomers in the teachings of Swami Prabhupada and the message of Krishna consciousness.

Sacralizing and secularizing the festival

To suggest that ISKCON is only concerned about the spiritual message that it wishes to spread through the festival activities is to ignore its obvious strategic plan to place the organization at the centre of Durban's social and cultural life. Spreading the message of any religious organization is driven not only by its spiritual quest but equally importantly by its desire to increase its membership and commitment to its doctrines and rituals. As historians and social scientists, we do not have any way of knowing the benefits of these doctrines beyond our world, but we certainly can see the social and cultural benefits to both the followers and the organizations concerned. The creation of identity and establishment of organizational strength in the face of other religions and denominations are certainly the most visible goals of religious institutions that we can study. ISKCON has certainly become a very successful organization since it began the festival of chariots in 1988. Compared with other Hindu organizations, it is certainly the most visible and popular, and with well-oiled machinery its fundraising is among the most efficient. From the sale of books to securing sponsorship for ritual activities, all the fundraising activities demonstrate the organization's social strengths. Both religious and secular organizations face the same challenges for survival. Their internal politics and power strategies illustrate their will to survive in the modern world.

Close attention should also go not only to their stated spiritual goals but also to the events as they unfold at the festival. Notice, for instance, the contrasting slogans that are highlighted on the banners: one banner highlights the four goals of the festival, food, fashion, Vedic art and meditation; another banner highlights the more spiritual ideals of the festival, yoga, mantra, astrology and philosophy. The festival seems to cater to both material and the spiritual needs. When such efforts are made to combine the material and the spiritual, our explanations of the festival of chariots must take both aspects into account. Nevertheless, whether or not the spiritual goals have been achieved is hard to tell as they are not accessible to us as scholars for scrutiny. But the material goals can be quite obviously studied as they are observable. Given the popularity it has achieved in Durban city, ISKCON has certainly become well established and its identity as a unique organization with a unique philosophy of life is also well known. The sari-clad women and dhoti-wearing men with cymbals in their hands are hard to ignore in a procession that goes through the city centre.

ISKCON may be spreading a unique message of Krishna consciousness but it is hard to miss the Indian cultural symbols in the form of dress, music, the images of idols, the chariots decked with garlands of marigolds and so on. For in the eyes of ordinary people that is what makes an impact. It is the spectacle of cultural images that catches the attention of the person on the beach; the entertaining dances on the stage draw the crowds; the Indian

biriyani and thick lentil soup and the sweet *suji* (made of fine wheat grain) seem to attract streams of people. The organizers and monks hope that at least a handful of those who come will be transformed and will become interested in ISKCON's message. Thus, the festival might have been meant to change the hearts and minds of thousands of Durbanites and the scores of tourists who visit the beach over Easter, but whether or not a person really finds liberation through these events is hard to tell. What is available for our scrutiny is the evidence before us, how many are listening to the lectures and how many are there to watch the spectacle and while they are at it have a plate of good vegetarian food. The long-term impact of a sustained increase in the following of the Hare Krishnas is certainly a testimony to their growth as a community in Durban. This is measurable both from their regular membership as well as from informal attendance at the temple or at the festival of chariots.[1]

The amount of time and resources invested in the festival of chariots by ISKCON shows that it wishes to create awareness about its religious beliefs and thereby increase its following. Whether this fulfils its spiritual quest or not, it certainly enables the organization to increase in size and in the last couple of decades its presence in Durban has grown significantly. This is evident from the large number of sponsorships and assistance in human and other material resources from the local Indian community.

Numbers matter for religious organizations

From one man's journey to the West, ISKCON has become a massive human organization with substantial financial resources. By regular chanting campaigns throughout the world it has made substantial gains in the number of its followers. The festival of chariots has become an important means to enhance both its social popularity and also to increase the number of its followers in Durban. It no longer uses the strategy of standing on street corners and singing or chanting the name of Krishna but, coupled with occasional processions in different parts of Durban such as Phoenix and Chatsworth where there are also temples, it has settled on the festival of chariots as an important means to mobilize the local population to give it social support. In this effort, what is important is that it has managed to enlist even the local civic authorities and politicians and has offered them a platform at its religious festival. Of course, the politicians gain popularity by addressing a religious gathering as it provides a readymade audience for their political rhetoric. They make great use of such occasions to inform the audience about what their political organization is doing for their well-being. This creates an important symbiosis between the politicians who give protection to cultural and religious institutions in return for support at the polling booths, and religious organizations that need such support for their organizational success in spreading their religious message.[2] This is a classic social

strategy identified by social scientists: mutual support between king and priest, state and church, religious and secular.[3]

For this classic strategy to work, what seems to matter is the number of followers that a religious organization can muster in order to be socially and politically relevant or important. Whether or not a religious organization openly supports a political organization, there exists an expectation on the part of both that they should be useful to each other. The invitation to the leader of the Minority Front party, which is exclusively Indian in its membership, has an obvious motivation. The party's main concern has been the protection of Indian cultural and social rights, so ISKCON sees it as a friend which should back its religious organizational network.

Increasing the number of followers and keeping good contacts with the relevant politicians and civic authorities make a trusted strategy for support in times of social and religious strife. ISKCON has not yet faced a serious social or religious conflict in Durban, but it has in the UK and other European countries. There have certainly been minor stand-offs between ISKCON and some Pentecostal churches in the predominantly lower middle-class Indian township of Phoenix. As I saw in 1999, when the Hare Krishna festival procession was going through the centre of the Phoenix area, the local Pentecostal church also staged a procession going in the opposite direction. The two passed each other in the town centre with both sides loudly singing or chanting their own religious songs. The recent civil case brought by a local church leader against the Durban city council alleging discrimination, after the city council gave land to a local Hindu temple although the church had been using it for many years and had been paying rent to the council,[4] is cause for concern about the potential for religious conflict in Durban. As it is, Christian and Muslim denominations are constantly criticized by Hindu organizations for their conversion strategies and the inroads they have made into the Hindu community. The Hare Krishnas' vigorous campaign to spread their religious message through regular temple and community activities such as the Food for Life Programme has certainly been noticed by the Christian and Islamic organizations. The presence of white and African followers in ISKCON is an important lever to attract non-Indian followers. As well as having a white Hare Krishna monk as the head of the Durban temple, it has a good presence of African-American monks and young local African followers. Notwithstanding their religious work, these are certainly important strategies for the successful survival of ISKCON as an important religious organization.

Why the Hare Krishnas matter in Durban

Generally in South Africa (and this applies naturally to Durban city) Christians are considered to be in the majority. With rise of Pentecostalism among the Indian community in recent years, there is a general fear among

the Hindus that more and more of their followers are being converted to Christianity. Christian preachers often come under attack by Hindu religious leaders for their aggressive conversion campaigns. Added to this is the role played by the Islamic Propagation Centre in Durban in distributing controversial videos denigrating Hinduism. With the general decline of Hindu society's economic status in many predominantly Indian townships such as Chatsworth, Merebank, Phoenix, Verulam and Tongaat, Hindu leaders fear that the economic needs of the people, coupled with many social problems such as drugs, alcohol and domestic violence, may lead their members to fall prey to the attractive promises of the Christian preachers and Islamic organizations. Whether or not there is substance to these fears, in the face of significant growth in Pentecostal Christianity, the Hindu reactions are significant. Already many Hindu organizations such as the Divine Life Society, the Ramakrishna Centre, the Arya Pratinidhi Sabha and many others in Durban have programmes for poverty alleviation among African communities. Both the general public and the Hindu religious organizations seem to function under the assumption that poverty is more prevalent among the African communities, perhaps neglecting the Indian poor in their very neighbourhood. No wonder the Pentecostal preachers have moved in to make a 'difference'. Though the Hare Krishnas take their Food for Life Programme to the predominantly African populations, their religious activities are so vigorously geared to the Indian community that they make a strong presence among the Indians and as such can be seen as a force to combat Hindu conversion. Besides, by claiming greater orthodoxy, the Hare Krishnas are able to convince average lay Hindus that their branch of Hinduism is better than other Hindu organizations. Their emphasis on vegetarian food and their strict life style tend to appeal to many Hindus. Even though the other neo-Hindu organizations also emphasize vegetarianism, the ISKCON campaign on vegetarianism is certainly more aggressive. It has been particularly successful among the youth, with weekly visits to local university campuses where it regularly organizes lectures and religious classes and distributes free food to students. Given the competition that exists both within the Hindu fold as well as in the Indian community in general, the Hare Krishnas have for the last couple of decades taken on importance in that they have managed to make Hinduism attractive both philosophically and ritualistically. Their theory of salvation and their philosophy of Krishna consciousness, and their ability to appropriate structures and methods of operation, make them far more successful and appealing to the Indian community and perhaps to a certain extent to other communities as well. Their monks are better educated in their religious teachings and are able to effectively convey their message and are also able to debate on controversial issues whether within Hindu society or outside. They are more frequently invited to debates on religious issues on television talk shows. They have much more categorical views than their counterparts in other Hindu organizations.

Perhaps non-Hindus know more about them than about other Hindu organizations. All these features make them a very important force within Hindu society and as such they are able to make themselves matter within the larger society.

From the profile that I have provided here of the Hare Krishnas it is clear not only that they matter but also that religion itself matters in society, not necessarily because religion has provided us with all the answers, but because it has served an important function in helping to shape social and cultural identity and at the same time providing hope in times of crisis. Above all, it is perhaps the single force that can either build or destroy a society's fabric simply because its adherents attach so much importance to it. There is no doubt in the mind of any serious follower of ISKCON that its scheme or theory of salvation is far superior to any other. Such strong religious conviction has the potential to trigger conflict. Fortunately, ISKCON's general indifference to material goals has made it socially isolated despite its very successful religious organization. In other words, its organizational success is by no means seen as a threat to any other community and this I would attribute to the devotees' monk-like appearance with Indian clothing, shaven heads with a tuft of hair and so on. But appearances could be deceptive. Given their strong convictions and the uncompromising religious stand that they take towards other religions and even other denominations within Hinduism, they have the potential to stand up to any external threat to their religious identity. There are many world views based on modern science that people are strongly convinced of. The simplest response (yet one beset with serious consequences) that one could make to the Hare Krishnas is that religion may be the world view with the potential to engender the greatest conviction among its followers, but at the same time it is the only one that bases that conviction on an other-worldly phenomenon that ordinary people have no access to. It is not so much the convictions that people have that can create problems in social networks, but the fact that those convictions are based on something that is not available to public scrutiny. So does religion matter? Yes, particularly in areas of conflict.

In conclusion, it would seem that ISKCON with its deep religious conviction may honestly feel that its religious philosophy (Krishna consciousness) should be universally disseminated to enable others to follow its path. But this spiritual journey (*yatra*) cannot happen unless the secular authorities and popular support can be enlisted. By providing a spiritual message mixed with entertainment, food and other material attractions, it seems to have a successful recipe to attract outsiders to its fold. The positioning of the two banners at the entrance to the festival grounds, with their double message on material and spiritual goals, is not accidental. The festival of chariots that moves through the city centre not only has a sacralizing effect but also turns the festival into a secular celebration. It is through the ability to garner the support of civic society that the festival of chariots makes an impact

on society at large. It is a strategy that has worked and seems to be a time-tested means to spread Krishna consciousness.

Notes

1 In this regard, the relationship between religiosity and religious participation can usefully be studied. See Martikainen (2006).
2 In an interesting study Mines and Gourishankar (n.d.) trace the relationship between the politicians and Shankaracharya of Kanchi in Tamilnadu using the notion of 'big-man'.
3 In this regard, Brian K. Smith's (1994) work on how the Hindu universe is classified is helpful.
4 'Court restrains church group in council's favour', reported by Juggie Naran, in *Sunday Tribune/Herald News*, 31 December 2006, p. 18.

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CONCLUSION AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

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The chapters in this book have emphasized the continuing significance of the religious dimension of processions. Religious processions are celebrations of religious events and are most often festive occasions. They are often part of festivals, in which case they are the high point. Religious processions therefore need to be analysed as religious celebrations and events that bring people together to experience happiness and togetherness. The delight and feelings of happiness that processions generate should not be denied even though processions may be crowded and chaotic events that contain elements of competition as well as communitas. The chapters have shown that processions continue to be important ways of expressing religious sentiment and of gathering for a religious purpose in South Asia.

Religious processions often display sacred objects, the most cherished in the religious tradition. They might be statues of a god or goddess or of a saint or divine figure, hero stones or a sacred scripture. These sacred symbols are at the centre of the festivals. However, processions have often attracted more interest among students of politics than students of religion. That is probably why in previous research there has been a tendency to focus on the politics in processions, with the religious and ritual elements neglected or considered only instrumental. There is a need to focus on the religious dimension and to understand processions as religious manifestations. Comparison with non-religious processions helps to single out what distinguishes the two.

The chapters in this book have demonstrated how religious processions make manifest social distinctions, hierarchy, difference and identity. Some have also shown that processions continue to be a source of conflict in South Asia. Symbolically and physically processions often lay claim to public space. They are therefore indicative of dominance. A religious procession is a sacred space in motion but sacred space is not homogenous and processions

can move towards the borders of the sacred spaces of a different religion. Processions, thus, can focus on disagreement over sacred space.

Processions sometimes lead to violence but this is not general. Most processions are peaceful events, but these are not usually considered as such. Most often they are passed over with the words 'nothing happened'. But peace is also created. Like the news media, some researchers only focus on the latest outbreaks of violence and conflict, ignoring peace events. This is to a certain degree understandable. That violence sometimes happens should not be denied. Religious processions can serve as vehicles for politics and since politics is about power, that is, demonstrating power, challenging power, or seeking power, violence can be the outcome. While some religious processions have been transformed into riots, most are peaceful events. The chapters in this volume have shown that processions are part of normal ritual life. Some theorists have claimed that they create spontaneous violence, while others have shown that violence, when it occurs, is often premeditated and fomented. This book demonstrates that violence is not a natural outcome of processions or the gathering of crowds. In fact, most processions do not lead to violence. This points to the need for balanced studies of processions and this book has been a contribution towards that effort. This volume has attempted to present a fair picture by focusing on the plurality of traditions and their different functions. Future studies have to maintain this balance.

In this book we call attention to the manner in which processions in the diaspora are able to display religion and religious identity to the Other. Processions mobilize the diaspora population in support of their religious and ethnic identity, bolstering the religious institution organizing the celebration. Processions, in fact, become the most important annual event for gaining public recognition. Since size is important for minority groups seeking public recognition, the gathering of the whole group on a public street becomes a sign of strength and pride. Seeking public recognition is a step in the growth of self-confidence of a community and might be a sign that the group is seeking influence. Religious processions may be a rising phenomenon. There is a need for long-term studies of such a trend. How do processions change? How are processions related to conflicts in society? As processions are about public space, power and domination, change in their traditions should indicate social change. Increased emphasis on traditions might be a sign of increased tension in society or increased competition between groups. The need to become visible and to stake a claim to public space might indicate rivalry and conflict, but it might also be a sign that suppressed groups are becoming self-confident or are enjoying increased material wealth and opportunities.

The chapters have shown that one major function of religious processions in South Asia and in the diaspora is to display identities. To determine whether this is a general function or a phenomenon confined to South Asia, religious processions must be studied as a universal phenomenon. Many religions have

processions and these are among the important ways humans express their religion. In the South Asian diaspora processions are on the rise. Comparative studies will show if this is a characteristic of all diasporas or unique to the South Asian diaspora.

Finally, this book shows that multi-religious procession traditions have become less common in South Asia. Religious boundaries have been strengthened. National secular parades have perhaps replaced the shared religious processions. Nevertheless, religious processions continue to display identity and difference, and to function as powerful vehicles for the expression of religious devotion and feelings of happiness and togetherness.

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