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Thaipusam in Malaysia

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Thaipusam in Malaysia: A Hindu Festival in the Tamil Diaspora

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Introduction

In the Beginning

My first experience of Thaipusam occurred on 24 January 1978. Encouraged by Indian contacts who suggested that the festival might be of some general interest, I rose at 4 a.m., and accompanied by my wife, Wendy, four visitors from Australia, and a young Tamil man who had agreed to act as our guide, we made our way to Batu Caves, about thirteen kilometres north of Kuala Lumpur. Despite the early hour the area around the caves was already crowded and we had to park some distance from the main site. (Press reports calculated the 1978 attendance at 500,000 and I was later to find that many people had spent the night at the caves.) We threaded our way through the concourse to the very foot of the steps leading to the main cave (known as the Temple Cave), which would, we hoped, provide us with a privileged view of the festival and its participants.

Since our arrival in Malaysia we had been fed a diet of highly dramatic (some might say sensationalist) stories of the Thaipusam festival. We had heard accounts of the numerous *kavadi* (ritual burden) bearers, their bodies pierced with skewers and hooks, carrying their loads up the sharp incline of the stairway leading to the main shrine within the Temple Cave; of the immense crowds; of the auditory overload, consisting of the chants and shouts of devotees, the constant drumming, the loudspeakers relaying amplified religious music as well as the droning speeches of visiting political dignitaries. And this festival was dedicated to the deity Murugan, a South Indian god so seemingly obscure and generally unknown that he earned but a brief paragraph in one of the putatively authoritative texts which had provided my background reading into Hinduism, and no entries at all in the

remainder. Most of what we had heard about Thaipusam had comprised the impressions of the few expatriates who had visited the festival, and who tended to view it as a curiosity, a form of local colour, an incidental divertissement which provided a suitable touch of the “mysterious East” to round out their stay in “oriental” Malaysia. None of our informants had looked upon Thaipusam as a meaningful religious observance of deep significance to devotees and the wider Hindu community; in other words, as a festival worthy of consideration in its own right. We were advised that should we wish to venture into the immense crowds we would witness a series of amazing exhibitions; devotees who performed miraculous yet grotesque acts in the name of religion. We were also warned that Thaipusam could prove stomach churning, and was not a spectacle for the faint-hearted.

These rather cursory and impressionistic accounts provided no real insights to what Thaipusam betokened as a religious observance, nor did they even begin to prepare me for what I was to experience. But then the fifteen months I had spent in Malaysia had been a continual exposure to the unexpected. Prior to my posting as an Attaché to the Australian High Commission, Kuala Lumpur, in late 1976, I had been furnished with a schedule of pre-departure briefings which had adumbrated in nebulous and often misleading detail some of the supposed social and political realities of the country in which I now found myself. As a consequence I found myself poorly equipped to deal with the complex realities of Malaysian life, in particular the plethora of ethnic, religious, socio-economic, educational and linguistic issues which dominated Malaysian political discourse, and to which my work daily exposed me. In particular I possessed but a rudimentary understanding of the great religious traditions which informed and enlivened the worldviews of the component ethnicities of Malaysia. I had attempted to remedy my ignorance with a programme of focused reading, supplemented wherever possible with exploration of local cultures, or at least those cultural aspects which were both open and accessible to expatriates. My expressions of interest were rewarded with warm Malaysian hospitality, generosity and encouragement. As a result I visited mosques, churches, temples, weddings, initiations, firewalkings and cultural performances, as well as the open houses which marked the great festivals of each community — Hari Raya Puasa, which concluded the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan; Chinese New Year; the Hindu festival of Deepavali and the Christian commemoration of Good Friday

and Christmas. As I gradually gained the confidence of my Malaysian colleagues, I began to receive invitations to functions and ceremonies that were normally closed to expatriate “Europeans”. These included a kampong *silat* training session, family religious observances and temple and mosque related activities. These explorations boosted my general understanding of the dynamics of Malaysian life and assisted me to piece together the complex three-dimensional jigsaw which constitutes Malaysian culture and society.

And therein lay a further reason behind my visit to Batu Caves that January morning. Hindu associates, aware of my growing interest in the various forms of religious expression in Malaysia, had suggested that Thaipusam, and in particular the disciplined austerities surrounding the kavadi ritual, might provide a general introduction to some of the traditions of South Indian Hinduism, in particular those relating to the deity Murugan, as well as the fundamental philosophy of *bhakti* (devotional) worship which underscored Hinduism in Malaysia.

Our arrival at Batu Caves coincided with a temporary lull in proceedings. We stood in the preternatural darkness of the predawn cool, orienting ourselves to our surroundings, and commenting upon the curiously charged atmosphere we had all detected; a singular amalgam of muted exultation and anticipatory enthusiasm. To our right the looming bulk of Batu Caves was etched against the setting full moon and the still night sky. The steps leading to the Temple Cave were gently illuminated by strings of coloured light globes. To our left, hundreds of onlookers, nearly all ethnic Indians, waited patiently on either side of the roped lane reserved for kavadi bearers and their followers. Soldiers and police, all armed, and nearly all Malay, were stationed at regular intervals along the lane; practising Muslims detailed to guard a Hindu festival.

Our reveries were fractured by a sudden commotion. Several drummers preceded a group of chanting, dancing devotees who made their way towards our vantage point, their progress animated by a tangible wave of excitement. This group surrounded a young man who appeared to be anchored below a kind of mobile tower, largely consisting of a decorated platform incorporating an image of the deity whom I had learned to recognize as Murugan, son of the supreme deity, Siva. The votary's torso was laced with hooks, each of which was attached to a fine silver chain which hung from the platform. A “skewer” protruded from his tongue, another penetrated his cheeks. The entire group radiated an emphatic,

compelling and ecstatic energy, a form of intense exhilaration which fell well beyond the parameters of anything I had hitherto understood to constitute religious expression.

For the next eight hours we remained at Batu Caves, and as recalled in my personal diary, “witnessed some of the most amazing sights one could hope to see”. Throughout the morning hundreds of kavadi bearers, often clustered in groups, made their way to the stairs and up into the caves. All were accompanied by retinues of drummers and were surrounded by circles of supporters chanting and singing. While many of the kavadi bearers bore burdens similar to that of the devotee we had seen earlier, others restricted themselves to small wooden arches; some devotees had their cheeks transfixes by long spears; young men danced on huge upturned knives borne by their friends; couples conveyed babies in slings suspended from sugar cane; both men and women carried vessels full of milk. Most devotees radiated that same mysterious and unfathomable rapture, almost overpowering in its intensity, which had so astonished me earlier that morning.

Throughout the course of the morning we shifted from place to place within the Batu Caves complex. We visited the sites along the *Sungai Batu* (Rocky River) where most devotees began their journey, and watched the aspirants bathing, achieving trance, undergoing piercings, and having their kavadis fitted. We shuffled up the congested stairways to the shrine in the Temple Cave where the kavadi bearers terminated their pilgrimages.

Like so many “foreign” observers of Thaipunam, I was intensely curious about what I had seen and experienced during the festival. I had not been prepared either for the sheer size of the crowd that had gathered at Batu Caves that morning, or the large number of active participants — pilgrims, musicians and supporting attendants — who had made their way to the main shrine within the Temple Cave. Nor had I even remotely anticipated the ecstatic devotion of those who had elected to bear kavadis. Like many “Westerners” I was puzzled by the absence of pain or evidence of blood among devotees, and the unaccountable exultation of the pilgrims, especially in view of the ritual privations they had endured.

In February 1979, a mere six weeks prior to my scheduled return to Australia, a close Hindu friend, Ramasamy (not his real name), informed me that several of his relatives intended to take kavadis under the direction of his uncle, a recognized medium. He invited me to observe the group as it prepared for and fulfilled the kavadi ritual. We arrived at our destination

slightly after nightfall on Thaipusam Eve, and ascended the steps to the Temple Cave. The interior of the cave was suffused with the liquid light thrown by dozens of candles and lamps, and the air was heavily laden with the commingled scents of incense and burning camphor. Ramasamy and his cousins offered their obeisance, firstly to Lord Ganesha, the elephant-headed deity whom they described as the Remover of Obstacles, and then to Lord Murugan. We left the cave and made our way to the riverbank where the group of devotees known to Ramasamy had assembled. The group leader welcomed me, and although he worked almost non-stop in overseeing the purificatory rituals, supervising trance states and fitting kavadis, made time to provide me with abbreviated explanatory comments about his own actions and those of each kavadi bearer. In the main, the group, numbering about twenty-five people, consisted of working-class Tamils, drawn from the rubber and palm oil estates adjacent to Kuala Lumpur, but also included two Chinese university students, and a Eurasian Catholic lawyer who informed me that he divided his worship between Jesus and Murugan. The group contained a wide spread of ages ranging from teenagers to votaries in their fifties. Although predominantly male, the group included several women, most in their early twenties, and one much older woman who had dedicated herself to Murugan. At about 12:30 a.m. the party set off for the caves. I followed them, observing the ascent to the caves, the ecstatic dancing culminating before the main shrine, the termination of the trance state, the dismantling of the kavadis. Later that morning I breakfasted with the devotees at a nearby enclosure set aside for this purpose.

My sojourn in Malaysia and in particular the festival of Thaipusam had affected me in ways that I had not envisaged. From the very outset of my posting I had found Malaysia vital and compelling, a country visibly grappling with the residual problems bequeathed by colonialism, struggling to come to terms with the legacy of its immediate history, and to reconcile the sometimes contradictory diversity of cultures, traditions and worldviews under the overarching umbrella of nationhood. Throughout my years in Malaysia I had made a number of deep and enduring friendships; my family and I had been welcomed into numerous homes where we had been received with warmth and hospitality. My return to Australia was accompanied by a wholly unanticipated and quite profound culture shock, and sustained "homesickness" for the society I had left behind. It appeared obvious that in certain respects my departure had been premature; there

were still lessons to learn, and mysteries, both intellectual and personal, that I needed to penetrate. Within six months of my return I had shocked myself (but neither my wife, nor my Malaysian friends), by announcing my “conversion”¹ to Saivite Hinduism, and my concomitant vow to bear a succession of kavadis at the festival of Thaipusam at Batu Caves.

My first kavadi was taken on 20 January 1981, and was followed by regular pilgrimages which have continued until the present day. Each of these pilgrimages exposed me to new and often profound experiences, and both widened and deepened my knowledge of Thaipusam, Murugan worship and Hinduism in Malaysia. In 1989 I was invited to address the Fifth Malaysian National Hindu Conference held in Petaling Jaya, Selangor. Senior Hindus suggested that I write a book about my religious experiences. The resultant volume, a highly personal account of the “confessional” genre, and entitled *Towards Truth: An Australian Spiritual Journey*,² was published in February 1992 in Kuala Lumpur. Although this book was well received by Hindus within Malaysia and Singapore, and in other parts of the world, my later studies made me painfully aware of its many and varied scholarly limitations. I have therefore declined offers made over several years to reprint this work.

Routes Travelled

In 1993, while working as Australian correspondent for the U.S.-based journal *Hinduism Today*, I was invited to apply for admission to an off-campus and part-time Master of Arts programme at Deakin University in the Australian state of Victoria. To this date my interest in Thaipusam had been shaped by two major influences — firstly my role as a privileged “insider”, albeit that of a “Western” pilgrim, and secondly, the spirit of scholarly inquiry. To that point my knowledge of Thaipusam had been largely moulded by the philosophies and rituals of the so-called “great tradition” school of Saiva Siddhanta, especially the more esoteric conventions of Murugan worship as they related to and enmeshed with that tradition. While this background was sufficient to provide an interpretative paradigm for my own participation in Thaipusam, it proved too narrow to sustain any detailed analysis of the collocation of behaviours and belief structures which collectively comprise this complex and multifaceted festival. In particular the terms of my personal engagement with Thaipusam neither provided me with the breadth of perspective necessary to discern

the intricate and often fluid web of relationships which permeate the supposedly inviolable boundaries of *Agamic* and “village” Hinduism, nor allowed me to appreciate how these relationships catalyse the negotiation, reformulation and transmission of concepts within the broader context of Hindu society. Scholarly inquiry thus insisted that I move beyond the conventions of “great tradition” learning and plunge into a wider study embracing the agglomeration of castes, sub-ethnic and religious discourses which cumulatively make up the body of beliefs generally classified under the rubric of Hinduism.

Integral to my research for my dissertation (which was subsequently upgraded to doctoral level), were periods of fieldwork, including several trips to Malaysia, one extended over three months (1995), and supplementary trips, each of six weeks duration (1997, 2000 and 2004), interspersed by a ten-week trip to South India in 1998 funded by a research grant awarded by Deakin University. My 1995 travel incorporated a six-week stay in London, which not only enabled me to interact with other scholars, but also included one-month’s research into colonial documents, reports, and related materials held within the official collection of the Oriental and Indian Office Library. These papers yielded much valuable information and occasionally rare and illustrative vignettes on the Indian experience in British Malaya.

Malaysia. The focal points of my Malaysian visits, which have continued to the present day, have been the close observation of the festival of Thaipusam as conducted at Batu Caves and in Penang, as well as similar and related festivals at Melaka, Kangar and other locations. My presence at these festivals has provided openings which have enabled me to arrange extended interviews with kavadi bearers and their attendants. Over the years I have met with several hundred such devotees, as well as members of their families and supporting retinues. The process of organizing interviews has undoubtedly been advanced by respondents’ awareness of my own history of kavadi pilgrimage, and by my standing as a devotee who has written a “confessional” book about these experiences. My interviewees have represented the entire gamut of kavadi worshippers in terms of ethnicity, sex, age and vocational status, and have included participants who have borne kavadis for non-*Agamic* deities.

My knowledge of local conditions and the assistance of friends and erstwhile colleagues have also enabled me to interview a range of

people who hold or have held prominent positions within the Indian and Hindu communities. These included temple officials as well as a large number of individuals whose impressions and recollections have done much to deepen and embellish my own perspectives. Similarly, Malay and Chinese friends and contacts provided me with introductions to religious scholars and officiates, many of whom provided invaluable and illuminating information, and whose warmth and generosity always proved enlightening. Many interviewees made their availability conditional upon their guaranteed anonymity. Accordingly, where I have made reference to the views or recollections of an individual, I have footnoted these with the initials of the interviewee.

In preparing this study I have been careful to contextualize the views of self-proclaimed “reformers”. Many of those who fall within this category are Western educated, of professional standing, modernist in outlook and fluent in English. One could thus be easily led to form the impression that the views of the “reformers” represent an authoritative perspective on what constitutes “correct” Hindu philosophies and rituals. In fact, it has been my experience that most reformers subscribe to a textual Hinduism which is both rarefied and “rational” (and often “disenchanted” in the Weberian sense), and thus largely stripped of its *Puranic* traditions, its emotional content, and the ritual modes of expression which infuse most forms of the South Indian *bhakti* tradition. Many reformers who propound Vedantic philosophies, or who pursue an idealized “philosophical” Hinduism largely isolated from its ritualized expressions, are often but sparsely informed, and hold grossly simplified and stereotypical views about such subjects as *Agamic* beliefs, the scope of Murugan worship and its relationship to didactic philosophy, or the belief structures undergirding village/popular Hinduism. Most are acutely sensitive to imagined Western perceptions of Hinduism. I have been constantly queried, sometimes aggressively, about the need to research village/popular Hinduism in Malaysia. Indeed in 1995 one academic insistently counselled me to overlook the “uncivilized” views and beliefs of the majority of the Hindu population in order to provide a more “acceptable” (even if bowdlerized) portrayal of Malaysian Hinduism. While I have noted the views of the “reformers” as belonging to a small, albeit highly visible minority of Malaysian Hindus, I have not permitted them to unduly bias my overall findings.

Over the past three decades I have undertaken trips to major temples and noted pilgrimage sites throughout Peninsular Malaysia, especially

those related to Murugan worship and the kavadi ritual. These necessarily involved visits to the entire spectrum of Hindu places of worship, ranging from orthodox *Agamic* temples (exemplified by well-managed Jaffna Tamil and Chettiar temples), to small village structures fashioned of plank and zinc. I have observed the conduct of many different rituals, including several examples of mediumship, and met a number of religious figures, many self-educated, others possessing the dubious imprimatur of self-anointment.³ Requests to research temple records within Malaysia were invariably declined, generally with the polite rebuttal that these were off limits to any person other than properly elected officials and trustees. However, in many, if not most instances, the need to view temple records was circumvented by prolonged interviews with older devotees.

During my extended 1995 visit, I was invited to spend time on a coconut/rubber estate in northern Perak. This provided me with opportunities to visit several adjoining coconut, rubber and oil palm estates. My stay permitted me to gain insights into the “plantation” ethos which has played such a formative role in shaping Indian culture and society in Malaysia. My time on the estate also brought the unexpected bonus of interaction with nearby Telegu communities, and the opportunity to inspect several estate-based Vaishnavite temples.

India. My fieldwork in India in 1998 furnished me with an invaluable opportunity to examine the Murugan cultus within its metropolitan setting, to visit many of the regions from which Tamil immigrants to Malaysia had been drawn, and to observe as much as possible in a ten-week trip of “village” Hinduism in South India.

Undoubtedly the focal point of my visit was my participation in a weeklong 120-kilometres *pada yatra* (foot pilgrimage) which commenced in Palakkad (Kerala) and culminated in the festival of Thaipusam at the major pilgrimage centre of Palani, Tamil Nadu. (This is described in Chapter 7.) The pilgrimage group was predominantly composed of *Smartha* Brahmans. The pilgrimage enabled me to note daily rituals, to record the behaviour patterns of pilgrims, to hold a series of in-depth discussions with members of the party, and finally to observe pilgrimage traditions and the kavadi ritual at Palani.

My visits to major temples and pilgrimage sites connected with the Murugan cultus not only provided me with an introduction to centres pivotal to the traditions of Murugan worship, but also allowed me to

explore a number of destinations I had previously only read about in books, heard in discourses, conversations or songs within Malaysia, or viewed as the idealized offerings of temple artists. Conversations with temple priests, pilgrims and devotees often supplied me with incisive and valuable insights. A prolonged discussion over lunch with the head priest at the major seashore temple and pilgrimage centre of Tiruchendur dispelled in one succinct session several of the more spurious claims made by Hindu reformers and other observers regarding kavadi rituals and behaviour at Thaipusam in Malaysia.

In addition my trip to India included stays at several *asrama*, mainly, but not exclusively, linked to the Murugan cultus. These visits supplied an introduction to institutions of spiritual teaching and thought, and in some cases the traditions of the *guru/sishya* (master/disciple) relationship. These institutions and traditions are largely unavailable in Malaysia. In each centre I was treated with extraordinary kindness and generosity, and I was encouraged to question swamis, itinerant *sadhus*, officials and pilgrims, both Indian and international.

Contextualizing Thaipusam

Thaipusam is a Saivite festival dedicated to the worship of the deity Murugan, the son of the supreme deity, Siva, and held to be the *Mahadeva* (god) of spiritual disciplines, austerities and yogic powers, and thus capable of bestowing *mukti* (final liberation) upon those who engage in concentrated worship of him. While the deity has absorbed a complex amalgam of Sanskrit and Tamil influences, in pre-modern and modern India he has been increasingly identified as a Dravidian and specifically Tamil deity, who through a prolonged process of syncretization has accumulated a wide variety of motifs, attributes and belief structures which render him acceptable and accessible to all segments of Tamil Hindu society. Murugan worship in Malaysia is widespread among Tamils of both Indian and Sri Lankan descent.

In essence, Thaipusam celebrates the bestowal of the *Sakti Vel* (cosmic spear or *Vetrivel*) upon Murugan, by Parvati, consort of Siva, at the outset of Murugan's campaign to defeat Surapadman, head of the *asuras* (demonic forces or lower astral beings). A substantial corpus of *Puranic*⁴ mythology informs the Murugan cultus. At the *cosmological* level the Murugan mythology may be interpreted to embrace themes of phenomenological

atrophy and dissolution, as well as subsequent reconstitution and renewal. At the *human* level Murugan's battle with Surapadman is internalized and the *Vel* becomes a key to spiritual liberation. My field research suggests that many devotees view Thaipusam — the commemoration of Murugan's acquisition of the *Vel* — as a highly propitious occasion in which to resolve personal karmic difficulties, or to “repay” the deity for major adjustments or transformations in family and social life. Thaipusam is thus marked by individual acts of devotion involving austerity and sacrifice, often taking the form of bodily mortification, accompanied by trance states, and the bearing of kavadis.

While Thaipusam is consciously formulated upon the mythology, traditions and modes of worship celebrated at the great pilgrimage centre of Palani, Tamil Nadu, the processes of relocation and adaptation within Malaysia have in certain respects endowed the festival with a uniquely Malaysian orientation. In the years since I first witnessed Thaipusam, both the social context in which Thaipusam is celebrated and the overall conduct of the festival have altered considerably. The crowds attending the festival have continued to increase by the year (the Malaysian press estimated that in 2011 approximately 1.3 million people attended Thaipusam at Batu Caves, while 300,000 gathered at the Penang festival), the number of kavadi pilgrims has more than doubled, the publicity surrounding the festival has gained greater prominence, and Thaipusam has been declared a public holiday in several states, and more recently (2008) in the Federal Territory. Thaipusam is not only the most popular and prominent Hindu festival in Malaysia, it is also the most visible and powerful assertion of Hindu identity. Recent studies reveal that Indians constitute only 7.4 per cent of Peninsular Malaysia's population of approximately thirty million people, with Hindus comprising about 84.1 per cent of that figure.⁵ Yet, Thaipusam at Batu Caves has become the largest single religious festival in Malaysia, and is generally believed to be the most significant Hindu festival outside India. While Thaipusam is dedicated to Murugan, kavadis are borne for nearly all Hindu deities worshipped in Malaysia, including those belonging to non-*Agamic* and Vaishnavite traditions.

The literature dealing with the Indian experience in Malaya/Malaysia is considerable, ranging from accounts of the establishment and later abolition of migratory systems of labour through to the formation and consolidation of Indian political and cultural organizations, and including investigations into the contemporary Indian situation within multi-ethnic

Malaysia.⁶ Until comparatively recently the availability of literature describing or analysing Hinduism in Malaysia was far more problematic. As Ramanathan Kalimuthu has pointed out in his comprehensive 1995 doctoral dissertation, *Hindu Religion in an Islamic State: The Case of Malaysia*, many of the studies of Indian society which have focused on the phenomena of Indian ethnicity have provided detailed political, economic, social and linguistic analyses while all but neglecting religion or religious issues.⁷ However, over the past few years this dearth has been at least partially remedied with the publication of four detailed and illuminating studies. Alexandra Kent's *Divinity and Diversity: A Hindu Revitalization Movement in Malaysia*⁸ explores the following of godman Sathya Sai Baba in Malaysia. This was followed in 2005 by Vineeta Sinha's fine and well-constructed study of the deity Muneeswaran.⁹ While Sinha's focus is mainly upon Singapore, her work overlaps with the more generic sphere of Hinduism in Peninsular Malaysia. Finally, Andrew Willford's two penetrating and well researched works, namely *Cage of Freedom: Tamil Identity and the Ethnic Fetish in Malaysia* (2006) and, in conjunction with S. Nagarajan, *Tamils and the Haunting of Justice: History and Recognition in Malaysia's Plantations* (2014), detail many aspects of Hinduism within the context of a nation highly charged with the politics of religio-ethnic communalism.¹⁰ In addition, noted scholar of Murugan, Fred W. Clothey, has dedicated a chapter of his 2006 work, *Ritualising on the Boundaries: Continuity and Innovation in the Tamil Diaspora*, to Thaipusam at Batu Caves.¹¹ My own chapter, "Hindu Resurgence in Malaysia", a contribution to a wider volume, *Rising India and Indian Communities in East Asia* (2008), while modest in comparison, seeks to provide an overview of the current state of Hinduism in Malaysia.¹²

The body of available literature on Thaipusam is rather sparse. Few studies have attempted to view Thaipusam in its own terms rather than as an object of "orientalist"¹³ speculation and theorizing. Notable exceptions are Lawrence Babb's 1976 work on Thaipusam in Singapore which explores the role of the individual in Hindu ritual,¹⁴ and Raymond Lee's 1989 study which furnishes a well-constructed phenomenological overview of Thaipusam at Batu Caves.¹⁵ Ervin et al.¹⁶ provide a detailed and empathetic description of the role of trance as a mode of spiritual transformation at Thaipusam, but do not attempt any detailed analysis of the festival in terms of Hindu categories.

It is my contention that Thaipusam, a major, highly colourful and extremely complex festival, has been seriously misunderstood by most

Western observers. In essence, Western interpretations of Thaipusam fall into three major, albeit overlapping schools:

1. **The Exotic Malaysia/Mysterious East School.** This consists of the frankly sensationalist descriptions which exploit both the festival and its participants as objects of curiosity, a diversion or source of potential entertainment, most typically for other Westerners. These accounts are invariably written from a generalist perspective, are undisguisedly orientalist, and while sometimes ostensibly sympathetic their underlying leitmotif remains the cultural distance of the writer from “the Other”.¹⁷ The most objectionable accounts of Thaipusam comprise those which might be termed the “benighted native” approach, cast in terms of implied cultural superiority of the writer, openly condescending or contemptuous,¹⁸ or in some cases simply unconscionable.¹⁹
2. **The Lost Village Tradition/Social Deprivation School.** This is perhaps the most common interpretation, and strongly encouraged by certain Hindu reformist groups who are supposedly arguing from the privileged and sanctioned perspective of “Great Tradition” Hinduism, and who are interested in recasting Malaysian Hinduism in terms of a modernist agenda. This viewpoint contends that Thaipusam constitutes the debased remnants of a decayed and perhaps lost village tradition, somehow transplanted to Malaya/Malaysia (invariably by Hindus of the lowest castes), and asserts that these rituals find no justification within *Agamic* or classical Hindu belief structures. The festival is thus sustained by illiterate and ignorant members of a chronically deprived working class/lower caste Hindu population (Chinese participation is rarely mentioned, let alone explained), who use Thaipusam as a cathartic outlet to relieve the unmitigated harshness which characterizes their oppression. These accounts often repeat the common fallacy that Thaipusam as practised in Malaysia is banned in India.²⁰
3. **The Psychoanalytic School.** This genre, largely conducted within the framework of Neo-Freudian psychoanalytic theory, tends to view the raw materials of Thaipusam in terms of the abreacted impulses and dispositions of repressed sexuality combined with social protest. Thus the spectacle of young men (these accounts invariably marginalize and downplay the participation of women and older devotees), piercing their flesh with skewers and steel rods, transported by the rapture of

orgiastic trance, and penetrating into the interiors of temples and caves, are fulfilling a ritual whose inner meanings and significance — the “real” motives which impel their public performances — somehow elude the participants themselves, but may be carefully decoded by privileged (usually Western) scholars accoutred with the appropriate armoury of psychoanalytic techniques.²¹

Each of the interpretations grouped under categories (1) and (2), written by scholars and observers who in the main have experienced Thaipusam as a largely sociological phenomenon, suggests its own rationale for the construction and inner dynamics of the festival, and argued on the basis of readily observable and purely Malaysian evidence may achieve a deceptive plausibility. It is relatively simple to trace the origins of such interpretations. A large percentage of Malaysia’s ethnic Tamil population *does* consist of an oppressed and marginalized underclass, and it may seem axiomatic to many Western scholars to link the esoteric rituals of Thaipusam to the traumas of subjugation, and to the intense need for recognition in a society which neither cares to remember the historic achievements of Indian labour nor values or respects their current contributions. Similarly, it would be easy to accept the views of a numerically insignificant but disproportionately vocal group of self-proclaimed Hindu “reformers” as authoritative. As previously related, many of those who fall within this category are Western educated, of professional standing, fluent in English, modernist in outlook, and immediately accessible to any field worker conducting research into Hinduism in Malaysia. This group is more than prepared to diminish the experiences and practices of those whose perspectives do not accord with their own, especially Hindus who are working class and poorly educated.

My research, fieldwork and experiences over many Thaipusams suggest that these interpretations are based upon incomplete ethnographies, which fail to locate Thaipusam, the kavadi ritual and Malaysian Hinduism within a sufficiently broad or comprehensive framework. Nicholas Dirks has warned of the dangers of translating specific observations based on restricted fieldwork into universalistic generalizations.²² The limitations of the approaches outlined above are revealed by wider research, including analyses of metropolitan Tamil Hindu traditions,²³ studies of Thaipusam and the kavadi ritual within the broader Tamil diaspora, close readings of the modern Indian migration to and history within Malaya/Malaysia,²⁴ and

the intense fieldwork which must be undertaken if one is to disentangle the layers of meaning embedded in a festival as involved and as multifaceted as *Thaipusam*.²⁵

Many of the previous interpretations have thus reached conclusions which will not withstand the scrutiny of close inquiry. As I will show, *Thaipusam* has its roots in continuing traditions and philosophies readily located in both popular and *Agamic* Hinduism, and those aspects considered objectionable, exotic or bizarre by Western observers have precedents, and nearly always equivalents, within metropolitan Tamil Hindu culture. Nor is the *kavadi* ritual restricted to lower caste Hindus or younger males; participants are drawn from nearly all sectors of Malaysian Hindu society and include considerable numbers of women. I have uncovered no evidence to suggest that the dynamics of *Thaipusam* are influenced by inter-caste rivalry; this is not to suggest that caste distrust or friction is non-existent, but rather that it is not a major causative factor in the overall construction of the festival. My fieldwork and personal experiences dispel the notion that the trance state at *Thaipusam* axiomatically produces amnesia;²⁶ the majority of devotees whom I interviewed were able to provide compelling and often vivid descriptions of their trance experiences. Moreover, comparative studies dispel the “social deprivation” theory of *Thaipusam*; they demonstrate that the *kavadi* ritual is a common diaspora phenomenon and that this occurs within societies where Tamil practitioners are neither politically or socially disadvantaged. Indeed, these studies clearly reveal that *Thaipusam*, *Murugan* worship and *kavadi* rituals have typical normative elements which manifest at the festivals commemorated in both *Batu Caves* and *Penang*. The book will argue, *inter alia*, that *Thaipusam* festivals at both locations, while in some senses uniquely Malaysian,²⁷ are “orthodox” in the sense that they reproduce worship rituals and behavioural patterns which owe their origins to Tamil *Murugan* traditions that continue to be practised in India.

This book will explore the festival of *Thaipusam* in terms of its own inner dynamics — the traditions and belief structures which ensure the festival’s continuing relevance to Malaysian Hindus. It will argue that *Thaipusam* in Malaysia reflects a growing sense of Hindu identity in Malaysia, and an as yet inchoate unity. It will contend that while the *kavadi* ritual provides profound meaning at the individual and group level, *Thaipusam* furnishes a public arena for and gives expression to a powerful Hindu resurgence, largely, though not exclusively, fuelled by

Dravidian assertiveness. Over time, Thaipusam has developed its own paradigmatic impulses which have stimulated and continue to promote the expression, aggregation and negotiation of Hindu identity in Malaysia. This book will thus demonstrate that the festival incorporates competing discourses — based on caste, the multiplicity of sects and traditions ranging from village to *Agamic* — within the generic rituals and received frameworks associated with Murugan worship. Thaipusam thus provides a public arena for the open articulation and assertion of the concatenation of diverse and often competing discourses which fall under the rubric of Malaysian Hinduism.

In investigating the catalytic forces which are reformulating Hinduism in Malaysia, the book will examine the crucial role played by the deity Murugan as the quintessential Tamil deity, and thus a powerful symbol of the Dravidian renaissance. This analysis will necessarily involve exploration of the history and traditions of the metropolitan culture from which Malaysian Hinduism has arisen, and the continuing applicability of its major tenets and impulses among Malaysian Hindus.

In situating the festival within the context of a Malaysia dominated by Malay and Islamic power brokers, a society in which both the Indian community and Hinduism are relegated to the margins, the book will explore the festival of Thaipusam as a vehicle for mobilization of religious symbols and values which not only simultaneously articulate ethnicity and thus resist the forces which threaten cultural and religious integrity, but which also ultimately signal wider allegiances to the broader politico-cultural world of an imagined, immeasurably rich, and enduring Indo-Hindu civilization.

Structure

The book is organized as follows. Chapter 1 provides an essential overview of the social and political context in which the Indian community within Malaysia is situated. This traces migratory streams and the post-*Merdeka* (independence) trajectory of Indians as a minority community within a society dominated by communally infused discourses structured upon “race” and religion. Chapter 2 explores the history and development of Tamil institutions and belief structures, including kingship, temples, *bhakti* Hinduism and Saiva Siddhanta. In essence this chapter argues that the Hindu institutions which developed through the period of the great

dynasties — the Pallava, Pandya, Chola and Vijayanagara — indelibly shaped the Hinduism which continues to obtain today. Chapter 3 examines the impact of British colonialism upon Indian and specifically South Indian society, and demonstrates how “colonial knowledge” helped create and sustain contemporary Hindu reform movements. Chapter 4 looks at the relocation and development of Hinduism in Malaya/Malaysia, including the modification of caste, the construction and management of temples, and the continuing negotiation of Hindu identity within modern Malaysia. In Chapter 5 I explore the Murugan cultus in some detail, tracing his evolution as a “Tamil” deity, outlining the rich corpus of *Puranic* mythology (including that which underpins both the commemoration of, and ritual behaviour at, Thaipusam). This chapter also examines the continuing influence of the Murugan cultus and its multifaceted appeal to a society characterized by enduring diversity. Chapter 6 provides a phenomenological exploration of Thaipusam at Batu Caves. This looks at the founding and development of Batu Caves as a pilgrimage centre, the kingship rituals and chariot procession which establish the overall parameters of the festival, and the formal acts of vow fulfilment which constitute the kavadi ritual. Chapter 7 consists of a comparative study on Thaipusam and the kavadi ritual within Penang, metropolitan India, as well as a number of diaspora locations. This demonstrates that both the festival and the modes of worship found within Malaysia are observed by Tamil Hindus within many societies and among many castes and classes. In Chapter 8 I examine the kavadi ritual within the context of the Tamil Hindu pilgrimage ritual, that is as a *tirtha yatra* (“divine crossing”) in which the devotee moves from the periphery of quotidian life to the sacred centre (*axis mundi*) within the context of vow fulfilment. This chapter will show that the pilgrimage ritual at Thaipusam is saturated with and dominated by a logic drawn from Murugan cosmology but also from wider Tamil belief structures. Finally, in Conclusions I look at the continuing and expanding significance of Thaipusam, its central role in providing a forum for the redefinition of Hinduism in Malaysia, and its multivocality in terms of the messages it sends to a variety of audiences.

Presentation

Throughout this book I have employed the most common Malaysian Romanized spelling of Tamil and Sanskrit terms, and following the

example of C.J. Fuller,²⁸ I have omitted diacritical marks. This has been largely prompted by the varied spellings of Tamil words which appear in different contexts in Malaysia, and are almost invariably offered without diacritics. Thus, for example, the term *kovil* for temple is often spelled *koyil* or even *koil*; *aluga* (beautiful) kavadis are often rendered as *alaku* or *alahu*; while Murugan may be offered as *Murukan* or *Muruhan*. Sometimes multiple spellings of the same word appear within the one work. Within Malaysia, both spelling and meaning are complicated by the fact that many Tamil and Sanskrit words have found their way into the Bahasa Malaysia vocabulary, where they often assume meanings which are marginally or markedly different from their original currency in India. Thus, in Malay a *guru* is a teacher or instructor (with or without religious overtones), whereas the Sanskrit *swami* becomes the Malay *suami* (husband). Over time some of these Bahasa Malaysia meanings have been transplanted or returned to the Tamil lexicon. In addition, several words relevant to this study, such as “Thaipusam” (alternatively offered as *Thaiposam* or *Tai Pucam*) and “kavadi” have passed into the common Malaysian English vocabulary, and their English spellings are the most widely circulated among Malaysians generally. My aim has to be achieve consistency as well as clarity. I have italicized Tamil and Sanskrit terms with the exceptions of proper nouns and the two terms just listed, i.e., “Thaipusam” and “kavadi”.

Notes

1. This is described in my book, *Towards Truth: An Australian Spiritual Journey* (Kuala Lumpur: Pacific Press, 1992).
2. Ibid.
3. Several of this latter group were obvious frauds. One such “swami”, attended by a retinue of strong-arm thugs, complete with minatory body language, proudly showed me photos of his visit to Australia. One of these disclosed that he had visited a prominent Sydney massage parlour, an establishment which had gained nationwide notoriety in the 1980s during a well-publicized Australian political scandal.
4. The role and nature of *Puranas* will be discussed in Chapters 2 and 4. *Puranas* are books of mythology both extolling and describing the deeds of the great deities, but simultaneously conveying underlying metaphorical and metaphysical subtexts.
5. P. Uthayakumar, *Indian Marginalization of the Indians in Malaysia*, emailed to the author on 6 April 2010. In the 2000 census, Hindus accounted for 84.1 per

- cent of the Indian population, while Christians numbered 7.8 per cent, and Muslims 4.1 per cent (Saw Swee-Hock, "Population Trends and Patterns in Multi-Racial Malaysia", in *Malaysia: Recent Trends and Challenges*, edited by Saw Swee-Hock and K. Kesavapany [Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006], p. 19). Recent discussions suggest that the Hindu percentage of the Indian population remains at this level.
6. Recent examples include Carl Vadivella Belle, *Tragic Orphans; Indians in Malaysia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2015); Janakey Raman Manickam, *The Malaysian Indian Dilemma: The Struggles and Agony of the Indian Community in Malaysia* (Klang: Janakey Raman, 2010); Muzafar Desmond Tate, *The Malaysian Indians: History, Problems and Future* (Petaling Jaya, Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, 2008); and the Malaysian section in *Rising India and Indian Communities in East Asia*, edited by K. Kesavapany, A. Mani, and P. Ramasamy (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008). My reservations regarding *The Malaysian Indians* can be found at Carl Vadivella Belle, "Malaysian Indians: An Incomplete History", *Malaysiakini*, 25 June 2009 <<http://www.malaysiakini.com/opinions/107202>> (accessed 26 June 2009).
 7. Ramanathan Kalimuthu, "Hindu Religion in an Islamic State: The Case of Malaysia" (PhD dissertation, Universiteit van Amsterdam, 1995), p. 11.
 8. Alexandra Kent, *Divinity and Diversity: A Hindu Revitalization Movement in Malaysia* (Singapore and Copenhagen: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies/NIAS Press, 2004).
 9. Vineeta Sinha, *A New God in the Diaspora? Muneeswaran Worship in Contemporary Singapore* (Singapore and Copenhagen: Singapore University Press/NIAS Press, 2005).
 10. Andrew C. Willford, *Cage of Freedom: Tamil Identity and the Ethnic Fetish in Malaysia* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006); Andrew Willford (in collaboration with S. Nagarajan), *Tamils and the Haunting of Justice: History and Recognition in Malaysia's Plantations* (Singapore: NUS, 2014).
 11. Fred W. Clothey, *Ritualising on the Boundaries: Continuity and Innovation in the Tamil Diaspora* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2006).
 12. Carl Vadivella Belle, "Hindu Resurgence in Malaysia", in *Rising India and Indian Communities in East Asia*, edited by K. Kesavapany, A. Mani, and P. Ramasamy (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008).
 13. The term "orientalist" is used throughout this book in the sense developed by Edward Said. In basic terms, orientalism consists of Western portrayals of a given "third world" subject which both represent it and fix it as inherently "oriental". This portrayal is hegemonic in that it appropriates and speaks for the "other", and in various ways, often subtle, seeks to dominate the other by, inter alia, demonstrating the irrefragable differences and distance — social,

- racial and cultural — between the observer and the observed. Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin, 1991).
14. Lawrence A. Babb, *Thaipusam in Singapore: Religious Individualism in a Hierarchical Culture* (Singapore: University of Singapore, Department of Sociology Working Paper No. 49, 1976).
 15. Raymond L.M. Lee, "Thaipucam in Malaysia: Ecstasy and Identity in a Tamil Hindu Festival", *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 23, no. 2 (1989).
 16. Frank C. Ervin et al., "The Psychobiology of Trance: Physiological and Endocrine Coordinates", *Transcultural Psychiatric Review* 25 (1988).
 17. Examples of this school include Arthur Hullett, "Thaipusam and the Cult of Subramaniam", *Geo* 3, no. 4 (1981). Hullett's article actually displays a photo of statuary of the *avatars* of Vishnu, which he claims to be "Kartikkeya, a manifestation of Subramaniam or Murugan" (pp. 72–73), and has worshippers chanting "Wai, wai, wai" instead of "Vel, Vel, Vel" (p. 77); <http://www.LonelyPlanet.com.destinations/south_east-asia/Singapore/printable.htm>. This website, showing a complete misunderstanding of the festival, describes Thaipusam as "masochistic" and perpetrates the myth that Thaipusam is banned in India (accessed 25 November 2003).
 18. An example of this genre is provided in Blanche D'Alpuget, *Turtle Beach* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1981). The pejorative comments about Malaysia's component ethnic groups which litter this book are apparently justified by the heroine's admission of inherent racism (p. 53). Thaipusam becomes an "orgy", an "abomination", with the priests chanting "mumbo-jumbo" (p. 147). The book contains the falsehood that the festival is banned in India (p. 144). It is difficult to dispute D'Cruz and Steele's assertion that *Turtle Beach* is, at the very least, implicitly racist (J.V. D'Cruz and William Steele, *Australia's Ambivalence towards Asia* [Clayton: Monash University Press, 2003] p. 26). For a close discussion of the racism conveyed by *Turtle Beach*, see pages 199–287 of this work.
 19. A rancid and truly offensive example of this genre is offered by Gail Saari, whose fanciful and frankly sensationalist description of Thaipusam proclaims it "like Halloween in Greenwich Village with more S&M". Later she states, "It is more disturbing to see women in trances than to see men similarly affected. The women in the throes of religious ecstasy — with their hair unbound and uncombed, tongues artificially reddened with saffron powder (*sic*) and lewdly flitting in and out of their mouths, crazy sensual smiles, eyes rolling and breasts and hips undulating — violate even my notions of propriety on a deeply visceral level. It is an abandonment of self-control, at once spiritual and lewdly sexual..." (emphasis added) (<<http://www.salon.com/wlust/1998/06/26mondo.html>> (accessed 8 January 2004). This passage would appear to reveal far more about the writer than it does about Thaipusam.

20. The erroneous notion that some of the “more dramatic aspects” of the festival, i.e., the piercing of flesh with rods and hooks, is banned by law within India, appears to have its genesis in Paul W. Wiebe and S. Mariappen’s study, *Indian Malaysians: The View from the Plantation* (Delhi: Manohar, 1978), p. 148. This myth is repeated by Hullett, who states that the government of India has outlawed the use of “spikes and other implements” (Hullett, *Thaipusam*, p. 81). Colleen Ward also claims that the festival is banned in India (Colleen Ward, “Thaipusam in Malaysia: A Psycho-Anthropological Analysis of Ritual Trance, Ceremonial Possession and Self-Mortification Practices”, *Ethos* 14 [1984]: 324). Finally, Marian Aveling makes the remarkably inaccurate claim that the kavadi ritual forms “no part of Murugan festivals in India” (Marian Aveling, “Ritual Changes in the Hindu Temples of Penang”, *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 12, no. 2 [1978]: 192).
21. A psychoanalytic approach is adopted by Elizabeth Fuller Collins, *Pierced by Murugan’s Lance: Ritual Power and Moral Redemption among Malaysian Hindus* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1997). My review of this work, which I found reductive, incomplete and occasionally risible, is contained in *Sophia* 40, no. 2 (December 2001): 83–86. Collins’ response is found in the same issue. (Elizabeth Fuller Collins, “Of Transgressions: Reply to Carl Vadivella Belle”.)
22. Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 79.
23. Thus, Evers and Jayarani state that “The worship of Murugan being *only* the son of Siva is less demanding [than the worship of Siva]” (emphasis added). They maintain this was the result of the lack of specialist knowledge among the immigrant Hindus (Hans Dieter Evers and Jayarani Pavadarayan, “Religious Fervour and Economic Success: The Chettiars of Singapore”, in *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia*, edited by K.S. Sandhu and A. Mani [Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993], p. 864). This shows a comprehensive misunderstanding of Tamil Hinduism and is akin to suggesting that Christians are unsophisticated because they worship Jesus, who is *only* the son of God. (Evers and Jayarani also assert that kavadi-bearing Hindus “mutilate” themselves [ibid., p. 848], a claim that is manifestly untrue.) Hullett also erroneously contends that Murugan is not considered a major god in the Hindu pantheon and ponders why such a “minor” figure has gained such prominence in Singapore and Malaysia (Hullett, *Thaipusam*, p. 71).
24. Thus, for example, in her response to my review of her work, Collins asserts that “the majority of devotees who fulfil vows to Murugan are working-class descendants of the indentured labours who were brought to work in the British colony. These low caste and untouchable labourers...” (Collins, *Of Transgressions*, p. 87). This contains a serious and very basic historical

error. While it is true that the majority of indentured labourers were indeed *Adi Dravidas*, or of low caste, Collins seems unaware that indentured labour, terminated in 1910, provided less than six per cent of total immigration to Malaya. As I will show in Chapters 1 and 3, the far more influential kangany system of recruitment produced a workforce of variegated caste, of whom only about one-third were drawn from *Adi Dravida* castes.

25. Two examples, selected at random from Collins' book, both of which might have been rectified by more careful fieldwork, are as follows: (i) She claims that "Prints of the infant Krishna are frequently used in the decoration of kavadis. Most people seem unaware that the deity represented is Krishna because both Murugan and Krishna are associated with peacock feathers." (Collins, *Pierced by Murugan's Lance*, p. 150). This is simply untenable; any field worker who has spent ten minutes discussing *Puranic* Hinduism with worshippers at Thaipusam would be made aware that devotees have an almost encyclopaedic knowledge of members of the pantheon and their relationship to one another. Malaysian Hindus are vitally aware of both Murugan and Krishna and the easily identified and clearly recognizable motifs distinctive to each deity. (ii) On the same page, Collins continues: "The committee that oversees the Penang Murugan Hill Temple have encouraged the emphasis on the worship of the infant deity by constructing a pond in which the six infant forms of Murugan float on lotus petals." In fact, the committee have made no such encouragement; the pond and the representation of the infant Murugan form part of a well-structured set of iconic symbols which lead the pilgrim from the periphery (Murugan's unstabilized form) to the centre (Murugan triumphant).
26. The issue of trance and the supposed "amnesia" will be discussed in Chapter 7.
27. One obvious example of the Malaysian orientation of Thaipusam is the involvement of non-Dravidian Indians and ethnic Chinese in kavadi bearing.
28. C.J. Fuller, *The Camphor Flame: Popular Hinduism and Society in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. xiii.