

*Pierced by Murugan's Lance: Ritual, Power and Moral Redemption among Malaysian Hindus.* By Elizabeth Fuller Collins. Dekalb: Northern Illinois Press, 1997. 254 pp.

As I see it, Collins' focus on the Thaipusam procession in Penang serves as a platform for raising a number of theoretical and methodological issues that are clearly not novel in their formulation and yet the text is unique in proposing a multitude of ways in which these "old" problematics may be approached. Collins freely and rightfully draws upon sources ranging from psychoanalysis to anthropology to history to political theory to ethnography to make sense of Thaipusam.

First, the text: The book begins with an account of the procession of Thaipusam amongst the Hindu Tamils of Penang, in peninsular Malaysia. The opening chapter also lays out the argument and plan of the book. Through her chosen empirical domain, Collins intends to advance a view of ritual as a "kind of language, a form of symbolic action" (p. 11). Chapter Two provides the mythological and historical contextualization of the festival in the story and history of Muruga, a central deity in the festival of Thaipusam. The sociology of the community that participates in the festival is laid out in Chapter Three, where the internal class, caste, and differences of the Indian Hindu community are detailed. The history of the Penang festival is captured in Chapter Four, where Collins attempts to theorize the changes and continuities in the festival "by seeing events against the background of socio-historical changes in Malaysia and the politics of its Hindu Tamil minority" (p. 13). The shift in the religious consciousness and ritual practices of Penang's Hindu Tamils *vis-à-vis* social-economic and political changes in their day-to-day lives forms the subject of Chapter Five. Shifting frames somewhat, the next chapter attempts to develop a theory of trance from individual narratives and meanings rooted in personal experiences by relating them to the mythology and meaning of "Arul: the trance of Divine Grace". While individual stories are presented and privileged, other kinds of data allow for a socio-political reading of "trance" behaviour or phenomena. This approach allows the author to propose the use of psychological insight in the analysis of trance. Further,

in an attempt to interpret (and not explain) meanings of individual acts of vow fulfilment, Chapter Seven focuses on Tamil folklore in all its complexity. The author presents Tamil legends, myths, and stories that carry narratives of Shiva, Amman, Murugan, and Idumban, as central deities associated with vow fulfilment. According to the argument, these narratives are seen to provide the cultural framework that allows for and generates a range of diverse meanings and interpretations (often conflicting and ambivalent) of vow fulfilment amongst devotees. The concluding chapter is a theoretical chapter. It attempts to provide a framework for making sense of rituals (not just rituals of vow fulfilment), one that will go beyond existing anthropological and psychoanalytic approaches. The approach here is to selectively abstract from the ideas of Tambiah, Wittengenstein, Bourdieu, Asad, and Foucault for a generalized theory of rituals and her argument is persuasive enough.

Undoubtedly, the text is ethnographically rich. The data are fascinating and Collins utilizes different types of data for her analysis: narratives, visual data, textual material, and so forth. The end result is a detailed, graphic, and rich account of the festival, ritual event, and procession of Thaipusam. It is precisely this refusal to label and define simplistically and categorically “what Thaipusam is” that allows for a complex and multi-layered discussion of the subject at hand. Collins is strongest in these areas: documenting the specific ethnography of the event; sharing narratives of her own field experiences and stories from various participants/informants involved with the festival; in contextualizing the festival in the larger sociology and history of Hinduism, specifically of Tamil folk Hinduism, both in Malaysia and in Tamilnadu. In these areas Collins reveals a nuanced awareness of historical and contemporary socio-cultural forces in making sense of the festival. I also support the author’s sophisticated reflections on an age-old methodological dilemma. The value of interpretation in favour of explanation of human social behaviour now does not need to be justified. The question is how does one elicit meanings from individuals, particularly when individual participants are either unable to provide unambiguous answers, or provide conflicting ones. Collins’ own fieldwork experiences clearly demonstrate this, but her sourcing of Tamil legends, folklore, and

Hindu mythology as an aid to interpreting ritual practices is not entirely satisfying.

While my endorsement of the text is mostly positive, there are two related areas that I found problematic. First, the explicit identification of Thaipusam as a peculiarly “Tamil” event. No doubt, the theological and mythological origins of the festival historically locate it both within the ambit of Tamil folk Hinduism and regionally in Tamil lands. Yet, the fact that one is dealing in the case of Malaysia with a migrant Indian population base that is internally diverse, not just *vis-à-vis* class and caste, but also across regional and linguistic lines is surely a factor in the analysis. Also, Malaysia’s multi-culturalism, together with the fact that more and more of the non-Tamil, non-Hindu, non-Indian members of Malaysian society are participating in the festival, gives the present manifestation of the event in Malaysia a rather different flavour and character. In this context, two types of data would have been beneficial: one, the extent to which the non-Tamil, non-Hindu, and non-Indian participate in the festival; two, a discussion of some comparative material from other similar contexts such as Singapore or Mauritius. These, I think, would have allowed the author to embark perhaps on a different kind of theorizing *vis-à-vis* Thaipusam amongst the Indian diaspora. The author’s definition of Thaipusam as a “Tamil” festival, I feel, constrains her analysis. There are numerous instances in the text where a particular individual statement, response, or behaviour is interpreted in terms of the “Tamil” identity of the person, which is not always satisfying and may veil other plausible explanations. Collins herself is aware of the limitations of this position. At several points in the text, she admits that many of the themes that concern Tamil Hindus in Penang may have universal overtones and may reflect “transcultural” human concerns. Yet, the tension between the “Tamil” nature of the festival and its wider possible universal relevance remains unresolved and is not theorized.

Second, unfortunately, in this text Collins opts for a rather textual reading of Thaipusam. In my assessment, she searches and finds a canonical and theological grounding for the festival. While her grasp and interpretation of these textual prescriptions is clearly sound, her reliance

upon these texts to elicit meanings that Thaipusam, the ritual of vow fulfilment and the experience of trance, have for the devotee is ultimately limiting. The individual narratives are interpreted through the frame of what Collins assumes are not just culturally prescribed but also culturally agreed-upon paradigms. Despite her intention to elicit meanings from individual participants, their voices are for the most part muted in the text. The meanings that surface as “superior” and “legitimate” appear to come from this cultural repertoire of Tamil folklore, mythology, and legends, itself enmeshed with aspects of folk and Brahmanical Hinduism, even when individuals themselves do not articulate them as such. Additionally, one does wonder what “other” meanings of ritual vow fulfilment might be in currency given that participants in these ritual events do increasingly come (as we know from other sources) from religiously, culturally, and ethnically diverse backgrounds, and that the festival unfolds in a largely non-Tamil, non-Indian, and non-Hindu environment.

The most powerful quality of this text for me is that it is a superbly crafted piece of ethnography, and yet not merely descriptive; the theorizing is sophisticated, mostly self-reflexive (barring the occasional ethnocentric slip), and it does raise for reflection a number of critical anthropological questions and problematics, even if their mode of resolution is not entirely satisfactory. This text is a much-needed contribution to a field that has in recent years not seen too much scholarly and theoretical engagement. The field is the practice of “Hinduism” in the Indian Hindu diaspora, in Southeast Asia in particular. Beyond that, the text would be of immense interest to any scholar interested in theorizing “rituals”, religious or otherwise. The multi-disciplinary quality of the text propels it outside any narrowly defined disciplinary boundary and I would without hesitation strongly recommend it.

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