

Thaipusam Kavadi – A Festival Helping Hindus in Mauritius Cope with Fear

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Abstract

With Hindus in Mauritius as a case study, this article will show how Thaipusam Kavadi, a festival of piercing and procession of ancient Tamil origin, has become not only a modern expression of religious affiliation in diaspora, but also a way of coping with fear by trying to gain dispensation for possible religious or ethical misconduct in a time and a place where religion has become compartmentalised. To understand this development, the article gives a short introduction to the overall theme of fear, including theoretical considerations as a prism to understand the factors at play. This is followed by an introduction to Hinduism in Mauritius from a general point of view. Then, using a particular case study and participant observations as a point of departure, the article will explore how Thaipusam Kavadi is conducted and what kind of meaning the participants attribute to their participation.

Keywords: fear, piercing rituals, Hinduism, Mauritius, Thaipusam Kavadi

Introduction

Coping with fear, inauspiciousness and misfortune is often part of most lay-oriented Hindu practices and also frequently at the centre of many daily Hindu prayer rituals (*pūjās*) – for instance at the morning and evening *pūjās* at the home altar (*mandir*), where the worship of deities, gurus and forefathers generally also has a protective aspect (Fuller 2004: 224–252, Kumar 2013, Michaels 2017, Rodrigues 2011). This is evident not only in the prayers but also in the offerings; the underlying idea being that if the individual and family are in good standing with the deities, they will be protected against all kinds of inauspiciousness and evil (Falk 2006: 120–122). This is furthermore a key issue in many Hindu folk mythologies, where the emphasis is on the way in which correct conduct and devotion can prevent all kinds of malevolent powers from taking control – for instance demons, restless spirits and evil eyes, as well as angry gods and goddesses who must be given offerings and devotion to make them positively and not negatively inclined (O’Flaherty

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1980). These entities can all be categorised as external powers whose interventions may have a positive or negative impact on the wellbeing of individuals or families.

A more personal reason for fearing what will happen both in this life and in lives to come is the failure to live up to your *śva dharma* (personal *dharma* related to social position, class, age and gender) or the dharmic rules in general for being a good Hindu. In this respect, fear is connected to the theory of karma and, unlike the fear of supernatural powers mentioned above, has a wider scope because it has an impact both on life tomorrow and on future lives to come (Flood 1996: 58–67). These two perspectives are regarded as being interconnected and are just two different ways of living up to a dharmic-determined orthopraxis (“right practice”) – a keyword within the Hindu tradition that has both ritual and ethical implications (Flood 1996: 12–14). As Lipner notes, this can be seen in the Sanskrit language: the word *pāpa*, often translated as “evil” or “bad” can refer to natural evil or moral evil or to both simultaneously, while its opposition *punya* means both “merit” and being “ritually pure” (Lipner 2010: 244–245). As defined by Axel Michaels, *dharma* is life ritualised according to norms and rules (Michaels 2004: 16). This means that it can be difficult to differentiate between the ritualistic and the ethical aspects of a Hinduistic self-understanding, leading Michaels to suggest the concept of “identificatory habitus” as a key notion for the Hindu tradition – with habitus (“what is done”) being closely intertwined with *dharma* (“what to do”).

In this article, using Hindus in Mauritius as my case study,¹ I will show how identificatory habitus is subject to negotiation and how it is adjusted to suit a modern and in many ways secularised society and lifestyle also when it comes to coping with fear. This does not mean that strong signifiers of “being a good Hindu” have disappeared. Instead, they have become rationalised, compartmentalised and more individualised. Moreover, they have become more concentrated or condensed and are therefore much stronger in their expression on special occasions, even though they are almost absent in daily life. This is in line with Yves Lamberts’s understanding of religion in modernity, where religion does not disappear but is given new forms in light of a secularised society (Lamberts 1999). This is especially due to the fact that religion is a provider of meaning, but at the same time also a provider of a ritual-toolbox with instruments for coping with meaningless and with irrational feelings of fear.

1 The article is based on fieldwork done in Mauritius in the spring of 2010, again in the spring and autumn of 2016 and in the spring of 2017. The timespan between the first and the other visits has made it possible to identify possible changes internally within a certain group of Hindus, between different Hindu groups, and with regard to the formation of Hinduism as such in Mauritius, as well as changes in society at large. The fieldwork consisted of archive and text studies, participant observations and semi-structured interviews with leaders of both the different cultural organisations and board members of different temples, priests and laymen alike.

One of the strongest expressions of belief and affiliation, which involves coping with fear among Mauritian Hindus in particular, is *Thaipusam Kavadi*. This is a ten-day Tamil Hindu festival comprising fasting, piercings and processions that today, alongside *Mahāśivrātri*, is celebrated by many of the Hindus on Mauritius, regardless of their ethnolinguistic affiliation.² The strong commitment, the difficulty of participation and the strong focus on the individual's painful "offering" of his or her body seem to have particular appeal. The body becomes a central communicative tool and a performative expression intended to demonstrate the sincere religious affiliation of the individual in relation to other people and to God.³ But as will be shown in this article, the body is also a channel or tool for coping with fear. As emphasised by the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty "the body is our general medium for having a world" (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 146), meaning that we cannot perceive the world without taking the body as lived materiality into account as well. This is furthermore underlined by Thomas Csordas (1994), who understands the phenomenological approach to rituals as an important contribution to other approaches that primarily understand ritual as a cultural inscription. Inspired by Roland Barthes (1986), who makes a distinction between "the work" as a material object and "the text" that is experienced as activity and production, Csordas makes a distinction between "text" and "textuality". He juxtaposes this division onto the "body" as a biological material entity and "embodiment" defined as perceptual experience and engagement in the world (Csordas 1994: 12).

This is an important juxtaposition because, in my view, it underlines how the body not only acts according to something else (the cognitive system, the common shared ritual), but is engaged or takes part in the world in such a way that it becomes a bearer of meaning. As I have shown in another article in relation to *Mahāśivrātri*, the individual dedication of one's body is well suited to a modern performativity (Fibiger 2018). Moreover, especially painful and exhausting rituals seem to promote not only psychological relief, but also a stronger identification with the group as well as an increase in social cohesion within the community (Xygalatas et al. 2013, Fischer / Xygalatas 2014, Geertz / Klocová 2019).

When it comes to the definition of fear, I take as my point of departure the Oxford Living Dictionaries, which define fear as a diffuse feeling or state of

2 The linguistic anthropologist Patrick Eisenlohr (2006) uses this concept to describe how Hindus in Mauritius use language to divide themselves and their various affiliations to different places in India. See also Varma (2008).

3 Roy Rappaport (1979: 177f.) calls these two forms either auto-communication (communication to the person himself/herself) or allo-communication (communication to a god or to the group to which individuals feel they belong).

mind caused by the belief that someone or something is dangerous and likely to cause pain or be a threat.⁴

The Danish philosopher and existentialist Søren Kierkegaard, in his 1844 book *Om Begrebet Angest* (“On the Notion of Anxiety”), compares fear and anxiety. As summed up by K. Brian Söderquist in *A Companion to Kierkegaard*: “When fear has an object, a fear of something definite, anxiety is disturbed by the indefinite. [...] This means that the thing that is threatening is nowhere and therefore also everywhere” (Söderquist 2007: 88–89). This is an important contribution to the understanding of how a ritual becomes a recognisable strategy for coping with anxiety. While theologies and mythologies might explain the what and why of fear and the reason for fear, rituals help to cope with both fear and anxiety – both as a reparatory mechanism for misconduct (fear) and as a preventative mechanism to avoid potential misfortune (anxiety). Nonetheless, as noted by Axel Michaels and Christoph Wulf in the introduction to their book on emotions in rituals, while the feeling of fear is one of the basic emotions and despite the existence of a vast literature on emotions and religion, detailed studies on ritual and emotion remain scarce (Michaels / Wulf 2012: 1–28). This is also the case when it comes to the inter-relatedness between emotions, rituals and text, especially the way in which the body and bodily actions, as embodied ritualisation, play a role in the mind or the cognitive system. This is understood as embodied cognition, where the interaction between bodily actions and human cognition and meaning-making is emphasised (Geertz / Klocová 2019). In relation to fear, the engagement of the body or the making of a bodily sacrifice can have a crucial impact on mental and emotional states of mind, particularly when the ritual is rooted in a collective memory that can include history, places and institutions as well as texts (Assman 2006, Legér 1999).

Because Thaipusam Kavadi is rooted in an archaic myth from Tamil Nadu, with a connected ritual describing how sincere devotion can lead to resurrection as well as the relief from fear, this ritual becomes of particular interest for the investigation of the relation between a strongly physical ritual and the mental feeling of relief. As one of my informants described it:

Twice a day I do *pūjā* in the house and I also go to the temple to make offerings to the deities there. This is fine and we believe the deities help us on a daily basis. But when something more comes our way, such as illnesses in our family or other problems, even problems we fear can occur in the future, we feel the need to do something more. Here Thaipusam Kavadi comes in. On this occasion once a year, we can show our sincere wish to change our destiny by offering our bodies. My husband did it once when his sister was really sick. Now we all do it – mostly to prevent anything evil from happening. This is a kind of religious insurance [laughing] (Tamil-Mauritian woman, 52 years of age, Quatre Bornes, Mauritius, February 2017).

4 “Fear: An unpleasant emotion caused by the belief that someone or something is dangerous, likely to cause pain, or a threat” (Oxford Living Dictionaries 2018).

If this ritual is inscribed in Robert Bellah's grand theory on religion in human evolution⁵, it can be seen as an interesting kind of evolutionary looping, with parts of archaic forms⁶ of religiosity being revitalised and inscribed in a modern way of coping with fear. And as recognised by Robert Bellah, cultural and religious elements are not only "never lost" – the whole of human cultural and religious history is still with us (Bellah / Tipton 2006: 4). In other words, it seems as if some part of an archaic form of Hinduism, in particular the offering of the body and the display of religion, goes hand in hand with a modern and compartmentalised form of religion among Hindus in Mauritius (Fibiger 2018).

Hinduism in Mauritius – a historical and contemporary overview

Hinduism is now the largest religion in Mauritius, with over 670,000 adherents, representing approximately 51.9% of the total 1.3 million population of the country.⁷ This not only makes Mauritius the country with the highest percentage of Hindus in Africa and the third highest percentage of Hindus in the world after Nepal and India, but furthermore makes it the only country in the world in which a Hindu diaspora constitutes the majority. This is important for the role and position of Hinduism in Mauritian society and has a great impact on religiosity as such in the country.

Indians have a long history in Mauritius, and the Mauritian Hindus of today are at least fourth- or fifth-generation Indian immigrants. After the abolition of slavery in 1835,⁸ a severe shortage of cheap labour in British planta-

5 Robert Bellah's evolutionary scheme was introduced in an article entitled "Religious Evolution" in 1964 and further discussed and developed throughout his work – but especially in his book *Religion in Human Evolution* (2011), in which he focuses primarily on the development from the Palaeolithic to the Axial Age. What is of particular interest in relation to this article is his typologisation of archaic religions, the Axial Age and modern religion. While his article from 1964 has been criticised by many scholars, his book on human evolution inscribes cultural evolution in a new scheme, which can be very useful for analysis.

6 Robert Bellah changed his first category from primitive religion to tribal religion. This category describes cultures with no complex priestly structures and with an emphasis on local myths and rituals.

7 Approximately 31.4% of Mauritians are regarded as Christians, 15.3% as Muslims and around 1.5% as others, including Chinese Buddhists (see World Population Review 2018). The figures according to the 2011 census carried out by Statistics Mauritius (2018: 68) show slightly different figures: Hindu 48.5%, Roman Catholic 26.3%, Muslim 17.3%, other Christian 6.4%, other 0.6%, none 0.7%, unspecified 0.1%. It is important to note that about 70% of the total population of Mauritius is regarded as having an Indian origin (Eisenlohr 2006), and that many Mauritians today have a secularised relationship with their religion.

8 In 1833 an abolition law was passed, but it was not implemented until 1835. Mauritius has a long colonial history. The island was discovered and occupied by the Portuguese from around 1507 (1510), followed slowly by the Dutch, who settled on the island in 1598 and named it Mauritius after Prince Maurice of Nassau. Among other things, the Dutch introduced sugarcane and the Java deer before leaving in 1710, moving on to settle in South Africa. About five years later, in 1715, the French occupied the island, renaming it "Isle de France". In 1810, the British conquered the island. Most of the French settlers remained on the island and were allowed to keep their customs, religion and laws. Mauritius achieved independence on

tion colonies – especially in the sugarcane fields – led to the systematic shipment of a large number of indentured Indian labourers to the island, both men and women, particularly from the ports of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras (known today as Kolkata, Mumbai and Chennai). The first ships carrying labourers from India left in 1836, but the traffic grew during the 1840s (Northrup 1995: 62–67, Younger 2009). These indentured labourers came from several regions in India, but especially from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Bengal, Maharashtra, Gujarat and Tamil Nadu. They spoke Marathi, Bengali, Gujarati, Telegu and Tamil, but those who spoke Bhojpuri, comprising both Hindus and Muslims, were the majority at that time.

Today Mauritians with an Indian origin still draw distinctions among themselves depending on the language spoken at home,⁹ which indicates a particular ethnic and cultural affiliation to India. This is despite the fact that many of my informants do not know exactly where in India their family originates. At the same time the Hindu elite, in particular, as well as different Hindu organisations, such as Arya Samaj, jointly promote religious reform as well as the revival of some kind of common shared “Indianness”, which differentiates the Indians in Mauritius from the Creoles (Claveyrolas 2017). Such tensions between unity and difference are core issues with regard to Hinduism in present-day Mauritius.

This preservation of difference is evident in the different names for the temples – a *mandir* or a *shivāla* temple for the Hindi-speaking group, a *maṇḍiram* temple for the Telugu-speaking people and a *kōyil* temple for the Tamil-speaking Hindus – as well as being visible in the temple architecture and in the shape and material used for statues or representations of the deities (*mūrtis*). The temples also have different deities as the centre of their devotion. Viṣṇu, Kṛṣṇa, Rāma and their respective spouses as well as Hanumān are the most popular deities among Hindus who speak Hindi/Marathi and Telugu, while Murugan (the Tamil name for Śiva’s second son Skanda or Kārtikkēya) is one of the most popular deities among the Tamils, alongside Śiva and his spouse Pārvatī, as well as Kālī and Durga and the elephant-headed deity Gaṇeśa. The other deities have almost equal importance among all the Mauritian Hindus, a status also enjoyed by Murugan, as the popularity of the Thaipusam Kavadi festival indicates.

However, tendencies toward unity have become noticeable within the last couple of years, during which many of the temples as well as previously local, shared festivals have become a shared reservoir for many of the Hindus in

12 March 1968 and adopted a constitution based on the British parliamentary system. Mauritius changed its status to that of a republic on 12 March 1992 (Varma 2008).

9 Today the main distinction is among groups who speak Hindi/Marathi, Tamil and Telegu, all of whom have different cultural associations and religious organisations that try to preserve and continue local religious festivals as well as the local Indian language (Eisenlohr 2006, Eriksen 1992). The Indian language spoken at home as a second language is still important as an identity marker and is taught in schools.

Mauritius. Not only do they visit each other's temples, but they also celebrate or participate in locally anchored festivals or synthesise and combine different local expressions of a given festival, giving it a new Mauritian form to which all the Hindus in Mauritius can relate. So while the different Hindu subgroups have managed to preserve some of their distinctiveness in their temples, as sites of memory (Trouillet 2012, Claveyrolas 2015), there is also an emerging culture of Hindu ecumenism characterised by a sharing of rituals (Rambachan / Shukla 2016). In particular, festivals have become not only the focal point of a shared form of Mauritian Hinduism, but a shared expression of Hinduism in the public space that differentiates them from other ethnic groups on the island.

The procession as a religious and cultural expression seems also particularly suited to a modern compartmentalised, individualised, condensed and concentrated form of Hinduism. In contrast to the temple ritual (*pūjā*), which is primarily orchestrated by the priests (*pūjāris*) and has the devotees as secondary participants, a procession allows individuals to be the centre of participation – for example by wearing particular clothes or behaving in a particular way, such as by going into a trance, carrying altars, playing the drums or a boom box, performing ascetic actions such as piercings or walking barefoot, singing religious songs or mourning. In other words, there has been a shift of authority from the priest and the religious institution to the individual and the public space. This observation is supported by the president of the Kailasnath temple in Bambous: “While participation in temple worship is decreasing, especially among the young people, the participation in the religious processions is increasing and is growing every year” (interviewed in the Kailasnath Mandir in Bambous, March 2017). And his answer to the question of why young people in particular choose to participate in the processions and seldom visit the temples is clear, emphasising that the individual is at the centre but that there are also social benefits:

It is a kind of showing off – especially for the young men. They pierce themselves, or they carry very heavy *kanwards*¹⁰ to show potential wives and their families that, despite the fact that they live secular, not very devoted lives, drinking beer, eating meat and so on, they are Hindus. [...] Many of them participate to get rid of bad karma as well, but I think it is kind of the same. (interview with the president of the Kailasnath temple in Bambous, Mauritius, March 2017)

This has had an impact on worshipping patterns within the last ten years or so, with processions becoming a crucial part of an increasing number of Hin-

10 The altars they carry are called *kanward* when they are connected to the Mahāśivrātri festival and *kavadī* when they are connected to the Thaipusam festival.

du festivals in Mauritius.¹¹ The procession seems to be the meeting place both for the different generations and for all the different Hindu groups (Fibiger 2018).

The mythological legitimation of Thaipusam Kavadi

The overall ritualistic pattern for Thaipusam Kavadi is found in a myth, the so called Idumban myth. There are of course different versions of the Idumban myth, and many of the participants in the Thaipusam Kavadi ritual in contemporary Mauritius do not know the whole story. They just know about its existence, and perhaps some bits and pieces of the story. The main point is that the myth exists, thereby not only legitimising the ritual but also relating it to a common shared devotional tradition with links extending back to India.

The following is a general summary of the main aspects of the myth. While the original version is found in the Skanda Purāṇa, slightly different versions can be found on the web, in various temple pamphlets and among families. But the main message in all these versions is the same. The piercing is a symbolic death or bodily offering that will purify the person; and the carrying of the *kavadi* (altar) is a strong marker of devotion, in the hope that one's wishes will be granted by the deity.

The main figure in the myth is Idumban, whose name means "arrogant". He is a bandit and a disciple of a guru known as Agathiyar, but also a devotee of Śiva and his family, not least Murugan. To test Idumban's loyalty, Agathiyar tells him to go to the mountains and bring back two summits. He is told to attach the summits to a *kavadi*, a yoke used to carry loads. Idumban, who was faithful and obedient to his guru, departed, accompanied by his wife. He did as he was told. He went to the mountains and firmly tied the two peaks to his *kavadi* before turning back. But on the way home, Murugan wanted to test him even further, so he changed himself into a little boy and hid on one of the peaks to increase its weight. Idumban soon discovered him, and (unable to recognise his God in disguise) started fighting the little boy. In the fight Murugan pierced Idumban with his spear (*vel*) and killed him. However, Idumban's wife recognised Murugan and returned to Agathiyar and told him what had happened. Agathiyar, Idumban's wife and many other followers of Agathiyar prayed to Murugan and asked for Idumban's resurrection. Finally, Murugan heard their prayers and resurrected the dead man. To show their gratefulness and devotion, they all decided to carry the *kavadi* to the temple of Murugan.

11 Some of the most important processions apart from marriage and cremation processions and Mahāśivratrī are held during Gaṇeśa Chaturthī, Navrātrī with Dusshera, Themethee and Kavadi. Additionally, there are numerous locally based processions.

There are many symbolic references to this myth in *Thaipusam Kavadi*, which usually takes place on the day of the full moon in the month of Tai/Thai (January or February) corresponding to *Māgha* in the Hindu calendar. But the meaning invested in these symbols varies from one person to the next. What seems to be of greatest importance is that the symbols are present, thereby supporting and legitimising the rituals to which they are related. But they also signal to the outside and to the individuals involved that they are related to a specific tradition that again is inscribed in specific symbolic coded rituals. For instance, the beginning and end of the ten-day festival are marked in the Tamil temples¹² by the raising and lowering of a flag (*kodi*) decorated with the *vel* that killed Idumban, and a peacock, the vehicle of Murugan. The raising of the *kodi* indicates the beginning of ten days of ascetic living and fasting. This is not a total fast but a time when the devotees avoid eating meat, fish and all foods containing milk products. Furthermore they refrain from sexual intercourse, avoid eating outside their homes and sleep either on the floor or on beds of nails. In this way the devotees are said to purify themselves both physically and mentally, and are encouraged to dispel hate, passion, arrogance and envy – important dharmic regulations. A holy thread is also tied around the wrists of the devotees as a sign or token of their commitment and obedience. During the fast, some devotees visit the temple every day to pray and sing devotional hymns as well as making offerings to Murugan such as coconuts, fruit, milk and saffron water. Most of the devotees will pray either at home or at small get-togethers with their neighbours.

A few days before the big *kavadi* procession, Murugan is taken out of the temple as a tutelary deity to visit and bless the neighbourhood. This is called *urvalam*, or “visiting the neighbourhood”, which is a familiar event in India and part of other festivals as well. It is very popular because it gives devotees the opportunity to make offerings to the deity and have their houses blessed and protected from the intrusion of evil powers. *Urvalam* ends with a shared meal in the local temple. The day before the *kavadi* procession it is time to make the *kavadis*. The framework is mostly made out of bamboo and timber, and these days it is 2–3 metres in height, weighing more than 50 kilos. These are then nicely decorated with artificial coconut trees, peacock feathers, flowers, limes and sparkling cloth – as well as with miniature icons mostly of Murugan, but today also of other deities, reflecting the individuality of religion and giving each *kavadi* a personal touch. As expressed by one of my informants:

Hanumān has always helped me and my family. He is standing in front of our house and he has protected us all for anything evil. For me it is natural that he will be in my

12 Despite the fact that these rituals only take place in Tamil temples or *kōyils*, Hindus with other ethno-linguistic backgrounds attend them. I even met some Hindi-speaking Hindus in a Tamil *kōyil*, who preferred coming to Tamil temples because they enjoyed the pleasant and precise conduct of the *pūjās* there.

mind when doing the *kavadī*, and together with Murugan he will be the one I will give my thanks, but also send my prayer for his blessing for the future to come. (interview with Hindi-Mauritian man, 47 years, Bambous, Mauritius, February 2017)

This man, who belongs to the Hindi-speaking Hindu majority, has performed the Thaipusam Kavadī for the last five years, and says that he will continue to do it every year as long as he is physically able to do so. He told me how participation had changed his life. Not only does he regard himself as a better person, following more of the dharmic precepts, but his new company (the old one went bankrupt) has done well ever since.

The shape and size of the *kavadīs* have been increasing during the last ten years, and the choice of which deity or deities to carry has furthermore become more individual. In particular, this choice of deity reflects the extent to which the ritual follows the myth or is gaining its own expression. This may be one of the reasons why Thaipusam Kavadī now appeals to an increasingly broad audience in Mauritius, including modernised, secularised or compartmentalised Hindus.

Danielle Hervieu-Léger (1999, 2000) takes up the debate about secularisation and religion; but unlike many other scholars she underlines that modernity both undermines religion and creates a “need” for it as the storage place for culturally shared memory or a chain of memory linking a particular group to a presumed common past and projected future. By suggesting that religion should be “a particular modality of the organisation of and function of the act of believing” (ibid. 1999: 87), she focuses not on the substantive elements or functions of religion, but on the action or practice of religion.¹³ This allows different interpretations of how and why a group as well as individuals act. At the same time, because this acting is concentrated on this special occasion, the expression of commitment increases. That may explain why the *kavadīs* are getting bigger and heavier, but also why the participants invest such great efforts in the performance or the act itself. As expressed by one of my informants:

Usually I don't consider myself a strong Hindu devotee. I don't go to the temple much during the year. I eat all kinds of food – meat as well – and I drink alcohol, sometimes too much. But when I do the Thaipusam Kavadī, something happens to me. I feel a kind of ... closeness to God, but also to my family and friends, because we are fasting together. It is a kind of relief to do the Thaipusam Kavadī. I guess that is why I do it year after year. I am kind of addicted, you could say. (interview with Tamil-Mauritian man, 22 years, Quatre Bornes, Mauritius, February, 2017)

This is just what Bastian et al. have observed, namely that the experience of pain and stress alters body chemistry, thus playing an important role in allevi-

13 This is similar to Rappaport (1979, 1999), who wants to find the “obvious aspects” of ritual. He does not reject the functions of rituals, but his overall aim is to determine what is particular to a ritual itself in the sense that it cannot be replaced by something else.

ating guilt (Bastian et al. 2011). And when it comes to Hindu ethics, this can be understood as a cleansing from bad karma, thereby relieving the person's psychological anxiety about what the future will bring.

It is difficult to put an exact number on how many people actually participate in Thaipusam Kavadī. I have been given estimates of 5,000 up to 100,000 people,¹⁴ which can either include or exclude the many people who participate in the procession without being pierced. The fact is that the number of people who get pierced has been increasing over the last 10 years.

Thaipusam Kavadī in February 2017

It is early morning. The sun is slowly rising on the horizon, and I am sitting in a car with some of the members of the Ramasamy¹⁵ family. We are on the way to the riverbank close to Rose Hill in Mauritius, the starting point for some of the Thaipusam Kavadī processions on the island.¹⁶ It is here that the piercing of cheeks and tongues is taking place. We are following a van with beautifully decorated *kavadīs* on its hatch – one for each member of the family who will participate in this year's Thaipusam Kavadī. Today is the culmination of a ten-day period of mental and physical preparation. Most members of the family have been fasting, and they have performed daily *pūjās* directed at the god Murugan. Like many other Tamil Hindus, they understand their relationship to him as the pivot of Thaipusam Kavadī and believe that the outcome of this relationship will have a crucial impact on the year to come, as well as serving as a sign of forgiveness for their failure to fulfil the dharmic precepts. They primarily understand Thaipusam Kavadī as a purifying ritual destroying bad karma, which will furthermore have an impact on Mr Ramasamy's real-estate company.

We are sitting quietly in the car. The mood is a bit tense or ambiguous and loaded with a combination of expectations, anxiety and fear. Most of the family members in the car know what to expect, because they do the Thaipusam Kavadī year after year. Each of them sits with a box on their lap containing Murugan's spears (*vels*): a big one to pierce their cheeks,¹⁷ and a smaller one to pierce their tongues. Mr Ramasamy is also holding his hobnail shoes, which

14 These are estimates I have collected from the religious organisations Tamil Sangam and Hindu Swamysevak Sangh. There are no official figures.

15 This is an invented name to secure anonymity.

16 There are many other starting/piercing points around the island. Most of them are situated close to water or at a neighbouring temple or ashram near a Tamil temple – the destination of the procession – that has either Murugan as its central deity or at least an altar and a *mūrti* representing him.

17 In the last few years the *vel* for piercing the cheeks has in general grown longer and longer – up to more than one metre. In 2016 this tendency led the government to ban *vels* longer than 40 cm, but the ban has had little impact. Many people still use *vels* that are much longer than this.

he will be wearing during the procession, as well as a large number of small hooks with lime fruits that he will use to decorate most of his body. His hobnail shoes and *vels* stand in his home altar all year long to remind him of the importance of being humble. This humility may be difficult to maintain when you have three cars in the garage, a very big house with all the latest equipment, and a bar stocked with whisky and other sorts of liquor to offer guests after a good meal or a business meeting.

This morning at around four o'clock, he and his family did a special *pūjā* with the hobnail shoes and Murugan's *vel* at the centre of the devotion. The symbolism is clear. Mr Ramasamy shows Murugan his intention to offer his body, while asking Murugan for protection so he will not feel any pain when he is pierced. In addition, the *kavadīs* that will be carried on their shoulders during the procession have been consecrated outside the house by *ārtī*, an offering of fire, and blessed by the oldest member of the family, so that they will be bearable.

We are now reaching the riverbank, the place for the piercings and the starting point for a lot of groups whose processions will end at various temples. It is a beautiful scene with the sun rising in the background and with thousands of decorated *kavadīs* and people dressed in fuchsia-coloured garments, a colour related to the festival. Most of the men are stripped to the waist, and some have smeared their forehead, shoulders, back and chest with sacred ashes. There is a lot of activity at the riverbank. Some people are purifying themselves in the river and are getting help to decorate their bodies with small hooks and spears; others are decorating their *kavadī* or doing a short *pūjā* in front of it. Others again are standing around their *pūjāri* (priest), who is consecrating litres of milk that will be distributed to all the participants in the procession later. The milk will be poured into small brass pots that are covered with a piece of cloth before being tied onto the *kavadīs*. These pots of milk are related to the myth and symbolise the two mountain peaks that Idumban carried to his guru as an offering. In the same way, the devotees will carry the pots of milk to the temple as an offering for Murugan. If the milk becomes sour on the way, it is read as a sign that Murugan will not purify the devotee or listen to his or her prayers.

Then it is time for the piercings. Special piercing experts, who can be priests but also high-caste Brahmins, offer their expertise to the waiting people. One by one the participants, who are becoming pilgrims now, are pierced: first through their cheeks and then through their tongue, symbolising the importance of being silent during the procession. The idea is that from this moment on, until they have offered their milk to Murugan, they must concentrate or meditate on the deity.¹⁸ While the piercings are taking place, family members

18 The participants who choose not to have any piercings usually tie a scarf around their mouth as a vow of silence, meditation and devotion while walking in the procession. They will also carry a pot of milk on top of their head.

sing hymns to Murugan, and the piercer utters mantras. It is believed that the individual concerned will then be protected by the deity and will not feel any pain. The scene as I experienced it did not entirely conform to this ideal. I did hear a lot of screaming and crying, especially from the women and children. But coping with the pain is part of the ritual, signalling that the deity is well disposed towards the person concerned and is therefore reducing the pain. Or as mentioned by some of my informants: the pain can also be understood as a constructive pain, either by channelling or overruling a psychological pain or by reducing anxiety.

When I felt the pain, I felt in some way released from all my sorrows. I felt like the *vel* was puncturing my depression and my fear of what will happen to my children. It is difficult to explain, I was just crying and praying, not because of the pain but because of the relief I felt. (interview with a Tamil woman, 42 years, Rose Hill, Mauritius, February 2017, just after the *Thaipusam Kavadi*)

The procession now begins to move forward to the rhythm of religious songs coming from loudspeakers installed on top of a vehicle. This vehicle accompanies the head of the procession, who carries a stick or sceptre as a symbol of authority, and sometimes he carries the statue of Lord Murugan unless this statue is placed on a cart specially made for this purpose. If so, *pūjāris* from the temple towards which the procession is heading will sit on the cart and receive trays with offerings to the consecrated statue (*mūrti*), just as in any other *urvalam* ritual in which the deity visits and blesses the neighbourhood. People from the neighbourhood who are not participating in the procession will offer drinks to the pilgrims or water the road to cool it down.

The procession takes 2–4 hours, depending on the destination. There are a lot of dramatic situations on the way, with some pilgrims (mostly women) dancing in a trance, and others crying or shouting the name of Murugan or any other deity out loud. Quite a few people walk alongside the pilgrims, functioning as helpers. Some of the pilgrims need help in carrying their heavy *kavadīs* or need something to drink; but most of all they need psychological support, which their helpers can provide by singing hymns constantly. When the pilgrims reach the temple, they will first circumambulate the deities in *parikrama*.¹⁹ Then their piercings are removed, before they offer the milk. This will happen with the help of the *pūjāris*, who will pour the milk over the *mūrti* of Murugan.

The pilgrimage procession is now finished, and I find Mr Ramasamy sitting on a chair – tired but happy and (most of all) relieved. He is surrounded by his family, some of whom have done the pilgrimage with him, and others who have helped them along the way. The atmosphere in the temple is very special

¹⁹ *Parikrama* or *pradakṣiṇā* refers to the circumambulation of sacred places. *Parikrama* means “the path surrounding something”, and is also known as *pradakṣiṇā* (“to the right”), because people circumambulate anti-clockwise around the altars and *mūrtis* in the temple.

and can best be described as a combination of being unrestrained but solemn. Children are playing around, some being given *prasāda* (a blessed meal), while others are sitting in front of the *mūrti* of Murugan chanting and praying. Mr Ramasamy greets me and points proudly towards his 10-year-old son, who has now done Thaipusam Kavadī for the second time. Then he shows me an email that he had sent to his employees the previous day. In this email he emphasised that all the needles and hooks with which he was going to pierce his body were intended for the wellbeing of all his employees and the prosperity of the company in the year ahead. There is nothing to fear, neither for himself nor his family and his company, he expresses.

Conclusion

During my fieldwork interviews I was given several explanations of the reasons why pilgrims perform a Thaipusam Kavadī. From my point of view all the explanations are either explicitly or implicitly related to reducing fear in its widest sense. Some interviewees emphasised social and cultural factors, with the ritual being a way of showing that you are part of the Mauritian Hindu community. Thus the person involved will not be excluded from the Hindu community, which also is something to fear. This is especially emphasised among young, single and in many aspects secularised Hindu males, who, by taking part in the ritual, express their sincere wish to be good Hindus despite the fact that they do not show it on a daily basis. The ritual is thus obviously a display of religion (Jacobsen 2008). At the same time it is a way of maintaining and remembering a shared tradition that has its roots in India and that has served for centuries as a protective strategy. This explanation underlines the fact that the ritual involves the negotiation of identificatory habitus, but also that the piercing ritual and the related interpretations of the activated emotions of anxiety and relief are culturally and socially inscribed states (Geertz / Klocová 2019). In other words, the interpretation of but also the participation in Thaipusam Kavadī are examples of the adaptation of the identificatory habitus to a new setting, in relation both to place but also to space, without losing its significance. Others emphasise ethical (dharmic) reasons for participation. It serves not only as a strong reminder that one should be living an ethical and moral life, but moreover as a way that the participant can either make up for not having lived up to his or her *śvadharmā* (personal dharma) or punish him- or herself in order to make a fresh start. This can be understood as a nullification of dharmic misconduct and therefore a relief from fear.

Many people regard the ritual as a vow given to Murugan (or, more recently, also other deities) in return for a wish that has been fulfilled, or as a way of

keeping up a good relationship with the deity, and not least as a way of securing his ongoing protection in all aspects of life. In this way, the ritual relieves fear and anxiety because the deity is thought to be with you at all times. These reasons for the ritual can be categorised as a kind of religious pragmatism.

Most people perceive the piercing of the body as a sacrifice as well as a purifying ritual. The ten days of ascetic living, coupled with the personal, painful offering of the body and the exhausting procession, do not amount merely to a strong, concentrated expression of devotion. They are perceived, in addition, as purifying the individuals in question as well as the whole community, thereby removing bad karma. In this way, the pain becomes a constructive pain that relieves the person and the community not only here and now, but also in the future to come.

Despite the fact that it is the participation in and performance of the ritual itself that is emphasised by my informants as the most important element, the myth, which legitimises the ritual, still plays an important role. First of all, the relationship between Idumban (the devotee) and Murugan (the deity), as well as the offering that Idumban made, and his death at the hand of Murugan is mentioned as relieving fear. First of all, as a former thief, Idumban incarnates a person who is himself ethically and morally “unclean”, but becomes purified by his own sacrifice and by Murugan’s *vel*. This shows how anyone, by showing one’s devotion and sacrificing one’s own body, can be purified and thereby prevent any evil (both moral evil and also physical evil, such as sickness or bad business) in the future. Secondly, in the myth, the acts of Murugan show his ability to take action. He both kills Idumban and later has the power to resurrect him. In other words, he has the power over life and death and in that way, the ritual can also be understood as a way of dealing with death – symbolising everything that is evil or negative. In other words: the participation in the ritual seems to be not so much a coping strategy in the event of death, but more of a preventative strategy against death or – more broadly understood – against all kinds of failure to thrive in the family. Moreover, as mentioned in the theoretical introduction to the theme: when a psychological and indefinite feeling of anxiety or fear can become finite, by relating it either to a specific explanation, namely the myth, or to the misconduct of identificatory habitus, it can be coped with accordingly. And while theologies and mythologies might explain the what and why of a fear and the reason for that fear, rituals can help to cope with fear – both as a reparatory mechanism for misconduct and as a preventative mechanism to avoid potential misfortune. At least until participation in the next Thaipusam Kavadi.

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