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*‘The Old Gods Are Losing Power!’:
Theologies of power and rituals of
productivity in a Tamil Nadu village**

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Abstract

Some Hindus are killing animals in larger numbers, more regularly, and in more spectacular fashions than they have ever done before. In contradiction of the ethnographic record asserting the diminishing significance of ritual killing since the nineteenth century, sacrifices to tutelary deities that had long been abandoned are being reactivated or enacted for the first time. However, such a counter-intuitive surge in the popularity of sacrifices is occurring at a time when the very deities to whom they are dedicated are apparently losing their potency. This seeming paradox, this article proposes, is an implication of both the entrenchment of electoral democracy and the material transformations accompanying economic liberalization in rural Tamil Nadu. In an electoral democracy, the political significance of tutelary deities—and consequently their charisma—has diminished. Their productive valence however, as exemplified in ritual sacrifices, has become ever more resonant in India’s post-liberalization milieu, with its heightened sense of opportunity but also competitiveness and uncertainty.

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Introduction

In Vaduvur, a village of about 13,400 people in the fertile Kaveri Delta of central Tamil Nadu, animal sacrifices are acquiring renewed resonance and a new impetus. Here, the 'old gods'—the forceful lineage and village tutelary deities—have not been reformed into accepting exclusively non-sacrificial, vegetarian worship. Nor have recalcitrant gods that insist on sacrifice been totally abandoned. Indeed, tutelary deities that had been neglected for many generations are once again being propitiated. At the same time, scepticism about the presence and potency of the old gods in the contemporary milieu is increasingly being expressed. These doubts are verbalized largely by the traditional political elite, the headmen. Even among ordinary villagers, there is a definite insouciance towards the observations of the once rigid taboos surrounding the tutelary cult. But what there is no equivocation at all about is the efficacy of sacrifice itself as a medium to acknowledge and express the lineage's kinship with its tutelary deity. Sacrificial worship is being enacted more regularly than in the remembered past. More animals are being killed today than ever before. The scale and spectacle of the sacrificial ceremonies have become ever more extravagant. It appears that sacrifice has actually assumed an increased relevance in contemporary Vaduvur.

This situation is in direct contrast to the general trend throughout India in which blood sacrifices have been on the wane.¹ Reformist campaigns and devotionalist movements emphasizing non-violence have brought about an antipathy to ritual killing. This has resulted in laws banning animal sacrifices in several Indian states, including Tamil Nadu, since the 1950s. Many devotees themselves have also forsaken sacrificial worship as they emulate the more prestigious and pacific practices of groups ranked higher in the caste hierarchy.² Consequently, not only the incidence but also the scale and spectacle

¹ Srinivas, M. N. (1965). *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India*, Bombay, India: Asia Publishing House, pp. 182, 194; Pocock, D. F. (1973). *Mind, Body and Wealth: A Study of Belief and Practice in an Indian Village*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, p. 94; Fuller, C. J. (2004). *The Camphor Flame: Popular Hinduism and Society in India*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 99–103; Nabokov, I. (2000). *Religion Against the Self: An Ethnography of Tamil Rituals*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 153.

² 'Sanskritisation' in Srinivas, *Religion and Society*; Srinivas, M. N. (1966). *Social Change in Modern India*, Berkeley: University of California Press. For a description of the effects of Sanskritization in central Tamil Nadu, see Beteille, A. (1971). *Caste, Class and Power: Changing Patterns of Stratification in a Tanjore Village*, Berkeley: University of California Press; Gough, K. E. (1981). *Rural Society in Southeast India*, Cambridge:

of sacrificial worship—in terms of the numbers of animals killed—have been declining. Deities that once demanded animal sacrifices have been reformed into either accepting live animals (which are then released without being killed) or, more often, suitable vegetable substitutes. If they proved recalcitrant, some deities themselves have been abandoned. These developments are consistent with anthropological theorizations of religious change in contemporary South India, which fall into two main categories: rationalization and gentrification.

The rationalization of Hinduism involves ensuring that ritual action is consistent with the holy texts that have come to be defined as canonical. This has been accompanied by an emphasis on the inscription, codification, and standardization of hitherto more diffuse and fluid practices. Predominantly technically experienced priests have been urged to undergo formal training, certification, and professionalization. The authority of religious rituals is reinforced by the appeal to a written scriptural tradition, positivist rationalities, science, and technology.³ Gentrification goes even further, not only affecting the ritual demands of specific deities, but even their very nature. Tutelary deities have been adopted by upwardly mobile middle-class patrons. Through the processes of urbanization and globalization, they have been disembedded from their rural sacred jurisdictions. In the process, deities that were once volatile and fierce have become increasingly mellowed.⁴ Subjected to the circumscriptions of architecture, texts, and regular rituals, the vital impetus and the protean agency of these wandering deities have become fixed and subdued.⁵ These processes of moderation are also apparent in the practices of worship dedicated to these deities. There has been a move away from blood sacrifices and meat offerings and

Cambridge University Press; Gough, K. E. (1989). *Rural Change in Southeast India, 1950s to 1980s*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

³ Fuller, C. J. (1984). *Servants of the Goddess: The Priests of A South Indian Temple*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Fuller, C. J. (2003). *The Renewal of the Priesthood: Modernity and Traditionalism in a South Indian Temple*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

⁴ Preston, J. (1985). *Cult of the Goddess: Social and Religious Change in a Hindu Temple*, Prospect Heights, Illinois: Waveland Press; Waghorne, J. P. (2004). *Diaspora of the Gods: Modern Hindu Temples in an Urban Middle-Class World*, New York: Oxford University Press.

⁵ Uchiyamada, Y. (2008). 'Kurati and Kali: The Dead-end of Hierarchical Finality and The Moving Body That Assembles' in *The Unthinkable—Thinking Beyond the Limits of Culture*, Taipei: Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica.

towards vegetarian ones. Physically and emotionally taxing worship practices, such as painful vows, have given way to meditation, singing, volunteer work, and charitable acts.

In this article, I examine the cultural logics of an apparent paradox: the counter-intuitive proliferation of animal sacrifices to the very deities whose efficacy is perceived to be waning. This is both a manifestation of and catalyst to a number of social phenomena, including shifting gender relations, inter-caste dynamics, and agrarian hierarchies in contemporary Vaduvur. These trends—to which I gesture throughout this article—are, however, primarily understood as part of a constellation of symptoms. The locals see them mainly as indicators that are charted in an effort to diagnose the prowess of the deities in question, the quantity and quality of their interventions in the material world, and the state of the covenant between a congregation and its tutelary deity. They are the offshoots of more fundamental concerns with power and fertility that underpin the covenant between a tutelary deity and its congregation. As such, what is of primary concern here is the ramifications of the simultaneous theological undermining and ritual reinvestments for two particular domains—politics and productivity.

There is growing consensus that the intensification of interest in religious traditions, gods, and temples and the revival of traditional rituals is a prominent part of an Indian modernity.⁶ Charting the reassertion of tutelary cults and the reactivation of sacrificial practices considered native to non-Brahmin and non-urban peoples will contribute to a broader understanding of the plurality of the mediums through which the modern concern with tradition is being materialized in India. Beginning with the significance of tutelary gods to the protection, political meanings, and socio-economic productivity of lineage kinship, I describe the constitution of the powers of tutelary deities in terms of their location within and experiences of the village space and their active interventions in their devotees' lives. Framing these entanglements are understandings of the vital connections between political power, socio-economic productivity, and ethical responsibility that are prevalent in rural Tamil Nadu.

⁶ Preston, *Cult of the Goddess*; Fuller, *The Renewal of the Priesthood*; Waghorne, *Diaspora of the Gods*; Srinivas, S. (2008). *In the Presence of Sai Baba: Body, City and Memory in a Global Religious Movement*, Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill; Srinivas, T. (2010). *Winged Faith: Rethinking Globalisation and Religious Pluralism through the Sathya Sai Baba Movement*, New York: Columbia University Press.

Tutelary gods channel the divine energies (*shakti*) that animate the universe, and at the same time embody specific edifices and idioms of political power. They mediate between the life forces that sustain domestic and agricultural fertility and the material processes that underpin social, economic, and status reproduction. Being inherently powerful and dangerous, the deities' power is not dependent upon, but is nevertheless nourished by the recognition and rituals of their congregation.⁷ Within this specific nexus of power, I explore the political catalysts and constitutional ramifications of these deities' retreat from the rural landscape and the lives of their devotees.

The depiction of the waning power of these tutelaries is a microcosm through which to understand a specific historical consciousness and ongoing political contestations. The simultaneous but unexpected flourishing of animal sacrifice in contemporary Vaduvur, on the other hand, does not have much of a political valence. Instead, it refers more to preoccupations with socio-economic productivity. Given the nexus between sacrifice and fertility and its particular resonance within the agricultural context, I argue that the flourishing sacrificial complex has more significance for a broader understanding of the shifting socio-economic imperatives in village India. The renewed investments in this sacrificial cult and the cosmological and ritual dilemmas to which they give rise also speak to the consciousness of possibilities and risk in Vaduvur. Ultimately, I argue, they allow us to grasp the specific predicaments of social reproduction within a post-liberalization economic milieu.

This is by no means to impute a straightforward efficacious connection between theology and politics or between ritual and economics respectively. I am attempting to understand the vibrant religious landscape in Vaduvur within the context of a deliberate juxtaposition between intimate, everyday, and ritual concerns and large-scale political and economic transformations. This not only captures the complex dynamism of the social problem itself but also mirrors the simultaneity of these tutelary deities, which not only traverse but eschew their very discretization into domains such as universal and local, transcendent and immanent, cosmic and political,

⁷ Shulman, D. (1980). *Tamil Temple Myths: Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South Indian Saiva Tradition*, Princeton: Princeton University Press; Eck, D. (2012). *India: A Sacred Geography*, New York: Harmony Books.

or ritual and material.⁸ In the process, this article both emplaces and personalizes the effects of large-scale political and socio-economic transformations. Ultimately, it both demonstrates the impact and unravels the reifications of specifically electoral politics and neo-liberal economics in contemporary village India.

The Kallars and lineage sacrifices

The Kallars⁹ are the dominant caste in Vaduvur, since they own most of the arable lands and monopolize the political offices. The prominence given to exogamous patrilineal kin groups such as lineages and clans is a critical feature of Kallar society.¹⁰ Only males are recognized as members of a lineage.¹¹ However, only married male heads of households can exercise the full rights and obligations of lineage membership. Members of the same lineage (hereafter

⁸ Orr, L. (2005). 'Identity and Divinity: Boundary-Crossing Goddesses in Medieval South India', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 73:1, 9–43; Bear, L. (2013). "‘This Body is Our Body’": Vishwakarma Puja, the Social Debts of Kinship and Theologies of Materiality in a Neo-Liberal Shipyard' in Cannell, F. and McKinnon, S. *Vital Relations: Kinship as a Critique of Modernity*, Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press, pp. 155–178.

⁹ In 1918, the British classified many Kallars as a criminal caste (*kuttra parambarai*). However, there are significant differences between the Kallars of the drier upland tracts of Madurai and Rannathapuram and those of the wetter lowland Thanjavur regions, who had converted to more orthodox, pacific, and prestigious Brahminical and Vellalar values. Unlike their more intractable brethren in Madurai, my informants, the Thanjavur Kallars, had become settled and prosperous agriculturalists. Access to land and reliable irrigation was the key to their pacification and prosperity and their portrayal as being more compliant. The Thanjavur Kallars, Louis Dumont has attested, 'look with scorn on their Madurai brothers, whom they consider coarse and half-savage': Dumont, L. (2000). *A South Indian Subcaste: Social Organisation and Religion of the Pramalai Kallar*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. 14. Conversely, Karuppaiyan notes that the still recalcitrant Upland Kallars disdain the lowland Kallars' dependence on Brahmin landlords and emulation of Brahminical values. Karuppaiyan, V. (1990). *Kinship and Polity: A Study in Socio-Political Organisation among the Upland Kallars of Thanjavur District in Tamil Nadu*, Chennai: University of Madras.

¹⁰ Dumont. *A South Indian Subcaste*; Dirks, N. (1993). *The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom*, 2nd edition, Michigan: University of Michigan Press; Karuppaiyan, *Kinship and Polity*; Venkatasamy Nattar, N. M. (2005). *Kallar Carittiram (History of the Kallars)*, Chennai: Carata Patippakam.

¹¹ Women born into a lineage are formally recognized and have certain direct and inalienable rights with respect to their natal lineage cult, albeit not equal to those of their male brethren. Women married into a lineage are not even formally acknowledged by their marital lineage cult. Any rights they may have are only through their husbands and sons.

lineage-mates) are deemed to share three fundamental attributes, which define them as co-sharers (*pankali*): claims of descent from a common male ancestor, residential territory, and a tutelary deity (*kula devam*) and a ritual cult.

This sharing of territory, tutelaries, and especially substance underpins their identification of themselves as 'others of the same sort' (*vahaira*). For each lineage, their own tutelary deity is their first and foremost god. All other gods and religious affiliations are both subsequent and secondary to this elemental sacred kinship. Animal sacrifice forms a central component of the ritual cult of a lineage in two ways. First, it is in the practices of sacrificial worship that the fundamental bonds among lineage-mates themselves and between a lineage, its deity, and its territory are most prominently asserted. Lineage kinship itself is materialized when individuals come together to sponsor and organize a ceremony, watch their animal being ritually dedicated to their deity, and, finally, share and consume the now sanctified meat. Second, animal sacrifice is at the root of an ethical economy which is oriented towards the cultivation of fertility. The protection and favour of their own lineage deity are seen as fundamental to the success of a lineage's productive and reproductive enterprises. This is represented by the deity having primary claim on the fruits of its lineage's agricultural and economic labours via the medium of oblations. To ensure continued divine favour and future prosperity, the deity's responsibility for the lineage's success should be acknowledged and appreciated in the form of regular sacrifice.

The first goat sacrificed at a lineage sacrifice is always the common goat—equally paid for by each lineage-mate and sacrificed on behalf of the entire lineage—which exemplifies the pre-eminence of the lineage at such tutelary rituals. Once the goat has been decapitated by the ritual priest, the severed head is tendered as an offering to the deity. The now consecrated carcass is then divided equally among the lineage-mates who have sponsored and directed the sacrifice. These shares in the sacred meat form a material basis to their corporate membership within the lineage. Concerted efforts are undertaken to ensure the uniformity of each individual share of sacred meat, thereby reiterating the absolute equality of each lineage-mate's rights within their lineage.

Traditionally, for the sacrifice to Muniswarar—the tutelary deity of several Mannaiyar lineages living along an eponymous street—some blood from the sacrificed communal goat was mixed with cooked rice, rolled into three big balls, and thrown up in the air, into the branches

of the surrounding trees. These rice balls did not fall to the ground; instead, the *minis* swooped down to catch and consume the blood-soaked rice. *Minis* are capricious spirits that inhabit specific topographical features such as stagnant water bodies and mature trees. Characterized by a voracious appetite—for blood and human life—these spirits are also responsible for agricultural fertility.¹² *Minis* must be satiated with regular sacrifices not only to forestall demonic possessions and death but also to ensure the continued productivity of the land and water bodies. The blood-thirsty *minis* are kept in check by Muniswarar—a fierce but largely benevolent and vegetarian deity. Like most (male) tutelary deities, Muniswarar is depicted as having a massive build, bulging eyes, a luxuriant moustache, bared teeth, a raised sword, and sometimes a foot resting on the decapitated head of a demon. This ferocious countenance is an intrinsic part of the forcefully protective function of such deities—another weapon in the eternal battle with demonic forces. Astride his horse, Muniswarar patrols the borders of the territory that he protects, guarding its integrity and frightening away evil spirits to safeguard its order. Thus, the disappearance of the bloody orbs of rice—an ostensible defiance of gravity—was a decidedly eerie sight and proof of the *minis*' existence and Muniswarar's favour.

Declining potency

At least, this used to be so, in the halcyon past, when the worship was held in the dark of night, lit only by flickering camphor flames and kerosene lamps, before the ubiquity of electricity, which has become guaranteed in Vaduvur only in the last 30 years. This was when Muniswarar's shrine was located out in the middle of rice fields, amid a grove of massive trees. In Tamil grammars of space, agricultural fields are classified as uninhabited wilderness. They are the abode of ominous entities and are to be avoided, specifically at night and especially by women.¹³ When the night itself was frightening, the bloody rice balls were caught by the *minis* before they fell to the ground.

¹² Similarly, at the start of the fishing season, the first big fish that is caught must be released back into the pond. This is considered part of the *minis*' share. Some of the fish from this first catch must also be cooked and presented (together with other offerings) as part of a feast in a worship ceremony dedicated to the *minis*. Ensuring first and foremost that the *minis* get their share of the best of the piscine harvest is believed to be critical to ensuring the success of future fishing endeavours.

¹³ Selby, M. and Peterson, I. (2005). *Tamil Geographies: Cultural Constructions of Space and Place in South India*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Today, the worship is held in the afternoon to facilitate the feasting and hospitality that follow the sacrifice. Even when sacrificial worship is observed at night, electric lights powered by generators render night into day. The landscape upon which the uncanniness of lineage worship was premised has also been greatly transformed. The sacred grove has been cleared for agriculture; there are no enormous trees in which the *minis* can shelter. Habitat destruction has had adverse effects on spirit manifestations, demonic possessions, and sacred epidemic diseases.¹⁴ Shining a bright light on what has always been eerily enigmatic has diluted its unearthly ambience. Today, the lineage headman sheepishly admitted, after much demurrer, the rice balls just fall and smash uselessly to the ground. 'The old gods no longer have any power!' he declared.

Professional priests and older lineage-mates concurred with this dire assessment. In general, the intercession of tutelary deities into human affairs has waned. The deities are no longer seen riding on their horses, their divine watchmen at their side as they police the village boundaries. They are not encountered late at night, striding imperiously across the landscape. They are not heard bathing and washing their clothes at the local ponds. They no longer appear in dreams as often as they previously did. They do not possess as many people as they did in the past. In fact, they do not even attend the sacrificial worship that are organized in their honour and at which they are repeatedly invoked through fervent appeals, praise songs, and music. Worshipers who appear to be possessed at lineage worship—thereby manifesting the attendance of these deities—are probably pretending.

The starkest indication of waning divine power is with reference to women. At the heart of lineage sacrifices is a counter-intuitive appropriation by males of the responsibility for fertility.¹⁵ The lineage deity promises a permanent life premised on death through sacrifice. This in turn necessitates the sidelining of real fertility—associated with 'decay, impermanence and replacement' and made flesh in women in their reproductive prime. Indeed, it has been argued that it is women—as embodiments of biological fertility—who are the

¹⁴ For similar scenarios in Banaras and Bhilai in Chhattisgarh respectively, see Parry, J. P. (1994). *Death in Banaras*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Parry, J. P. (2005). 'Changing Childhoods in Industrial Chhattisgarh' in Chopra, R. and Jeffery, P. *Educational Regimes in Contemporary India*, London: Sage Publications, pp. 276–299.

¹⁵ Bloch, M. and Parry, J. (1982). *Death and the Regeneration of Life*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Bloch, M. (1992). *Prey into Hunter: The Politics of Religious Experience*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

actual scapegoats during lineage sacrifices.¹⁶ Analysing the changing position of women with respect to the lineage cult is therefore particularly instructive about the ritual logic of these sacrifices and the transformations of their practices and significance. Just as they are not recognized as lineage-mates enjoying the full rights and responsibilities accorded to lineage membership, women are not allowed to participate fully in lineage tutelary rituals. Women—especially those of childbearing age—are not supposed to view animal sacrifice. They are not even allowed to approach the sanctum of the lineage gods. Their very presence is deemed to be polluting. Fear of being possessed or smitten by a wrathful god means that women themselves once hesitated to venture too close. They used to stand so far away from the shrines that they could barely make out the religious icons, let alone the worship rituals.

Today, however, women do approach the sanctums of the tutelary deities. According to a ritual priest, hitherto wary women now dare to graze their animals and even sit down to rest within the deities' sacred enclosures. And yet, nothing untoward befalls these transgressing women. My own observations of the positioning of women at the sacrifice for another lineage deity, Viranar, made it apparent that the invisible barrier keeping women away from the lineage deity is being incrementally breached. In 2007, the women had stood at the footpath bordering the field in which the sacrifice was being enacted. They only stepped onto the field itself after much hesitation, discussion among themselves, and repeated urging from their men. In 2008, however, they proceeded straight onto the field to the area allocated to them:

Our grandmothers did not even come to the sacrifices. Our mothers stood on the footpath at the edge of this field, barely able to see anything. When we came of age, we, too, stood on the path. Now, we and our daughters come onto the field itself, sit closer to the shrine. We can even see what is going on.¹⁷

Unlike their male counterparts, women still cannot initiate, sponsor or perform lineage sacrifices. However, they can approach the lineage shrine and watch the rituals being performed as they have never been able to before. The fact that fertile women can now approach the lineage deity without being smitten or possessed has been claimed as a symptom of waning divine prowess. This is the most blatant indication

¹⁶ Nabokov, *Religion Against the Self*, p. 175.

¹⁷ This is an account from Kannagi, a woman who married into this lineage, comparing the Viranar sacrifices she has attended over the years.

that the gods do not wield the same power or inspire the same fear that they once did. People are no longer as afraid of the consequences of breaching what were once absolute taboos. More than anyone else, it is the headmen who verbally and vociferously dispute the veracity of possessions and the efficacy of the old gods. Given that their own authority is fundamentally premised on the moral sanction of these very deities, why are the headmen themselves so insistent about the fading charisma of the old gods?

Democratic transformations

The headmen's narratives of decline are not simply obituaries to the old gods. They also form trenchant editorial statements about contemporary political realities. Kallar lineages and clans are not simply kinship groupings; they are also micro-polities, as they are based on three fundamental premises: first, the definition of a territorially delimited jurisdiction; second, the exercise of a localized sovereignty that does not tolerate interference from any external authority, especially in judicial and temple-centred ritual matters; and third, the practice of self-government and citizenship centred on the assertion of the equality of the rights and obligations of membership for male Kallars

These kinship polities are rooted in a sacred territory, protected by a tutelary deity and governed by headmen. At their narrowest—at the level of exogamous lineages and clans—kinship polities are made up exclusively of Kallars. However, these configurations are also foundational segments of progressively larger and more socially plural polities such as the street, the village, and the region (*nadu*). At their widest—within *nadus*—non-Kallars are also included, but strictly as employees and subjects, never as citizens or sovereigns. A *nadu* is defined, dominated, and governed by Kallars. Non-Kallars tender their services to the *nadu*. They are subject to its administrative decisions and judicial decisions. However, they do not participate in its governmental processes or judicial deliberations. Neither do they have any rights to the *nadu* temples or in their ritual cults. Given the entanglements of temple rituals in political processes in South India, these protocols reiterate the exclusion of the lower castes, from the traditional polity.¹⁸ Indeed, these micro-polities are founded upon

¹⁸ Mines, D. (2005). *Fierce Gods: Inequality, Ritual, and the Politics of Dignity in a South Indian Village*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

the assertion and policing of a hierarchical social order predicated on the claims of the superiority of Kallar men over Kallar women, and especially of the Kallar caste over the lower castes.

The old gods are intricately woven into the sovereign power and moral legitimacy of the Kallar kinship polity. First, the tutelary's circumambulations trace the boundaries and map the territory of the lineage under his protection. His patrols assert the corporateness of his lineage congregation and his dominion over this territory. Second, the deity's policing of the moral state of his congregation and his punishment of transgressors serve to delineate and affirm the proprieties that are supposed to bind this community together into an ethical polity. Discipline (*kattu-padu*)—having one's conduct be bound by norms—is an intrinsic part of citizenship in this polity. Constructing the polity as a moral and scared space involves guarding against ritual pollution through the observance of specific taboos.¹⁹ The two main sources of pollution are women of childbearing age and the Paraiyar caste. Paraiyars form a significant portion of Vaduvur's agricultural labour but are considered to be particularly ritually polluting. As previously noted, the presence of all fertile women at lineage rituals is circumscribed in order to establish the counter-intuitive assertion of male responsibility for reproduction. The presence of non-Kallars, specifically those of the lower castes, does not simply compromise the sacredness of lineage shrines and worship: it threatens the very integrity of a polity that is based on claims of Kallar exclusivity and their assertions of superiority over the lower castes.

The very presence of lower castes and specifically Paraiyars is anathema to Val-Muniswarar, the tutelary deity of the southern Mannaiyars. According to a headman, at the last lineage sacrifice, held 17 years ago, a perfect sacrificial specimen had been bought from a nearby village into which one of their daughters had been married. The daughter promised to hire a man to bring this goat to her natal village. Along the way, the goat broke away and ran off; despite searching everywhere, it was not found. Another goat was brought in Vaduvur itself, and the sacrifice proceeded smoothly. At its conclusion, the hitherto missing goat suddenly reappeared. When Muniswarar's priest was consulted, he insisted that the 'bringer [of the goat] was not right'. Upon further investigation, the woman admitted that she

¹⁹ Masilamani-Meyer, E. (2004). 'Guardians of Tamil Nadu: Folk Deities, Folk Religion, Hindu Themes', *Neue Halesche Berichte* 5, Halle: Verlag der Franckeschen Stiftungen zu Halle, p. 89.

had sent the goat with a Paraiyar—the very apotheosis of ritual pollution in the Tamil social sphere. Muniswarar was deemed to have deliberately stopped such a ritually polluted sacrificial candidate from contaminating his worship. In some cases, the lower-caste individual may even be severely punished for ‘polluting’ Muniswarar’s territory and its inhabitants. A man of the Ambalalar caste from a neighbouring village had come to Vaduvur to work during the harvest. He eloped with a Kallar woman from Muniswarar’s very lineage, and the couple set up home nearby. A short time later, the Ambalalar man developed excruciating stomach pains and died. His Kallar lover committed suicide soon after. Muniswarar, it was claimed, had punished this couple for their contravention of the rules of caste endogamy and ritual purity.

Accounts of Muniswarar’s patrols around the village and his terrible retributions articulate moral concerns or ‘moral fictions’.²⁰ Through these narrations of ethical infringements and supernatural punishments, the established protocols for people’s relations with their deities and with each other are articulated. The different castes may be interdependent, but they must remain separate so that the sacredness of the polity can remain uncompromised. This separation is premised upon caste endogamy. Therefore, the control over women’s fertility and dominion over the lower castes is necessary for both the reproduction of this caste-based polity and the maintenance of its unmiscegenated purity. Inter-caste elopements and entanglements threaten the constitutive purity of this sacred territory and its citizens, and they must be severely punished to prevent future polluting threats. Muniswarar’s patrols throughout his jurisdiction and his punishments of transgressions are fundamental to preserving the structural and ethical integrity of the kinship polity. The fact that the guardians of this morality are no longer seen policing and punishing the contravention of the norms underpinning the polity is therefore symptomatic of an emerging moral and political crisis.

Along with establishing the ethical architecture of the polity, narratives about patrolling and punishing divinities, spirit possessions, and dreams about angry deities convey very real ideas about how divine power is made manifest.²¹ They articulate the uncontainable

²⁰ Blackburn, S. (2003). ‘Moral Fictions: Tamil Folktales from Oral Tradition’, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 66:1, 116–117; Laidlaw, J. (2002). ‘For An Anthropology of Ethics and Freedom’, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 8:2, 311–332.

²¹ Hildebeitel, A. (1989). *Criminal Gods and Demon Devotees: Essays on the Guardians of Popular Hinduism*, Albany: State University of New York Press.

and vital impetus of these deities, which in turn frames the chaotic and creative flows of power and fertility in rural Tamil Nadu. These deities evade and exceed their devotees' attempts to represent and therefore fix them through architecture, iconography or ritual. They have tremendous agency as they roam around their territory, touching their devotees with their power. Their charisma is intrinsically linked with their immanence in the material world. This presence is not merely ambient but active, not remote but intimate:

At the temple dedicated to Pidari Amman [the village boundary goddess], there used to be a massive banyan tree. The village headmen would gather under this tree for their assemblies.²² And so would the old gods of the village. You could hear their voices as they sang and the sounds of the bells on their anklets as they danced. The gods would bathe and wash their clothes here because all temples have ponds. You could hear the sounds of splashing water and the pounding of wet cloth on a wash-stone. They would bathe, sing, dance, play, and then go to sleep. They liked it here because it was a secluded place. The temple was surrounded by dense trees. They would not be disturbed by the sounds of grains being pounded in a pestle and mortar [of human habitation]. But you cannot hear the gods any more . . . the forest is gone . . . the banyan tree has been cut down . . . There is electricity and lights everywhere. There are just too many houses and people too close to the temple.²³

Their experiential and embodied presence in the material world and the combination of devotion and fear that they inspire are manifestations of the power of these deities. Therefore, the withdrawal of the gods from the human world is a threat to both the moral and political constitution of the kinship polity. The sovereignty and moral sanction that is materialized through their immanence and interventions is being undermined. Narrations of the perceived waning of the prowess of their old gods are therefore ambivalent ruminations on the political transformations that the Kallars are experiencing. They reflect the ongoing separation of what had been

²² The headmen from the constituent villages form the government of the Vaduvur *nadu*. During their regular assemblies under the banyan tree next to the Pidari Amman Temple, the headmen come to decisions about the allocation and use of communal resources, the administration of Vaduvur's temples, and the sponsorship of public religious rituals as well as arbitration of disputes among the residents of Vaduvur. This mode of localized self-governance and statercraft was especially significant in this case because the Vaduvur *nadu* had been a sovereign body relatively free from the interference of centralized authorities such as the pre-colonial king as well as the colonial state.

²³ This account is from a woman who lives near the Pidari Amman Temple and has done so for decades.

continuous realms—deities and humans, rituals and politics, morality and sovereignty—into their own specific domains. They express the decline of authority within one specific idiom of power. Indeed, when I initially approached Kattaiyar Mannaiyar with questions about his experiences as a village headman, he was intensely skeptical:

Why are you asking these questions now? What is there to know? What are you going to do with this useless information? No one listens to us these days. Nobody bothers to ask us anything. Everyone dances to the tunes of politicians and their parties.²⁴

Along with being a commentary on the state of the Kallar polity, the headmen’s insistence on declining divine charisma is an articulation of the loss of their own roles within it. Once, the headmen were the unequivocal political elite. As the government of these micro-polities, headmen were vested with extensive legislative, executive, and judiciary powers. Their pronouncements applied to almost all the residents of the territory over which they had jurisdiction. Headmen were charged with the administration of temples and the sponsorship of rituals, both of which have tremendous political and economic significance in the South Indian context.²⁵ They arbitrated disputes, pronounced punitive sentences for crimes, and were central to the maintenance of law and order. Headmen were at the very core and apex of village politics. This was especially so in the case of Vaduvur, which had been granted sovereign status by royal warrant. This meant that the people of Vaduvur were subject only to the laws devised and enforced by its own government, that is, its own assembly of headmen. Even the colonial state did not interfere with this sovereignty, given the extremely small and localized nature of such polities. Headmen thus became very used to wielding significant powers with little oversight.

The Hollow Crown,²⁶ an ethno-history of Pudukkottai, a state once ruled by royal Kallars, is an analysis of how British colonial interventions severely undermined the powers of the pre-colonial rulers. However, what augured wholesale political transformations and interfered with the headmen’s monopoly of power in Vaduvur was actually the post-colonial nation-state with its promulgation of

²⁴ This is according to Kattaiyar Mannaiyar, a headman of the Vaduvur *nadu* polity.

²⁵ Appadurai, A. (1981). *Worship and Conflict Under Colonial Rule: A South Indian Case*, New York: Cambridge University Press; Appadurai, A. and Breckenridge, C. (1976). ‘The South Indian Temple: Authority, Honour and Redistribution’, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 10:2, 187–211.

²⁶ Dirks, *The Hollow Crown*.

electoral politics. Judicial power was redistributed to state agents such as the police and the courts, and the government took over the running of the most popular and prosperous temples. Now, headmen are left largely with ceremonial roles at temple functions shorn of their political ramifications. While ostensibly continuing with their 'traditional' duties, headmen have found that the patronage of temples is not as decisive as it once was with regards to the establishment and exercise of power. Not only has real power been leached out of extant forms of authority, but with the introduction of electoral politics, the sources of power have become multiple and fragmented. The criteria for determining the eligibility to exercise said power have also been expanded. It is now democratically elected politicians and political parties that wield most of the real influence. Reinforcing these institutional transformations has been the increasing political assertiveness of the hitherto subjects of Kallar authority—those of the lower castes. Citizenship within a democratic nation-state and the resultant political representation and rights to economic opportunities have challenged customarily hierarchical agrarian relations and thereby compromised the caste-based domination and subjection on which the Kallar *nadu* was fundamentally premised. In Vaduvur, the headmen's crown was hollowed out and the kinship polity rendered largely theatrical not so much by the colonial state as by democratic politics. Headmen have been rendered superfluous to the polities that they used to lead. Given their ascendant political and economic circumstances, the subjection of the lower castes to Kallar authority is not so forthcoming. What has been severely undermined is the sovereign power that the old gods create for the Kallar kinship polity and its headmen. To put it somewhat glibly, along with electricity, it is actually democracy that has weakened these particular old gods.²⁷

Ritual proliferation

However, at the same time that the powers of the old gods are being questioned, animal sacrifice dedicated to these very deities has

²⁷ It is beyond the scope of this article to address the effects of these same political processes—gathering penetration of the nation-state and the proliferation of the relatively egalitarian ideologies of democracy—on the potency of non-Kallar tutelaries in Vaduvur. However, there is some evidence to suggest that the emboldened agency and political assertiveness of Dalits may very well have an opposite effect on the charisma of their own 'fierce' gods; see Mines, *Fierce Gods*.

increased, rather than decreased, in Vaduvur. According to Palani, a priest who officiates at lineage worship, ten years ago he had been decapitating 20 goats over the entire sacrificial worship season.²⁸ Now, he slaughters well over 200 goats over the same period. Furthermore, he is in great demand not only in Vaduvur but also in the surrounding region. It was not only ritual priests who are in high demand during the sacrificial season, but also architects and artisans to build new or refurbish old shrines, traditional musicians to sing invocations for deities to come and possess their devotees, and butchers to skin and portion the sacrificed animals. Along with this establishment of an economy of ritual, there has been an inflation in the demand for and prices of perfect male sacrificial specimens (goats and roosters). As confirmed by members of lineages that sponsor sacrifices, not only are more animals being sacrificed, but there are also more and more regular lineage ceremonies as a whole. In 2007, the southern Mannaiyar lineage sacrificed 54 goats to their tutelary deity, Muniswarar. In 2008, another lineage sacrificed 57 goats to their deity. After one of their members was arrested for the horrific murder of a lower-caste boy, yet another lineage, which had never celebrated a sacrificial ceremony, staged one for their tutelary deity, Viranar, for the first time in living memory. Having been denied the voluntary sacrifice of an animal for so long, they assumed that their Viranar had become angry at their renegeing on the sacrificial covenant manifest and taken matters into his own hands. They initially performed the sacrifice to appease Viranar before he unleashed yet more bloodshed. Since then, they have continued to enact one every year.

The sacrificial rituals on which I focus are not those conducted by individuals as part of private vow fulfilments. It is the very apotheosis of the tutelary cult—sacrificial worship undertaken collectively by members of a lineage as a corporate descent group—that I describe as becoming increasingly popular in Vaduvur. Lineages are coming together to conduct collective sacrificial worship with a regularity and on a scale that they have never done before. Smaller lineages which had never conducted lineage sacrifices have begun staging them, and more regularly. Sacrificial rituals that had been abandoned for well over 60 years have been resurrected. Along with this revival, existing sacrifices have also become larger in scale and more ostentatious. This resurgence and amplification of animal sacrifices is in contravention

²⁸ The sacrifice season is over only three specific months of the Tamil calendar: December–January (Tai), April–May (Cittirai), and July–August (Aadi).

of the Tamil Nadu Animals and Birds Sacrifices Prevention Act, which was brought in in 1950 but was largely unenforced. In 2003 however, amid vociferous protest about the infringement on age-old religious beliefs, especially in the southern parts of Tamil Nadu, the existing legislation was implemented more rigorously as part of a campaign for non-violence.²⁹ However, for fear of an electoral backlash from rural devotees, the 1950 act was repealed just five months later.³⁰ This reassertion of supposedly traditional Dravidian practices of sacrifice in the face of more Sanskritic emphases on non-violence and vegetarianism contributes to the popularity of sacrificial worship, as will be elaborated in the next section.³¹

Why do people propitiate, ever more fervently, the very gods that they deem to be losing their potency? There are obvious instrumental reasons for the increase in sacrificial worship. Sacrifices are expensive. The costs of ritual specialists, refurbishing and decorating shrines, ritual paraphernalia, sacrificial animals, and the ingredients for the post-sacrificial feast can amount to thousands of rupees. There are more sacrifices now simply because more people can afford to perform them. As per the logic of sacrifice, more wealth means more must be sacrificed in order to preserve or increase it. This is a necessary but ultimately insufficient explanation which underestimates the complexity, indeed the multivocality, of Tamil rituals.³²

New modes of power and prestige

The economic and political dominance of the Kallars has been reinforced by the exodus of the Brahmins from Vaduvur since the 1950s. Vaduvur was a Brahmin village, with Vaishnavite Brahmins

²⁹ S. Viswanathan. (10 October 2003) 'A Decree on Animal Sacrifice', *Frontline*, 20:20, <http://www.frontline.in/navigation/?type=static&page=archiveSearch&aid=20031010001205000&ais=20&avol=20>, [accessed 17 November 2014].

³⁰ The Deccan Herald. (21 February 2004) 'Jaya Lifts Ban on Human Sacrifice', *The Deccan Herald*, <http://archive.deccanherald.com/deccanherald/feb212004/n1.asp>, [accessed 26 February 2014].

³¹ However, the repeal of the ban itself cannot be said to be a prominent consideration in the decision to enact lineage sacrifices for my Kallar informants. Just as they largely ignored the ban by continuing to conduct individual sacrificial worship (although they did abandon collective lineage sacrifices), they also largely ignored its repeal.

³² Clark-Deces, I. (2007). *The Encounter Never Ends: A Return to the Field of Tamil Rituals*, New York: State University of New York Press.

owning most of the fertile lands; Kallars were agricultural labourers and tenants to Brahmin landlords. The economic dominance of the Brahmins was buttressed by their avowed ideological superiority in terms of ritual purity and social prestige. This was reflected in spatial segregation and everyday protocols and practices in Vaduvur. Segar Vanniyar, the adviser to the council of headmen, remembered how Kallars were not even allowed to enter the Brahmin residential area (*agraharam*) but had to take the long way round to get to Vaduvur's commercial district. If they encountered a Brahmin, they had to disembark from and push their bicycles. They even had to remove their slippers and shawls from their shoulders.³³ Simultaneously, the emulation of the very Brahmin values that denigrated them was a key strategy in the Kallars' pursuit of social mobility. They adopted a strictly vegetarian diet, albeit only for one month—the month of September–October (Purattaci), which is specifically dedicated to Vishnu, the presiding deity of these Vaishnavite Brahmins and the largest temple in Vaduvur. Kallar men adopted Brahmin personal styles in terms of hair (long hair, knotted at the back), jewellery (ear-studs), adornment (the U-shaped mark of sandalwood powder or holy ash on the forehead), and dress. It was also this period of Brahmin cultural dominance that saw the shift from the indigenous Kallar practice of bride-price to the more socially prestigious Brahmin practice of dowry. Additionally, the preference for isogamous kin marriages gave way to the pursuit of hypergamous alliances with strangers, which heavily favoured the wife-takers. Like their Brahmin landlords, Kallars patronized the cults and temples of the great Sanskritic vegetarian deities such as Rama and Shiva. The worship of their original, highly local gods—their own lineage deities—was intermittent at best. Animal sacrifices, which the vegetarian Brahmins disdained, were extremely rare, so much so that until quite recently many Kallars had never experienced one.

At the height of their dominance, there were more than 250 Brahmin families living in Vaduvur. Today, there are fewer than 20 households. Beginning in the nineteenth century under British colonialism, Brahmins began leaving their villages to take advantage of the educational and occupational opportunities that were opening

³³ For further examples of the everyday implications of Brahmin dominance in the Thanjavur district (of which Vaduvur used to be a part before being incorporated into the newly formed Thiruvavur District in 1991) see Betéille, *Caste, Class and Power*, and Gough, *Rural Society*, pp. 294–296.

up in Indian cities and overseas colonies;³⁴ this exodus has intensified as such opportunities have become available globally. Many landlords sold their agricultural lands to their Kallar tenants. Alongside these pull factors were several push factors which made village life increasingly intolerable for the Brahmins.³⁵ The Tamil Nadu government introduced legislation to protect tenants from eviction in 1955 and to fix fair rents in 1956 and 1959. In 1961 and 1970 limitations on the size of landholdings were instituted. These reforms favouring the cultivating tenant emboldened the Kallars to withhold their rents from, launch protracted legal suits against, and at times violently confront protesting absentee landlords. Several Brahmins were forced to abandon their lands with no recompense in the face of threats of physical violence. The spread of the ideology of E. V. Periyar's Self-Respect Movement from 1925 and the power of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam political party from 1949 were also important contributors to the disintegration of Brahmin rural dominance. As a result of this undermining of entrenched Brahmin privileges and the instilling of pride in non-Brahmins based on their indigenous Dravidian culture, the Kallars were mobilized to become increasingly resistant to Brahmin authority in Vaduvur. Since the 1950s, the Kallars have become the unchallenged dominant caste and therefore also the new guardians of caste morality vis-à-vis the lower castes.

The Kallars in Vaduvur may have emulated selected aspects of Brahmin values and lifestyles. However, they did not go to the same lengths as the archetypal peasant caste, the Vellalars of the Kaveri river delta:³⁶ the Vellalars adopted a fully vegetarian diet and accepted the superiority of Brahmin cultural values in return for the acknowledgement of their status as the pre-eminent non-Brahmin caste. The Kallars never completely repudiated their past to embrace the overwhelmingly Brahmin-defined prestige and modernity. Contrary to the teleological thrust underpinning the Sanskritization thesis, the emulation of Brahminical norms among these Kallars has always been uneven, sporadic, and evidently

³⁴ Fuller, C. J. (2011). 'The Modern Transformation of an Old Elite: The Case of the Tamil Brahmins' in Clark-Deces, I. *A Companion to the Anthropology of India*, Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, pp. 80–98.

³⁵ For further details, see Betéille, *Caste, Class and Power*; Gough, *Rural Society*.

³⁶ Ludden, D. (1985). *Peasant History in South India*, Princeton: Princeton University Press; Ludden, D. (1999). *An Agrarian History of South Asia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

cosmetic. Kallars have maintained a non-vegetarian diet and remained proud of their 'martial traditions'.³⁷ They have also continued to cherish the association of their caste with heated tempers, acute sensitivity to insults to their honour, a propensity for violence, and luxuriant moustaches. A cherished proverb among the Vaduvur Kallars is: 'Vaduvur Vambu (trouble) Coonoor Kombu (horns).' Just as Coonoor village is known for the quality of its bulls (represented by their horns), Vaduvur is known for its confrontational nature (metonymically represented by its fearsome Kallars). All of these characteristics are entirely incongruent with Brahminical norms.

Now that the Brahmin exodus has cemented and extended Kallar politico-economic dominance, the outer trappings of Brahmin styles have also been abandoned. The renewed popularity of lineage deities and animal sacrifices is part of a reversal of the, admittedly always uneven, emulation of Brahminic values that had been part of Kallar pursuits of social mobility and prestige in Vaduvur. It may even be part of processes of de-Sanskritization and, conversely, re-Dravidianization. The expansion of sacrifice is part of the renewed assertiveness of the non-Sanskritic religious practices that are considered native to the Kallars. Social prestige and modernity are no longer primarily defined by Brahmin, or indeed even urban middle-class values. Instead they reflect the concerns of the now dominant Kallar caste. It is Kallar patterns of accumulation, consumption, and sacrifice that now define social prestige in Vaduvur. It is Kallar values and lifestyles that have come to be emulated as part of claims to social status, as evident in the tussle over the rights to the goddess Selli Amman's temple in 2007.

The Selli Amman temple is located in an area that is now dominated by the lower-caste Ambalarars. However, the temple was built and administered by the Kallars. Even the annual festival to the goddess was initiated by the Kallars. It is considered an integral part of the Kallar-dominated *nadu*. During the temple's consecration ceremony in 2007, however, the Ambalarars remonstrated about the route for the procession of Selli Amman's icon and about the order of sacrifices en route. As they also contributed to the financing of the temple festivities, they argued against what they saw as a Kallar precedence and privilege—the right to sacrifice first. However, the Kallars consider this to be their exclusive right. They retorted that this unprecedented Ambalarar contestation was a result of the

³⁷ Blackburn, S. (1978). 'The Kallars: A "Criminal Tribe" Reconsidered', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 1:1, 38–51; Dirks, *The Hollow Crown*.

misunderstanding that if one sacrificed one's goat in front of the temple itself it meant that one had equal rights to the temple. However, their caste inferiors could not be allowed to receive full and equal shares within what was patently a Kallar *nadu* temple. The threat of the goddesses' procession being completely abandoned was only alleviated by the last-minute intervention of the headmen's council. Thus, the Ambalarars are demonstrating their own increasing socio-economic status and political assertiveness by emulating Kallar modes of politics and prestige, and they are going even further by protesting against and even competing with Kallars themselves to exercise what have hitherto been exclusively Kallar rights and enact what have essentially been Kallar rituals.

Ritual innovations, changing meanings

Rather than simply being a revival of past practices, tremendous innovations have also been introduced to lineage sacrifices. This is partly due to the inadvertent compensations necessitated by the ritual naivety resulting from the intermittent enactment and abandonment of sacrifices. More significantly, such novelties are due to the new meanings being invested in these rituals. In principle, one communal goat representing the corporateness of the entire lineage is all that is needed for sacrificial worship. Today, however, each individual household wants to sacrifice their own goat, largely to feed the guests that they increasingly invite to what were once strictly domestic and intra-lineage functions. One of the reasons that the 2007 Muniswarar sacrifice was held in the afternoon was that people wanted to have enough time to prepare the feast for the guests that they had invited for the next day. The village police inspector alone slaughtered two goats and invited all his neighbours, both on his own and the next street, to a feast of goat *beriyani* (a spiced rice dish) prepared by a cook hired for the occasion. Older lineage members often condemn what they see as an overemphasis on hospitality rather than worship. Others, however, relish this opportunity for reunions with far-flung kin and convivial feasting.

The preparations surrounding the sacrificial rituals have also become more elaborate, and their staging more ostentatious. For the 2006 sacrificial ceremony of the particularly large Sakkarei lineage, what was usually a nondescript field was transformed into a brilliantly lit and beautifully decorated shrine for the worship of their tutelary

deity, Viranar. Devotional music blared from a sound system powered by a generator, strands of fairy lights hung from the branches of the massive tree under which Viranar resided, and garlands of fragrant jasmine formed a canopied passage to the deity. A ceremony once restricted to members of the lineage itself had been opened up to neighbours living on adjoining streets. Along with buying the massive quantities of ingredients needed, cooks and equipment had been hired to prepare the feast. The sacrificial goats themselves had to be paid for by all the participating lineage-mates, since the sacrifice and apportioning of the meat dramatizes the unity of the lineage and the equal status of all lineage-mates with reference to the lineage deity. Everything else was paid for by an extremely wealthy member of this lineage—Siva, a prominent businessman. Hundreds of people sat on mats out in the open fields, chatting excitedly to infrequently seen family members. They devoured the feast of curry made from the sacrificial goat meat, and a sweet maize porridge. These consecrated items were supplemented with curried chicken, sponsored by Siva. As the assembled masses compared lineage sacrifices over the years, they noted how extravagant their simple lineage celebrations had become, especially since Siva's patronage.

Vaduvur has become a relatively wealthy village. The reliable availability of water as a consequence of an improved irrigation infrastructure has laid the foundation for increased agricultural bounty. Migration primarily to Singapore and Malaysia during the colonial period resulted in several Vaduvur families attaining economic wealth, which was then reinvested in the village. Since the early 1990s, the processes of economic liberalization, urbanization, and globalization have also given further impetus to pursuits of social mobility for many villagers. As a result, socio-economic differentiations among rural kin-groups have become more sharply defined.³⁸ These sharper intra-lineage hierarchies are reflected not only in the elaborations of the lineage ritual, but also in its very logics. Partaking of the powerful essence of the divine and asserting solidarity with lineage-mates are no longer the only logics framing the lineage sacrifice.³⁹ Through his sponsorship of the post-sacrificial feast, Siva expressed his thanks to his lineage deity for facilitating his prosperity. In the process, he also demonstrated his success to, and shared its

³⁸ Kapadia, K. (1995). *Siva and Her Sisters: Gender, Caste, and Class in Rural South India*, Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.

³⁹ Nabokov, *Religion Against The Self*, p. 170.

fruits with, his lineage. Simultaneously, the spectacular lavishness of this ceremony—capably organized by the lineage and underwritten by the success of one of its own members—publicly dramatized the prestige of this particular lineage to neighbouring ones. The lineage ritual is fundamentally supposed to represent the corporateness of the lineage and the equality of lineage membership. However, such rituals have also become a culturally approved means through which to translate material capital into social and political capital.⁴⁰ The elaborate lineage ritual established and objectified the prestige of the wealthy sponsor, and by extension, the lineage and the lineage deity that engendered him. The increasing commercialization and socio-economic differentiation within the Kallar community in general, and within rural kin-groups such as lineages have contributed to the elaboration and regularization of lineage sacrifices. There is now tremendous emphasis on and investment in the embellishments of the lineage cult—the aesthetic ornamentation, the hospitality, and the gastronomic ostentation. In some ways, the lineage deity may be said to have become sidelined within its own cult.

The problem of productivity

Marriages that had been more or less finalized broke down at the last hurdle. Crops failed. Livestock died unexpectedly or did not multiply as they should. The lineage-members themselves suffered health problems or had business failures and debt problems.⁴¹

Such problems of productivity prompted their consultations with several astrologers, both independently and as a group. The diagnoses were all startlingly similar. They had a powerful lineage deity, Ravuthar, who continued to be by their side. However, their prolonged neglect of the worship due to him meant that Ravuthar was on the verge of abandoning them. This was why they were not enjoying the fruitful outcomes of marriages, gestations, agricultural harvests, and business enterprises. A decline in productivity is symptomatic of deeper problems in the covenant between the lineage and its deity. The neglect of worship of and especially sacrifice to their lineage deity may

⁴⁰ Osella, C. and Osella, F. (2003). 'Migration and the Commoditisation of Ritual: Sacrifice, Spectacle and Contestations in Kerala, India', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 37:1/2, 109–139.

⁴¹ This is according to Ravindran, a member of the Upputhanni lineage.

well have inhibited their biological fertility, economic productivity, and reproduction of social status. Hence, in 2005 the Upputhanni lineage began building a temple to house their lineage deity, who had hitherto resided in a hollow tin can under a tree in a nondescript field. In 2007 they hired a priest and performed elaborate rituals to consecrate this temple. After a few months, they conducted their first sacrifice to Ravuthar in more than 60 years in his new temple.

In a bid to understand ritual transformations in terms of shifting material realities, there is always a risk that the reasons as to why people actually enact rituals in the first place can come to be underappreciated.⁴² Rituals are enacted not so much to dramatize certain core values as to actually fulfil certain specific objectives—that is, 'to achieve an end'.⁴³ This end, in the case of the pioneering work of Comaroff and Comaroff,⁴⁴ is largely a material one. Challenging the teleological associations between modern capitalism and secularization, the proliferation of occult practices in South Africa is understood as part of 'the deployment, real or imagined of magical means for material ends'.⁴⁵ They exemplify the 'retooling of culturally familiar technologies' to grapple with the changed circumstances, moral dilemmas, and existential uncertainties unleashed by rapidly shifting politico-economic realities, the failures of contemporary capitalism, and indeed the breakdown of rationalism. This theoretical strain has inspired many analyses of the synergies between religiosity and capitalism within the context of increasingly market-oriented development in Vietnam,⁴⁶ Taiwan⁴⁷, China⁴⁸, Indonesia,⁴⁹ and

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Howe, L. (2000). 'Risk, Ritual and Performance', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 6:1, 63–79.

⁴⁴ Comaroff, J. and Comaroff, J. L. (2003). *Modernity and Its Malcontents: Ritual and Power in Postcolonial Africa*, Chicago: Chicago University Press; Comaroff, J. and Comaroff, J. L. (1999). 'Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction: Notes from the South African Postcolony', *American Ethnologist*, 26:2, 279–303.

⁴⁵ Comaroff and Comaroff, *Modernity and Its Malcontent*, pp. xv–xvi

⁴⁶ Taylor, P. (2004). *Goddess on the Rise: Pilgrimage and Popular Religion in Vietnam*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press; Endres, K. (2011). *Performing the Divine: Spirit Mediumship, Markets, and Modernity in Contemporary Vietnam*, Copenhagen: NIAS Press.

⁴⁷ Weller, R. (2000). 'Living at the Edge: Religion, Capitalism, and the End of the Nation-State in Taiwan', *Public Culture*, 12:2, 477–498.

⁴⁸ Chau, A. (2006). *Miraculous Response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China*, Stanford: Stanford University Press; Chau, A. (2011). *Religion in Contemporary China: Revitalisation and Innovation*. Abingdon, Routledge.

⁴⁹ Siegel, J. (2006). *Naming the Witch: Cultural Memory in the Present*, Stanford: Stanford University Press; Rudnyckyj, D. (2010). *Spiritual Economies: Islam, Globalisation, and the Afterlife of Development*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press.

Thailand.⁵⁰ However, this thesis has also met with doubts about its empirical substantiation⁵¹ as well as challenges to its seeming depiction of the occult as a retreat into mystification or a means of resistance against neo-liberal transformations.⁵² Unlike in the case of the even more critical Bruce Kapferer,⁵³ there is no exhortation to focus purely on the internal logics of spiritual rituals here. On the contrary, while such an emphasis may explicate the logic of lineage sacrifices, it does not account adequately for the place, and especially the time-contingent nature of their proliferation. Nor does it fully allow for the appreciation of the efficacy that is attributed to this ritual action and which underpins its contemporary popularity.

While I am wary of its psychological-functional and therefore problematic overtones, the proposed interaction between economic uncertainty and the occult nevertheless remains highly suggestive here. The new impetus of lineage sacrifices arises from grappling with the perennial questions of production and reproduction in what is perceived to be an increasingly competitive milieu and from a more vulnerable position. Lineage rituals, I argue, are part of my informants' location of the 'ultimate causes' of their economic and social predicaments in something that lies beyond the social—something that is numinous and enigmatic, as represented by powerful but capricious tutelaries who are also identifiable and with whom communication is possible. Sacrifices to these tutelaries represent attempts to interact with and enter into exchange with these forces and therefore persuade them to grant their blessings to productive and reproductive enterprises. Having delineated the political logics that frame lineage deities, I now turn to documenting some of the inner intentions that propel the enactment of animal sacrifices to these deities in the contemporary agrarian milieu.

Within the context of tutelary worship among corporate descent groups such as the Kallar lineage, sacrifices are fundamentally about the cultivation of fertility through the attempt to force the processes of creation using violence and death. Sacrifice in this case is 'creative

⁵⁰ Johnson, A. A. (2012). 'Naming Chaos: Accident, Precariousness, and The Spirits of Wildness in Urban Thai Spirit Cults', *American Ethnologist*, 39:4, 766–778.

⁵¹ Moore, S. (1999). 'Reflections on the Comaroff Lecture', *American Ethnologist*, 26:2, 304–306.

⁵² Rudnyckyj, *Spiritual Economies*.

⁵³ Kapferer, B. (2003). 'Outside All Reason: Magic, Sorcery and Epistemology in Anthropology' in Kapferer, B. *Beyond Rationalism: Rethinking Magic, Witchcraft and Sorcery*. New York: Berghahn Books, pp. 1–30.

power', which is predicated on the violent destruction of a former creation.⁵⁴ Indeed, its basis in 'ontogenetic and cosmogonic dynamics' makes sacrifice 'the total act which condenses ... the generative processes constitutive of human beings and their life worlds'.⁵⁵ This generative capacity of sacrificial rituals is explained in this analysis of cosmogonies embedded within Tamil temple myths.⁵⁶

One kills and in killing produces a vacuum that must attract more life ... [For] 'the Hindu universe is a closed circuit, nothing new can be produced except by destroying or transforming something else.

One must forfeit a life, ideally one's own, for the reward of more life (children) and wealth. In the quest to recreate more life, the sacrificial animal is actually the human sacrificer's designated substitute for their own being.⁵⁷ This is all the more apparent within the context of the sacrificial lineage cult, which is premised on securing a 'permanent vitality', uncompromised by the processes of biological decay and death as well as politico-economic transformations.⁵⁸ Even as it is based on the decapitation of animals, the exclusion of women, and the denial of all other natural and social constituents of generativity, lineage sacrifices revolve entirely around production and reproduction.⁵⁹ Having described some of the newer logics and ethics that have become attached to lineage sacrifices, it is to this first and fundamental rationale that I turn in this final section. A cult and a ritual of fertility predominantly associated with the biological, the agricultural, and the rural has been adapted to the demands of social reproduction through education and employment in an increasingly competitive milieu. The old gods may have lost their political impetus in an electoral democracy, but in post-liberalization India, their procreative valence, I argue, has assumed renewed significance.

Economic liberalization in India was initiated in the late 1980s through the removal of some of the restrictions and high taxes characteristic of the Nehruvian planned economy. In 1991, a determined policy of dismantling government controls and introducing market-oriented economic reforms was initiated. In the

⁵⁴ Nabokov, *Religion Against The Self*, p. 165.

⁵⁵ Kapferer, B. (1997). *The Feast of The Sorcerer: Practices of Consciousness and Power*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, p. 187.

⁵⁶ Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths*, pp. 90–91.

⁵⁷ Fuller, *The Camphor Flame*, pp. 82–85; Nabokov, *Religion Against The Self*, p. 176.

⁵⁸ Nabokov, *Religion Against The Self*, p. 165; Bloch, *Prey Into Hunter*.

⁵⁹ Nabokov, *Religion Against The Self*, p. 178.

1990s the Indian economy became increasingly integrated into the global economy. Foreign direct investment increased, barriers to foreign trade were reduced, and growing numbers of Indians began to work for global enterprises. A moribund Indian economy was transformed with rising growth rates and increasing economic opportunities. This meant mounting incomes and consumption, especially for, but not restricted to, the wealthy middle classes in the cities. Within the context of a thriving economy, aspirations towards worldly success in terms of not only education and employment but also consumption and accumulation have become even more imperative. The opportunities for achieving these goals have also increased due to the widening availability of employment and business opportunities resulting from an expanding private sector and the investments of multinational corporations. At the same time, the availability of a variety of foreign and local consumer goods and services means that there are more avenues on which to spend one's income and display one's newly acquired status.

Two main religious concomitants to these economic transformations have been the rise of Hindu nationalism⁶⁰ and globalized religious movements centred on charismatic gurus.⁶¹ Both these developments have partly been fuelled by the rise of the newly affluent urban middle classes, who are both assured about their worldly success and anxious about their religious ignorance and cultural transmission to their children. Their growing religiosity is not a result of existential anxiety, but an assertion of their worldly success and an emphatic cultural nationalism.⁶² As we have seen, these factors also underpin the enactment of more and more spectacular lineage sacrifices in Vaduvur as the dominant caste exerts its power and prestige. While it does account for ritual proliferation in general, this explanation has two

⁶⁰ Hansen, T. B. (1999). *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India*, Princeton: Princeton University Press; Corbridge, S. and Harriss, J. (2000). *Reinventing India: Liberalisation, Hindu Nationalism and Popular Democracy*, Cambridge: Polity Press; Rajagopal, A. (2001). *Politics After Television: Religious Nationalism and the Reshaping of The Indian Public*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

⁶¹ Fuller, C.J. and Harriss, J. (2005). 'Globalising Hinduism: A "Traditional" Guru and Modern Businessman in Chennai' in Assayag, J. and Fuller, C. J. *Globalising India: Perspectives from Below*, London: Anthem Press, pp. 211–236; Warriar, M. (2005). *Hindu Selves in the Modern World: Guru Faith in The Mata Amritanandamayi Mission*, South Asian Religion Series, London: Routledge-Curzon; Srinivas, *In the Presence of Sai Baba*; Srinivas, *Winged Faith*.

⁶² Nanda, M. (2009). *The God Market: How Globalisation Is Making India More Hindu*, Noida: Random House India.

main drawbacks. First, it is framed by a predominantly urban outlook in which there is little consideration of the particular challenges of a rural existence and agrarian subsistence. Second, it offers a fairly monolithic characterization of rituals which does not adequately account for the subtleties of why it is lineage worship and sacrifices in particular that are burgeoning. In order to counter this rather blunt assessment, the particular logics of not just sacrificial rituals but also the Kallar lineage itself are as integral as the specific material realities of the Kallars to the analysis of their understandings and experiences of socio-economic transformations in post-liberalization India.

The lineage deity is the origin of the lineage, part of their own and their residential territory's very essence. It is the lineage's original god and must be worshipped before and above all other deities. Sacrifices that abrogate the separations between the deity and the devotee assert and reassert this elemental kinship. This sacred affinity, the nature of the tutelary deities themselves, and the specific devotions due to them must also be taken into account in order to offer a convincing explanation for the proliferation of lineage sacrifices. The great Sanskritic deities such as Vishnu and Shiva are omnipotent, but their preoccupations are cosmic rather than earthly. They are remote and much less readily responsive to the pleas of their devotees. Other deities, such as Hanuman and various forms of mother goddesses (Amman), are perceived to be not only powerful but also more accessible, intercessionary, and immediately efficacious. That they are seen as more appropriate for addressing worldly concerns is one reason why their cults are also rising in popularity.⁶³ However, the attention and divine favour of even these more approachable gods must be shared with countless other worshippers, whereas the sole concern of a lineage deity is its own lineage. Embedded as they are in a specific territory, and related as they are to a specific kin-group, the orientation of these gods is decidedly earthbound and intimate. Their attention, grace, and loyalty are fiercely partisan and decidedly undivided. Their first and indeed only obligation is towards their own lineage, and they are willing to do *anything* to help them. The only

⁶³ Obeyesekere, G. (1977). 'Social Change and The Deities: Rise of the Katagarama Cult in Modern Sri Lanka', *Man*, New Series, 12:3/4, 377–396; Waghorne, *Diaspora of the Gods*, pp. 133–134; Harman, *Cult of the Goddess*; Lutgendorf, P. (2007). *Hanuman's Tale: The Messages of a Divine Monkey*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

purpose of lineage deities is to protect and promote the fertility of their own lineage.⁶⁴

The repeated forging of appropriate relationships between persons, their places, their fellow humans (specifically their kin), and their gods is the foundation of productivity in the Hindu universe. Defined by the ethics of relatedness and reciprocity, animal sacrifice is the pivot of 'a complex system of life-giving exchanges' between a lineage deity and its lineage.⁶⁵ Ritual sacrifice is based on the transaction of an animal life (premised on death) for the promise of a perpetual fertility which transcends the putrescent actuality of sexual procreation. It also involves the abnegation of the individual and atomized self for a substantially and socially totalized and therefore holistic community. Lineage sacrificial rituals connect all forms of productive power in a spectacular display of the fertility, sociality, and ethics that are necessary for their continuing realization.⁶⁶ With blood, meat, and life itself as the currency, sacrifice to tutelary deities is a ritual means through which to secure the continuous circulation of life forces in the domestic and public spheres. When sacrificial obligations are compromised or neglected, these deities can retaliate by withdrawing their presence and favour from the productive enterprises of their lineage. This is perceived to be the cause of economic and social crises.

It is this perception of crises, specifically in terms of productivity, that has underpinned the resurgence of lineage sacrifices. Lineage-mates who had migrated to neighbouring districts and even cities like Chennai are increasingly making it a point to return to their native villages in order to honour their original gods. They are reinstating their rights to sponsor and participate in the sacrificial cult and to share in the consecrated meat. They are reasserting their identification with their kin (ancestors, contemporary kin, and descendants), their native place, and their original god. The ethnographic record is replete with attempts to resurrect rituals to propitiate angry gods thought to be responsible for misfortunes.⁶⁷ However, it is not so much their novelty but why these specific rituals

⁶⁴ Moffatt, M. (1979). *An Untouchable Community in South India: Structure and Consensus*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 229; Nabokov, *Religion Against The Self*, pp. 154–155.

⁶⁵ Nabokov, *Religion Against The Self*, p. 170.

⁶⁶ Bear, 'This Body is Our Body'; Bear, L. (2012). 'Sympathy and its Material Limits: Necropolitics, Labour and Waste on The Hooghly River' in Alexander, C. and Reno, J. *Economies of Recycling*, London: Zed Press, pp. 185–203.

⁶⁷ Fuller, *The Camphor Flame*.

have been deemed so necessary at this particular moment that is the question here. The Kallars in Vaduvur have acquired more wealth, power, and status. The liberalization of the Indian economy is opening up even more economic opportunities so that they may entrench their local authority. Indeed, like many before them, they are engaged in translating their localized and agrarian-based dominance into urban and occupation-based social mobility. Even as they retain ownership of their lands, they are increasingly leaving the actual cultivation to tenants—the lower castes who have been their primary agricultural labour force—to finance educational and employment opportunities for their sons in the cities.

However, for non-Brahmins like the Kallars their position is ‘directly dependent on the economic political and ritual dominance’ they have accrued in the village. Becoming independent of their given locality through urbanization and industrialization therefore entails moving into ‘riskier and more socially unstable environments’.⁶⁸ At the same time, they continue to be economically reliant on agriculture with all its usual vagaries of nature, infrastructure, markets, politics, and productivity for their subsistence and for investments in future social mobility. Therefore the Kallars cannot be said to be as untroubled by existential anxiety as the predominantly urban and comfortable middle classes who approach charismatic gurus because they offer a divine validation for material success and help to assuage any philosophical ambivalence surrounding it.⁶⁹ Along with the expanded opportunities and sense of optimism offered by economic liberalization there is also an awareness of intensified competition for scarce resources, as the number of persons aspiring to and qualified for educational and employment opportunities has greatly increased.

Even in the village, the democratization and economic transformations that facilitated the disintegration of the Brahmin-headed agrarian order to the advantage of the Kallars are now allowing the lower castes to compete with and challenge the Kallars’ local dominance. In accounting for the resurgence of ritual sacrifices exclusively in terms of the validation of their assured power and status, there is a risk of overestimating the strength and stability of the Kallars’ dominance. Simultaneously, there is also a

⁶⁸ Barnett, M. (1976). *The Politics of Cultural Nationalism in South India*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 25.

⁶⁹ Warrior, *Hindu Selves in the Modern World*; Fuller and Harriss, ‘Globalising Hinduism’.

risk of underestimating the challenges and uncertainties that they experience as they engage with the shifting material and political realities of contemporary rural life. Lineage sacrifices assert the dominance of the Kallars. They are transactions intended to preserve and amplify this power and prestige. After all, as several Kallars opined, 'Only if we look after our lineage deity will he look after us.' However, in choosing to address the challenges of contemporary social reproduction as they have—stressing the sameness and corporateness of kinship, the perpetuity and procreative power of tutelary deities, and the fertile efficacy of the medium of sacrifice—there is also an acknowledgement (however oblique) of the uncertainties of the post-liberalization rural milieu and the vulnerabilities of the Kallars' current position.

Conclusion: ritual power and potential

In this article, I have examined how extant cultural resources have been adapted in order to make shifting cosmological and material realities both manageable and meaningful. The paradox of waning divine charisma and simultaneous ritual proliferation is a microcosm through which to understand the vital, everyday, and intimate experiences of both transcendental cosmological formations as well as large-scale political and economic transformations.

First, it explains the nature of such place- and people-specific forms of divine tutelaries and their relationship with the material world. The boundaries between the ritual and the material are not just porous or negotiated, but often even unrecognized. The cosmic, territorial, numinous, economic, political, and ethical are intricately connected such that a crisis in one domain has reverberations throughout the others. More significantly, the intimate presence of tutelary deities within the material world and their active interventions in the lives of their devotees are part of the very constitutive essence of their potency. The corollary to this belief in the localization of the divine is the very real threat of the departure of the god from their dwelling places. Even as these deities are part of the cosmic flows of power and fertility and often peripatetic, they also inhere in and distil universal energies in particular places for particular peoples. Even as they embody the primordial sacred energies of the universe, they are framed by the tenor of particular historical contexts and socio-political dynamics. Given that their potency is predicated on their immanence, their

powerlessness is also not a permanent condition. Potency is certainly affected, though not limited by, socio-political vagaries. Indeed, what is being articulated in Vaduvur is a theory of an immanent divine that is not just permeable to politics but is itself inherently political.

Second, Vaduvur's political crisis and flourishing ritual economy is one implication of the political and economic transformations accompanying the entrenchment of electoral democracy and the liberalization of the Indian economy in a rural setting. While the emphasis has been on the ritual and moral repercussions of political and economic processes, this does not mean that rituals simply reflect socio-economic transformations⁷⁰ or even suppress the visibility of such transformations.⁷¹ Rituals, above all, are cultural technologies imbued with power, transformative potential, and also risk.⁷² In the Tamil universe, a fruitful existence and a viable social life are as dependent on the ethical conduct of an individual and the morality of their sociality as they are on ecological and economic circumstances. This underpins the capacity of ritual action to not only affect self-consciousness but also influence wider socio-economic conditions. Rituals are instruments for people to not merely make sense of but also actively engage with, maintain or transform both themselves and their world. The counter-intuitive surge in animal sacrifices is part of ordinary villagers' efforts to make sense of the life forces that sustain productivity in their everyday lives and grapple with the problems of social reproduction. Such concerns are by no means new, but they are seen as especially pertinent given both the opportunities and the competitiveness and uncertainties that are part of the shifting material realities augured by economic liberalization in village India. But these rituals themselves are fraught with risk. The welfare, honour, status, and perhaps even the lives of the sponsors are at stake. More importantly, such rituals intrinsically involve grappling with powerful and dangerous forces, the intended outcomes of which are never guaranteed.⁷³

Having said all that, the logics underpinning village Hindu rituals are nothing if not multiple, disparate, and, indeed, contradictory. This

⁷⁰ Obeyesekere, 'Social Change and The Deities'.

⁷¹ Cole, J. (2001). *Forget Colonialism: Sacrifice and the Art of Memory in Madagascar*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

⁷² Howe, 'Risk, Ritual and Performance'.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

is evident in the classic Hindu correlation between modernity and moral degeneracy:⁷⁴

During the Kali Yuga, there is a breakdown in moral discipline and social order. The gods become so disgusted that they stop manifesting themselves before their devotees. They stop answering their devotees' prayers and start retreating from the world. This means that the devotees' faith in and fear of their gods decrease. This leads to even more wickedness. At the same time, devotees work even harder to propitiate their gods in order to stave off their punishments and solicit divine grace and favour. The practices of worship and sacrifices therefore begin to increase dramatically.⁷⁵

It is precisely the withdrawal of the gods from the human world as manifested in their waning charisma that gives rise to ritual proliferation. Both are an inevitable part of the grave political and cosmological consequences that follow the unravelling of the moral moorings of a community. The conundrum at the heart of this article is not a conundrum after all, but is precisely what is supposed to be happening now. It is all part of an unfolding cosmic agenda. More so than its explanatory power, what the invoking of this alternative interpretation proves is that the ostensible contradictions in the conception of tutelary deities and their worship do not readily resolve themselves. These elusive deities not only evade but also exceed precisely calibrated causative connections between the social and the cosmic—that is, the attempts to rationalize them away. Indeed, it is in such sacred ambiguities that their forceful and fearful majesty is rooted.

⁷⁴ Pinney, C. (2009). 'On Living in the Kal(i)yug: Notes from Nagda, Madhya Pradesh', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 33:1/2, pp. 77–106.

⁷⁵ This account is from a ritual priest who presides at tutelary sacrifices.