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"PERFORMING FAITH": DANCE IN CURRENT HINDU WORSHIP IN THE UK

This paper presents some of the theoretical concepts that frame and underpin the findings of fieldwork carried out in Hindu communities in the United Kingdom, specifically examining dance practices within the context of religious worship. Theoretical constructs that relate to issues of ethnicity, identity, community, culture and religion are interrogated as part of the doctoral thesis, however, this paper will focus on theories of ritual and performance in relation to two Hindu festival activities that form a part of the fieldwork.

I refer to the Tamil annual Hindu festival of *Tai Pusam*, which falls in January and honours the deity Murugan, one of the sons of Siva. It celebrates the mythological handing of a spear, the *vel*, to Murugan by his mother Parvati, in order that he may overcome the demon Taraka who had been oppressing the gods. The *vel*'s significance is that it represents the active power of god in the world. During this festival, and as part of the religious ritual, some men devotees choose to carry the *kavadi*, a large, heavy wooden frame, decorated with flowers, peacock feathers and pots of milk as offerings for the god, on their shoulders. They will process or dance either three times around the temple, or in a procession in the streets outside, or traditionally in Malaysia, undertaking an ascent of nearly 300 steps to a shrine at the top of the Batu Caves.¹ It is an act of extraordinary devotion, requiring tremendous physical strength and endurance, and is often undertaken as a vow (*vrata*) or penance. Additionally, the men may choose to have their bodies pierced with a small silver replica of the *vel* or spear through their cheeks and another through their tongue. They may also have thin needles pierced through the skin on their arms, and hooks in their backs. Many will go into trance and will dance for the entire duration of the ritual. Most aspects of *Tai Pusam* referred to in this paper relate to fieldwork carried out at the London Sri Murugan Temple in East Ham.²

The second Hindu festival selected for the doctoral research and that is examined in this paper is that of *Navratri*, the annual autumn nine-night celebration of the feminine aspect of the divine power. It is a pan-Indian festival, but is enacted with particular intensity by the women of Gujarat (in north-west India), who will traditionally perform circular, rhythmic, clapping and stick folk dances, called *garba* and *raas*, around a central shrine in honour of the goddess Devi or Durga. These events take place for several hours every evening for nine days. Fieldwork for this festival has been undertaken in Gujarati Hindu communities in both Leicester and London.³

To create a theoretical framework in which to examine these dance/movement practices within Hindu religious ritual, I draw firstly on anthropologist Milton Singer's concept of 'cultural performances'. Singer writes of his fieldwork experiences in India that:

I was helped to identify the units of observation not by deliberately looking for them but by noticing the centrality and recurrence of certain types of things I had observed in the experience of Indians themselves. I shall call these things "cultural performances", because they include what we in the West usually call by that name – for example, plays, concerts, and lectures. But they include also prayers, ritual readings and recitations, rites and ceremonies, festivals, and all those things we usually classify under religion and ritual rather than with the cultural and artistic [Singer 1972:71].

In his discussions on ritual and religion, cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz, citing Singer, describes how such elaborate and usually public ceremonies 'shape the spiritual consciousness of a people' [Geertz 1973: 113], and how they are frequently used by Hindus as a way to exhibit their religion and its meaning to both onlookers and to themselves. This concept of 'cultural performance' relates closely to the title of this paper – 'Performing Faith' – and it is in this sense that the term 'cultural performance' is used here. For example, the men dancing the *kavadi* dance in the Tamil temples are literally performing their faith whilst they participate in a ritual cultural performance at a calendrical festival. So too are the women playing *garba* during the nine-night festival of *Navratri*. In front of the large audience of elders and young children and amongst each other, the women offer an expression of their faith in a performance for the goddess *devi*, their ritualistic swaying, their rhythmic foot movements and hand claps creating a devout and focussed atmosphere as they move in large concentric circles around the central shrine.

To further analyse these performances of faith or cultural performances of ritual action, I draw too on French folklorist Arnold van Gennep's study of ritual, *Les Rites de Passage*, (*The rites of passage*) and anthropologist Victor Turner's extended emphasis and exploration of the state of liminality, from van Gennep's three-fold model. Van Gennep's study of ritual was highly influential to the development of Anglo-American anthropology and in particular on the work of Turner and Mary Douglas, as well as

being taken up within the discipline of religious studies. Van Gennep was interested in all rituals that marked transitions in life in a broad sense, and he applied to these rituals a model of three separate phases – that of separation, transition and incorporation. He also used the terms preliminal, liminal and postliminal for these phases. These three stages of ritual are examined now in relation to the two Hindu festivals.

The first stage of the ritual process according to van Gennep, the preliminal or separation stage, entails a breaking away from a previous state, a change or preparation for what is to come. This may necessitate, for example, a change of clothing, a shaving of the head, or a physical seclusion from others. There is a clear demarcation of secular time and space, from the entry into sacred time and space. For example, in preparation for carrying and dancing the *kavadi* for the Hindu deity Murugan, the male devotee has to spend a period of time fasting, praying, bathing and refraining from certain activities. In a less elaborate way, the women attending the *raas/garba* events at Navratri will put on special clothes and jewellery, and some will prepare too by fasting during the period. All these actions, physically, mentally and emotionally, help to prepare the devotee for the cultural performance or ritual he or she is undertaking – a preparation for their 'performance of faith'.

Van Gennep's model indicates that the next stage of the ritual or rite of passage, called a liminal or transition stage, may be a state of ambiguity or even confusion. 'Normal rules of behaviour may be suspended or exaggerated Certain rules on speech and movement may be imposed' [Bowie 2000: 163]. It is termed liminal because of the sense at this stage of crossing a threshold, or moving between one particular condition to another, with the emphasis on the point in between the two. Turner calls it 'neither here nor there ... betwixt and between' [Turner 1969: 95], yet it is the site of significant action. It may often be the climax of the ritual where the transition is marked and reinforced, and indicates a change in status, identity or new growth. In religious ritual, the devotee steps into sacred space, a space where different rules apply and normal regulations of time are suspended. It is a space where one is freed from the demands of daily life. This is the point in carrying *kavadi* where the male devotee may go into a trance as he dances. He is no longer the ordinary man that he was, but appears to be embodied by some power of the deity, enabling him to carry the heavy weight of the wooden *kavadi* on his shoulders and dance with abandon, and also to bear the piercings of the *vel* with no apparent pain. It is a liminal state.

This too occurs during the *Navratri* festival. The condition of the women playing *garba* reveals a state of focussed attention, free from everyday concerns, and energised to enable participation in the movement for several hours, often without a break. 'You feel free, you feel relaxed, you feel you're connected with what's there, with a presence. You loose touch with all the worries of the world. You're in the presence of god. It's as if you're meditating', one of my informants at Navratri told me [David 2002]. The presence of the deity is almost tangible in the hearts and minds of the women devotees, and occasionally, some of the women may go into a trance.

The final stage of the process according to van Gennep is one of reintegration, where the individual is incorporated again into society in a changed way. The rites of this stage may mirror those of the first stage, where clothing that has been especially worn can be taken off, or movements related to entry into the sacred space may be performed again on leaving it. The male Hindu devotees after carrying *kavadi* spoke of feeling 'clean, fresh, renewed' with a restored and confident (and perhaps new) relationship with their deities. They are blessed by the priest in the temple and given *prasad* (blessed food). The Hindu women celebrating Navratri return home at the end of each evening to their families with revitalised religious inspiration and a sense of inner cleanliness earned through the purity of their devotion. As Turner describes, 'The third phase represents the often exuberant return of the novice to society' [Turner; Turner 1982:202].

Ritual – the liminal phase

Turner was particularly interested in the middle phase of van Gennep's system – the liminal state – which he considered more as a process than a condition. He emphasised the significance of this central component of ritual activity, describing it as one of ambiguity, vulnerability, potentiality, creativity and even paradox. It brings freedom from a person's usual constraints and common structures of life, and therefore is described by Turner as a time of anti-structure. Old identities are stripped away, one's usual status is suspended and there is:

the liberation of human capacities of cognition, affect, volition, creativity, etc., from the normative constraints incumbent upon occupying a sequence of social statuses, enacting a multiplicity of social roles etc. [Turner 1982:44].

Liminality is a phase that can be extended or elaborated almost indefinitely, and is where transformation may take place. Turner's detailed analysis of liminality forms an important frame through

which to view Hindu ritual dance practices, such as the *kavadi* or *raas/garba*, in an extension of van Gennep's theoretical three-fold approach.

Turner classified the concept of this transitional, liminal time into three further ideas that can be analytically distinguished: that of a) 'communication of *sacra*' (sacred objects); b) 'ludic recombination' (notion of play); and c) 'communitas' (feeling of group solidarity). The last aspect, *communitas*, is again divided by Turner into a tripartite system of spontaneous, ideological and normative *communitas*. I draw now upon Turner's three-fold model of the liminal phase in detail (that is a, b, and c, above), and not on the three further aspects of *communitas*, as time here is constrained.

The first distinction of the liminal process is of the 'communication of *sacra*', the secret and sacred objects of the community both physical and conceptual which may be exhibited, instructed or enacted in dance and drama. Examining the example of the Hindu festival of Tai Pusam, one finds that all the objects used for the event are carefully and ritually prepared. To the sounds of chanting, music, and prayers of the priests, incense is burnt and the *kavadi* made ready. Small pots of milk are tied onto the wooden frame, decorations made with flowers, and the devotee's body is pierced.⁴ Before piercing, the *vels* (small silver lances or spears) will have been blessed and purified by the priest, and holy ash from the shrine of the deity is used to put in the cheeks of the devotee, and on his forehead. For this important festival day, the deities have been especially dressed, garlanded and exhibited. Ritual specialists are employed to effect the piercings, and the devotees are given instruction regarding how to prepare for the event, and what to do on the day. So 'the *sacra* may also be communicated by *instruction*' [Turner; Turner 1982: 204]. Turner calls this exhibition and communication of the sacred objects 'the heart of the liminal matter' [Turner; Turner 1982: 203].

But the *Sacra* are not only objects, they are also represented by actions, including ritual drama and dance, for example, the acting out of episodes from mythological stories. Turner remarks in this context, that 'Dance is the generative power par excellence, which brings the whole person into communion with the fundamental meanings, values, and goals of a living culture' [Turner; Turner 1982: 204]. In these terms, the *kavadi* trance dancing is also 'communication of *sacra*', where the devotee is said for a time to represent the deity Murugan in a show of his strength, invincibility and beneficence.

The 'communication of *sacra*' is evident too in the devotional responses and movement practices of the Navratri festival. The hired hall⁵ will be carefully prepared, transforming a secular space into a sacred one by the installation of the hexagonal shrine to the deity in the centre of the room. Once again, the shrine is decorated, *arti* trays with symbolic offerings of lights, flowers and fruit are laid out around the shrine, and there the *tenemos* is ready for the evening's worship. The *raas* and *garba* clapping movements take place around the central shrine, as do the prayers halfway through the evening. These Gujarati folk dances represent also aspects of Hindu mythology, alluding firstly in the *garba*, to the shepherd girls (*gopis*) in their circular movement around the god Krishna, in a glorified moment of union with their lord. Each is said to experience a merging in love, symbolic of the merging of the individual self (*atman*) with the supreme universal consciousness (*brahman*).⁶ The second 'dance', the *raas*, with sticks, suggests Krishna playing with the *gopi* girls. Turner, describing this aspect of liminality, notes how:

Such sacred dramas are often intrinsically connected with dance. Liminal ritual and myth are designed to bring about a restoration of the cosmogonic past when all sensorily perceptible phenomena came into being [Turner; Turner 1982: 204].

This example too reveals Turner's notion of 'communitas' (the third aspect of the liminal state), which he describes as 'a flash of lucid mutual understanding on the existential level' [Turner 1982: 48]. The *raas/garba* practices offer a two-fold understanding of this concept: the mythological synchronicity of the *gopis* (shepherd girls) moving as one, becoming 'totally absorbed into a single synchronized, fluid event' [Turner 1982: 48], and the contemporary perceptions of the participants of Navratri festival, who speak of an experience of group solidarity, of 'being' together whilst they are moving and clapping in the circles. It is important to acknowledge Turner's stressing of the fact that *communitas* preserves an 'individual distinctiveness' that is not emotional, 'nor is it "merging" in fantasy' [Turner 1982: 45- 46], although he does also describe it as 'magical' and 'deep' [Turner 1982: 47]. One of the *kavadi* participants of the Tai Pusam festival, spoke too of the experience of oneness with his fellow devotees, a sense of *communitas* and feeling of well-being and happiness. He told me, 'It was a happy thing to do, a good feeling. I was fully there' [David 2004].

Ritual – the notion of 'play'

A further characteristic of the state of liminality is the notion of 'play', the 'ludic recombination' of Turner's tripartite analysis of the liminal process, which is described as:

the analysis of culture into factors and their free, playful ("ludic") recombination in any and every possible pattern however deviant, grotesque, unconventional, or outrageous. This procedure is quintessentially liminal...[Turner; Turner 1982:204].

I argue that it is particularly significant in relation to the movements of *raas/garba*. Firstly, the Gujarati verb used for these 'dance' practices is the word 'play', never the word 'dance'. *Garba ramavo* is the Gujarati term for 'playing *garba*'. 'Are you going to play *garba*?' one will be asked, or the comment may be made, 'You play nice *garba*'. Dance is used to refer to performances in nightclubs, or other staged performances, but not to religious practices where movement is involved. The term 'play' carries both the philosophical sense of the *lila*, the world-play of the gods and their sport, and additionally, Turner's concept of 'ludic recombination' within the liminal state of ritual. When asked about this use of the word 'play', a Gujarati language teacher described how the *garba* signifies joy, like the ordinary 'fun' play in a game, but that it also encapsulates the sense of the universal play of the gods. He added, 'It is said that the rhythm of the *garba* beats in the heart of the individual, like the rhythm of the universe' [David 2003].

Secondly are the two related concepts in Sanskrit of *maya* (illusion) and *lila* (play), which are central to the Hindu view of the cosmos, in which it is stated that at the beginning of the world, the gods wished to play, and through their powers of illusion, created the world and mankind for their sport. [It is worth noting here that the Latin 'ludo' also appears in English as "elusive, illusion" and "delusion".] The notion suggested is that the universe is an imagination, a play solely for the creator's enjoyment. This idea is carried directly through into the mythological stories of the god Krishna and his sport with the shepherd girls, and manifest in the dance forms of the *raas/garba*. It is both serious and playful, simultaneously.

Concluding remarks

The above considerations of ritual theory taken from van Gennep and Turner offer a scheme of ideas which attempt to frame and explain the practical data gleaned from the ethnological fieldwork carried out in two United Kingdom Hindu communities in London and Leicester. It reveals 'an interaction between things done, things observed and systematic explanation of these' [Williams 1976: 317]. Evidence reveals that dance and ritual performance which takes place at Hindu annual religious festivals can be viewed through a framework relating to rites of passage, perhaps indicating that significant changes take place in the devotee's inner life through participation at these events as well as his or her outer life. The passage is of the inner journey, and of sacred time, as well as being part of the external life in ordinary time. These events, these 'cultural performances' are in fact, truly performances of faith.

Endnotes

1. For further discussion of the Malaysian Tai Pusam festival, see Willford 2002.
2. This temple has been housed in an old 'public house' since 1990, but in 2005, is due to move into a new traditionally built South Indian temple, which will be the first of its kind in London. There are currently six full-time working priests, who follow a South Indian rather than Sri Lankan calendar as the temple is host to predominately Tamil devotees from South India, with a smaller group from Sri Lanka.
3. The majority of these Gujaratis emigrated from East Africa in the early 1970s, forced out by Idi Amin's policy of Africanisation. They are sometimes called 'twice-migrants' having originally left their homes in Gujarat, north-west India.
4. This is usually only undertaken by the males, although there is evidence of some female bodies being pierced.
5. Because these events attract such a large number of devotees – several hundred or more – sports halls, community centres or any large indoor spaces are hired for the duration of the event.
6. These two Sanskrit terms, *atman* and *brahman* are an essential concept in Hindu philosophic thought.

References cited

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2002 Fieldnotes of Navrati event at Swaminarayan Temple, 19 October in London. Private collection: Ann David.</p> | <p>2003 Notes of telephone interview with teacher of Gujarati, 28 October. Private collection: Ann David.</p> <p>2004 Notes of personal communication during Tamil Tai Pusam festival, 22 February. Private collection: Ann David.</p> |
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