

THE TRANSMISSION OF ORAL TRADITION IN  
RELIGIOUS AND DOMESTIC CONTEXTS AMONG SOUTH  
AFRICAN TAMIL INDIANS

by

KOGIELAM KEERTHI ARCHARY

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### ABSTRACT

This study attempts to discuss the transmission of oral tradition in religious and domestic contexts among the Indian Tamil Hindu people of South Africa.

In chapter one, the focus of this study, as well as some reasons for choosing the Tamil group are discussed. The focus of this essay is to highlight the transmission of oral tradition in communities that have been physically separated from the original homes of those particular communities.

Thereafter, in chapter two, examples of surviving domestic rituals are analysed. Life cycle rituals and calendrical rituals that are performed in the home are discussed with examples. Examples of surviving public rituals are considered in chapter three.


An account of the rituals that are performed in the temple [either calendrical or of a personal nature] is given.

In chapter four Tamil Hindu mythology which has survived in this country is given consideration. Lord Siva, in particular, is discussed to a greater extent.

An overview of how some of the tradition has survived concludes this essay.

DECLARATION

I declare that this essay, unless otherwise  
stated, is my original work.

  
..... 18 January 1993  
SIGNATURE

DEDICATION

Dedicated to my late grandparents, Mr and Mrs S.P.Pillay  
who were a constant source of motivation.

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## **CHAPTER ONE : FOCUS OF STUDY**

### **1.1.INTRODUCTION : GENERAL FOCUS**

Ong [1982] is of the opinion that the orality - literacy interaction enters into ultimate human concerns and aspirations. He further states that all the religious traditions of mankind have their remote origins in the oral past and it appears that they all make a great deal of the spoken word. Thus, in light of the above, the central focus of this essay is the religious traditions of the Indian Tamil Hindu in South Africa.

The intention of this study is to highlight the transmission of oral tradition in communities which have been physically separated from the original homes of those particular communities.

There are many instances in recorded history where whole groups of people have moved great distances either across land or sea for a variety of reasons and many more can be inferred for prehistoric communities [such as the ancestors of the Indo - European people, to mention only one example]. Where such migration takes place, the study of oral traditions confronts the problems of what parts [if any] of the tradition are maintained and of how they continue to be transmitted.



Despite mass migrations being a common occurrence, and the problem of the maintenance of the oral tradition therefore arising quite often, this aspect of the new and developing communities has not received the necessary attention which its interest and importance deserve.

I have looked through the prescribed text for this course, The Oral Style [1990], to see if there is any discussion on the transmission of oral tradition with reference to migrant communities anywhere in the world but could not find any.

In view of these apparent gaps in the literature, it is the aim of this essay to make a small contribution towards filling them by considering some aspects of the Indian community in South Africa which does provide a local and interesting 'migrant' case out of many others, since it is one of the largest Indian communities outside of India, and, indeed, Durban is the largest 'Indian' city outside of India.

Furthermore, this Indian community has been subjected to many rapid and drastic changes which might be expected to affect the transmission of oral tradition.

Being a minority population group in the South African society meant facing up to many trials and tribulations which were aggravated by occupying an inferior, subordinate position in the broader South African society.

These trying and insecure circumstances as well as the fact that they were physically separated from their fatherland dictated or allowed only limited opportunities for the maintenance of oral traditions.

Particularly those Indians [the majority] who came as indentured labourers had to contend with relatively poor circumstances with little or no obvious incentives to preserve their own cultures. Thus, their opportunities to maintain some or even any part of their oral tradition on the face of it was feeble and bleak.

A conspicuous feature of the history of the descendants of these indentured Indians is the fairly rapid loss of the vernacular languages amongst them. Language is, of course, the main vehicle for the transmission of oral tradition and here, in South Africa, that vehicle has to a very large degree not been maintained. In just three generations, most of the Indian community has switched from its particular vernaculars to English as the home

language. What resulted then, was the apparent loss of the vernacular and language amongst the Indians.

Some figures for people claiming to speak Indian languages, taken from various Population Census records, are set out in Table 1.

**TABLE ONE**

Number of Speakers of Indian Languages in South Africa,  
1936-1980

	1936	1951	1960	1970	1980
Tamil	83 731	120 181	141 977	153 645	24 720
"Hindi"	60 276	89 145	126 067	116 485	25 900
Gujarati	25 408	39 495	53 910	46 039	25 120
Telegu	25 077	30 210	34 483	30 690	4 000
Urdu	13 842	25 455	35 789	—	13 280
Other	2 737	26 090	2 053	71 070	—

By 1936 the only languages with a sizeable number of speakers were, in descending order: Tamil, "Hindi", Gujarati, Telegu, and Urdu.<sup>1</sup>

The 1980 Census figures show a radical reduction in the number of Indian language speakers.

Of the group, the number of Tamil speakers has dropped most drastically. This may have resulted from a number of factors. Firstly, there is greater impetus amongst the other groups to maintain aspects of their culture and language than the Tamil group. Initially, the Tamil group came here as indentured labourers and as such they did not possess the financial stability that was needed to maintain a steady communication with their motherland, thus the means to keep the tradition alive was not available.

However, the Gujarati and Urdu were mainly passenger Indians and the passenger Indians were 'culturally heterogeneous.'<sup>2</sup> The Gujarati and Urdu people were merchants who 'arrived voluntarily with the intention of setting up small businesses in various parts of the province.'<sup>3</sup> Their relative wealth and trading interests kept them apart socially , and sometimes politically, from the indentured Indian. As a result of their superior financial status they were in a more favourable position to ensure that most aspects of their tradition and language were maintained. For example, between 1970 and 1980 the number of Gujarati speakers had dropped from 46 039 to 25 120. Yet, in comparison with the Tamil

speakers for the same period the figures show an vast drop from 153 645 to 24 720.

Another reason for this drop in figures is probably because Tamil parents did and still do not encourage and insist on their children learning the vernacular. If I were to take my own family as an example, none of my aunts, uncles or even cousins can read or write Tamil at present. And even though they may have learnt it, it has been forgotten. However in Moslem homes, to date, parents insist on children attending vernacular classes even before they enter class one. Moslem children are expected to attend Madressa classes [religious and vernacular education] everyday after normal school hours. There is no such compulsion placed on children from Tamil homes.

Even though colloquial Tamil may be spoken in the home, between the years 1970 and 1980 it was not construed as the main spoken language.

For example, my grandfather, spoke to my grandmother in Tamil but he conversed in English to his children and grandchildren.

But because he was a business person and spoke English at his place of work, he would have indicated English as the home language on the census questionnaire even though for

the duration of his marriage he spoke to my grandmother in Tamil.

There is a possibility that these figures are inaccurate because of the changing trends and people wanting to view themselves as being modern and westernised.

These figures, therefore, suggest immediately the question of WHAT, if any, of Indian oral tradition has survived this drastic change. If anything significant has survived, then the second question is HOW has it been maintained, despite all these obstacles.

In order to give any sort of answer to these two main questions, it is necessary first to look at the structure of the Indian population in more depth and detail. It is not always appreciated by outsiders that there are numerous ethnic groups within the Indian South African community, and thus it is inappropriate to study it as an entirety. Instead, it is preferable to study one of the component ethnic groups in some detail.

The first [and most obvious] division of the community is by religion. Originally, the religious division was between Hindu [the large majority] and Moslem, but there are now substantial numbers of Christians. From this tripartite division, this essay deals only with Hindus.

The Hindu group is itself further subdivided according to the original vernacular languages into the main subdivisions of Tamil, Hindi, Gujarati and Telegu.

As it happens, the greater percentage of the descendants of the indentured immigrants were of South Indian origin, predominantly Tamil.

The particular focus of this study is therefore the maintenance of oral tradition among the Tamil Indian community of South Africa. Apart from being the largest single group of Hindus, there are various other reasons for choosing to investigate this particular group.

#### 1.2. REASONS FOR CONCENTRATING ON TAMIL

Firstly, existing literature on the Tamil community here is relatively limited, reflecting the fact that not much emphasis or attention has been afforded them so far in studies of the Indian community.

Thus, Hilda Kuper, a social anthropologist in her monograph The Indian South Africans [1959], tends to emphasise the culture of Hindi speaking people, who have their roots in the north of India.

By comparison, her information on the Tamil community is more limited, though she does give some attention to it. So even though this text aims to paint an ethnographic

picture of the subdivisions within the Indian group, it is quite uneven in its treatment of them.

Fathima Meer, a sociologist, who, herself, belongs to the Moslem community, in her text PORTRAIT OF INDIAN SOUTH AFRICANS [1969] tends to discuss the community in terms of its broad division into Moslems and Hindus and gives only incidental references to particular features of different sections of the community, such as the Tamils.

Thus, I may justifiably state that there is not much in these standard [or in other] works which reflects or comments on the transmission of oral tradition in various contexts among people of Tamil origin in South Africa. Thus there is a clear neglect of the largest single ethnic group within the Indian Community.

Secondly, I happen to be a member of the Tamil group and I have an interest in and some knowledge of the culture, language, norms, values and traditions of this group.

Feeling the way I did about the Tamil language and the cultural background which I inherited encouraged me to take an interest in them and I had learned something of the language both at vernacular school and at university [where I passed Tamil 1] though I do not claim to be a



fluent speaker of it.

Thirdly, the Tamil group provides an interesting case study which emphasises and supports the generalization that motivation and determination are the ingredients for survival.

Fourthly, even though I am an educated, young westernised Indian female I found myself in situations where Tamil tradition demanded how I behaved and was viewed. Oral traditions, themselves would have maintained these expectations and they influenced my life.

### 1.3.CULTURAL HERITAGE

These mostly illiterate indentured labourers brought with them the varied cultural practices and religious beliefs that existed in India at the time.

These practices, beliefs, myths, rituals and customs were and still are transmitted via oral means.

In some cases, the knowledge may have been supplemented by texts brought from India, but these must have been few and available only to a handful of people. There would have been little chance to replenish the supply of such texts for several decades, since they could not be printed here. Furthermore, because of the distance

between India and South Africa, it would have been difficult to maintain a steady contact and thus the relevant literature would not have been readily imported. Added to this difficulty would have been the relatively high costs involved for the people with very small cash incomes.

But the Tamil people brought to their new country ancient traditions which had become theirs through telling and retelling, through learning and remembering over hundreds of generations - accounts of gods and sages and kings, and crafts of wood, metal and fibre and husbandry of animal and soil.

Even though this group of people has often succeeded economically, socially, physically and financially, they have suffered cultural drawbacks. It has not been possible for them to maintain their cultural heritage as it was practised and experienced in India. There have too many difficulties that been endured while trying to maintain their culture.

The great distance between their motherland and adopted country ensured that it was almost impossible for regular contact to be maintained. The Indians in South Africa were cut off from India and this separation which resulted because of the great distance was tantamount to

them experiencing difficulties in the maintenance of various aspects of their traditional views and values.

#### **1.4. CONCLUSION**

In this study I examine the transmission of oral tradition in religious and domestic contexts amongst the descendants of indentured migrant Tamil Hindus in South Africa. For this essay I shall use the term 'Tamil' whenever I refer to the Tamil Hindu. I have already given an outline of my reasons for concentrating on people of Tamil origin and their cultural heritage. Furthermore, for this essay, I shall be drawing mainly from experiences of my family, friends and myself.

In chapters two and three examples of surviving domestic [private] and communal [public] rituals are discussed.

In chapter four I then examine Hindu mythology. Chapter five follows with an in depth analysis of how aspects of oral tradition have been maintained. That oral tradition is not just verbal but also visual or ocular concludes this essay.

**CHAPTER ONE NOTES**

1. R.Mesthrie, Language in Indenture A Sociolinguistic History of Bhojpuri - Hindi in South Africa, Johannesburg, Witwatersrand University Press, 1991, p. 36.

2. H.Kuper, Indian people in Natal , Natal, Natal University Press, 1960, p. 7.

3. Ibid. , p. 6-7

## **CHAPTER TWO : EXAMPLES OF SURVIVING DOMESTIC RITUALS**

### **2.1. INTRODUCTION: RITUALS PERFORMED IN THE HOME**

In a mini - thesis of this nature it is impossible for me to comment on the survival of all aspects of Tamil culture as it is experienced in South Africa. It becomes necessary for me to select certain obvious and more important aspects that have survived. Rituals are one of the most conspicuous practices among the Tamil people in South Africa. Since the rituals are prominent, there is ample opportunity for exposure to the masses. The Tamil people experience this exposure in two contexts. We are either a participant in the ritual or witnesses others participating - us being part of the audience.

Many Tamil people experience this exposure which is inescapable since the rituals occur at regular intervals during the weeks, months and the year. The performance of rituals is one way in which the transmission of oral tradition is maintained. The exposure to the performance of rituals helps in the maintenance of some tradition. Rituals convey a message which is normally rational or pragmatic in nature. These rituals are handed down from generation to generation. They are taught to the people,

who learn, either by imitation - that is by watching and then performing or by being told over and over again what should be done. I learned about rituals by participating in them without ever questioning or challenging issues about them. I was simply told what to do and I did what was expected of me. For example, if I was told to turn the camphor around the lamp three times, then that is what I did without enquiring, and this was as a result of nobody ever enquiring and everybody accepting that this was the correct thing to do. Besides, questioning, was never really encouraged as everybody seems so busy at these rituals and it seems common place to accept what everybody else is doing.

Each generation taught the next what to do and it got done. Basically this aspect of the tradition was passed down, from one generation to another by the rituals being performed with some regularity and by repetition, that is the actions and the words are reiterated either after the priest or after whoever is leading the process. The performance of rituals do provide a steady medium for the transmission of oral tradition.

For the purposes of this dissertation I shall be concentrating on only a limited number of rituals. There are too many rituals which are performed on a

daily, weekly and yearly basis in a Tamil home to be mentioned or even discussed in a dissertation of this length.

However, I shall be concentrating on rituals because

- (a) they are clearly significant in the life of the Tamil person in South Africa, and
- (b) they are a medium for the transmission of oral tradition.

Ritual is a big field and it is impossible for me to discuss every ritual and every aspect of it in detail. However, I shall present a classification and some commentary of the main types of ritual. The rituals that I have selected to discuss in this chapter are summarised in two categories ie.

- (a) Domestic (Private) and
- (b) Communal (Public) rituals.

I shall devote the rest of this chapter to Domestic rituals and chapter three to Communal rituals. I shall also be drawing on personal experiences that involve either my close family, friends and myself.

## **2.2. DOMESTIC RITUALS**

The practise of many different rituals performed in Tamil homes today has been transmitted through oral tradition. These domestic rituals may be further categorised into life - cycle rituals which are conducted at the time of birth, marriage and death.

Other kinds of ritual are performed with a specific or special need in mind, such as special rituals for health, wealth and good fortune. Thus we may say that the need to be wealthy in various aspects of our lives, the need to be in good health and the desire not to experience misfortune has preserved or helped in the maintenance of some aspects of our traditions.

The maintenance and practice of these rituals have survived over the years despite westernization and they still do fulfil an important need in the life of the Tamil person. The indentured labourers and the Indians who lived in South Africa during the pre - war years [ 1945 ] were essentially a poor population. Similar to the situation in India, there was very little or no access to proper health and medical care in South Africa for the Indians.



It is, therefore, rather simplistic, to state that the reason for the performance of Tamil cultural rituals is just a matter of tradition because rituals do meet felt needs. These traditional cultural rituals are intended to serve not just a curative need but also function as a protective element. Rituals are performed with the intention of curing that which is wrong, for example, if a member of a family is ill, then the mother will probably take a vow and make some sacrifices so that the person inflicted with the illness will recover.

Many Tamil families, and even my own family engages in the practice of rituals which serve as a protective element. These rituals will be discussed later on in the chapter.

My family [ mother in particular ] performs some rituals at home. She has incorporated into her list of rituals for the year those that were performed by her mother-in-law and her mother. Both her mother-in-law and her mother performed different rituals and they took their cues from their mothers and their mothers-in-law.

One of the reasons for different rituals being performed by different families is because of the caste system which existed in India when my great grandparents came to South Africa.

People belonging to the different castes performed

different rituals. And even if the ritual was the same, either, the procedure or some aspect would differ. Further discrepancies arose because of the geographical area from which the indentured Tamils migrated. Inhabitants of the different areas performed the rituals according to their personal understanding of what was supposed to take place.

### **2.3. LIFE - CYCLE RITUALS**

According to Mandelbaum 'Life cycle observances are mainly family affairs, each of them marking an occasion when the family, helped by its other kin, delivers up to society a person in successive stages of social completion, from newborn baby to ancestral soul.'<sup>1</sup>

In South Africa, among the Tamil people, life cycle rituals are done at the time of birth, puberty [female], marriage and death. Priests do not usually have much to do with these rituals, which are planned, directed, and carried out mainly by members of a family for the family's welfare. The women of the family have the greatest responsibility for this aspect of religion.

### 2.3.1. BIRTH

The birth of a child, especially the eldest born is an important event, but irrespective of the number of children parents have, they feel obliged to perform the rituals for their newly born children.

In the pre - war years [ 1945 ], when medicine and doctors were not easily available, when a child was born he or she was kept warm in a room where camphor was lit and the burning camphor was turned around the child. This was done because it was believed that fire had the power to avert evil and any possible harm that may come to the child.

A scented mixture consisting of camphor, incense sticks, a special collection of scented leaves, fine pieces of wood, charcoal grains, 'ghee' [ extract of butter ], and some condiments is prepared. According to my mother this mixture known as 'sammarani' is set alight in a small brass container and left in the room so that the baby will be able to inhale it. She explained that this mixture has a curative value and will help to ensure a clear nasal passage.

The fragrance given off is also strong smelling and it is believed by many of the older people that I spoke to that it helped to keep away insects and bugs such as flies, mosquitoes, and bedbugs especially in the earlier years. Furthermore, it also keeps the mother and child warm while giving the room a pleasant odour. What is so fascinating about this is that this practice is still in existence today and every Tamil home that I visited where there was a newly born baby, there was the strong smell of 'saamarani'.

Shortly after the child is born, the parents consult a temple priest and he reads the child's fortune according to the " Punjagam " [text in the Tamil vernacular with dates, days and times for the practice of a ritual - obtained directly from India].

If there are no problems according to the priest then the parent offers a prayer of thanksgiving since the child is born under the right stars.

This 'prayer' takes the form of a ritual. The parents buy fruit and milk and sometimes they also purchase flowers and these they give to the temple priest. He then places these in front of the particular deity that he is addressing. Then the priest takes a part of the fruit , the milk and some of the flowers into the inner

sanctum of the temple and offers these to the deities. Camphor cubes are ignited and turned around the deity and simultaneously the priest rings a bell in his left hand and recites certain verses. Thereafter the priest blesses the child by turning a small bunch of peacock feathers around and over the child. While he is doing this he quietly recites verses off by heart. The peacock feathers are symbolic because the peacock is the vehicle of Lord Muruga. Muruga is generally accepted as being the younger son of Siva and Parvathi.

In most mythological accounts he is born so that he might defeat and destroy a demon [usually Taraka] who is a threat to the world. There are two popular representations of Muruga. In one of the business wall calenders that we are constantly exposed to, he is depicted as a handsome, single - headed young man dressed in royal robes. In one hand he carries his 'vel' [spear] while the other gestures protection. The practice of performing the ritual is done because parents want their children to be blessed with good health and to be prosperous later on in life. They are grateful that there appear to be no problems. This prayer will be done not only to offer thanks, but there is also the wish that the child will be successful. Many of my relatives told me that they also hope that

if they become parents again then those children will also be blessed. If, according to the stars, there will be obstacles on the child's path, then a prayer is done to appease the Gods so that the child may be blessed and be able to live a normal, fruitful life.

#### **THE KATERI AND MUNISPERAN PRAYER**

The Kateri and Munisperan Prayer is done for newly born babies. The term "prayer" is used in a context peculiar to the Tamil Indian. Wherever and whenever rituals are performed the term "prayer" is used. It is used in a colloquial sense which has been accepted and never questioned, since the people that I have spoken to are of the opinion that a ritual is equivalent to a prayer. When a child is a few months old, this ritual is done for him or her. Older women and grannies are the people responsible for conducting the procedures at the hair removing ritual. By word of mouth and by watching other older women conducting these rituals the women folk learn the necessary information and are able to conduct these rituals. Viewing and imitation plays an important role in the continuation of oral tradition.

At the Munisperan and Kateri prayer the child's hair is

shaven off. This is still common practice in South Africa among Tamil people. It is believed that the first growth of hair is thin and therefore it should be removed to allow for a better growth. At the Kateri and Munisperan ritual, the child is also blessed by having the ignited camphor turned around the child.

While the camphor is still alight in the brass or clay lamp, the lady that is conducting the ritual as well as the other ladies place their right hand thumbs over the flames and then on to the head of the child after which they smear sacred ash [vibuti] onto the child's forehead.

#### **2.3.2 PUBERTY**

When a young girl reaches puberty, a ritual is done for her because this is an important change in her life. Puberty is synonymous with fertility. This is symbolic of her child bearing function as she is now one step nearer towards marriage. The ritual done signifies the major function of women which is the bearing of children.



At this particular ritual, once again the women are in control of the situation. Older women from the neighbourhood, aunts and other female relatives are invited to this ritual. Each of these women either buys a gift for the young girl or gives her money as she is now seen in a different light, that of being a young woman entering adulthood with different needs.

Once the girl tells the mother that she has menstruated, the mother informs either her mother, her mother-in-law, or the nearest elderly lady/granny in the area that she knows. Thereafter the temple priest is contacted and he consults the "Panjagam" to check up on time, date and day of the occurrence. If there are no problems with the placing of the planets at the time then a day, date and time is set for the mother to arrange for the ritual to be performed. Initially the prayer was done in the home itself or probably outside in the courtyard.

However, in recent times, in some instances marquees have been set up to accommodate the crowds that have been invited. Some families have even gone to the extent of hiring small halls and larger crowds to this ritual.



However, amongst my friends and family, the pattern has been to invite just the immediate aunts and some of the older womenfolk as they are in the know as to what is happening and what ought to happen. Of importance, though, is that these women have learnt about these traditions by watching, ie. by being part of the audience and by participating, with never really enquiring about what they are doing.

As far as the procedure goes, some changes have taken place over the years. On the day of the ritual the girl follows a vegetarian diet, except that she does have a preparation made of raw egg, milk, sugar and cinnamon. It is believed that this preparation will give her body the nutritional strength that it needs to perform the functions for which it is designed.

After taking a shower, the young girl is dressed in a sari and her hair is made up into an attractive style. She is adorned with flowers and make up.

The ritual involves blessing the young girl. This is done by making offerings of fruit, milk and flowers to the deities. The lamp which is usually referred to as "Lutchmi" or the "Kamatchiamma Vilaku" is lit.

Kamatchi is a common name, amongst Tamil speaking Hindus for the goddess Lutchmi.

Vilaku is a Tamil word for lamp. Around the lamp, the utensils [which are usually brass], are placed. Milk and water are placed in these brass containers.

Incense sticks may also be lit as they give the room a sweet smelling fragrance. Ashes are also placed in their respective containers as the women will use this to dot the forehead of the girl. Burning camphor placed in either a brass or clay container is turned around the lamp and then around the girl.

Camphor in the form of fire is supposed to ward off impending evil and danger. Water, that has been placed in a brass chamber is sprinkled on the girl so that she may be cleansed. While the lady that leads the ritual is performing the various acts, she recites a prayer quietly, by mumbling to herself. After she has done the necessary actions the other ladies that are present enact what she has done. After each lady turns the camphor around the girl, dots the girl on the forehead and sprinkles droplets of water over her, she hands the girl the gift or money.

However, nowadays, many young girls consider this an "archaic" custom that is something of an embarrassment, since it becomes a public pronouncement of a very private and intimate facet of one's life.

As the Tamil girls of today are the Tamil mothers of tomorrow, it is unlikely that this practice will be insisted upon and hence maintained.

### 2.3.3.MARRIAGE

Marriage is of social importance for both the male and the female. The wedding is a public celebration which is attended by even the most distant of relatives and friends. The wedding implies that the male and the female have now achieved full social identity and this is true of most traditional societies. Thus the wedding becomes an important family affair. I shall first discuss in limited detail the Nalengu ritual and then the wedding ritual.

### THE NALENGU RITUAL

This ritual is done on the morning of the wedding. The ritual is performed at the homes of both the bride and the groom. The parents of both the bride and the groom consult the temple priest and he confirms a time for the Nalengu Ritual. The time for the Nalengu ritual for the whole year is already set out in the "Panjagam".

According to some of the older women [who are once again instrumental in the performance of this ritual] that I have spoken to this ritual is done to solicit the Gods to ensure a happy and prosperous marriage. It is an attempt to appeal for a marriage blessed with healthy children. Normally the priest is not in attendance to perform this ritual.

Older women in the community conduct the ritual. It is a detailed procedure. The males wear ordinary shirts and trousers and are barefoot. In the previous generations they would have worn "dhotis" [cloth tied around the waist either knee length or full length]. The females wear a saris and they are also barefoot.

Once the bride and the groom, who are at their respective homes are seated, either on the floor on stools, the older women who are conducting the ritual smear a mixture of tumeric powder onto the visible limbs, eg. the elbows, knees and shoulders of the person. This is done I am told so that the bride or groom will always be healthy and have the use of their limbs. All the ladies present, have a turn to smear this mixture. A 'Siva Lingum' is made from water and tumeric powder. This takes the form of a cylindrical column, the 'linga' protrudes out of a hollow base, the

'yoni'. From conversations with local priests it seems as if the 'yoni' and the 'linga' have been commonly associated with the male and female genitalia and sexual union. The 'lingum' is also dotted with red powder which is commonly called 'kungum'. Near the 'lingum' is the God lamp. Fruit and milk are also left in front of the lamp. The lamp is lit.

Burning camphor on an 'agil' [container made of clay] is turned around the bride or groom three times. It is done both clockwise and anti - clockwise. Fire is supposed to ward off danger and harm. It is seen as a protective element. The practice of 'turning the camphor' anticlockwise and clockwise is customary when worshipping, and when blessing a person. Camphor is also turned around the lamp to seek the blessing of God.

All the necessary preparations which take time and effort are done by the women. But the interesting thing about all of this is that none of these procedures are actually studied from any texts. Whatever these women know, they have learned from watching and then by participating. Thus oral traditions have helped in the survival of some culture but it also brings with it some change.

### THE WEDDING RITUAL

For the purposes of this essay, I shall not go into all the details of the wedding. The woman wears a sari. Her hair is also decorated with flowers. Both the bride and the groom are garlanded as this function is held in their honour. A fire is lit in a rectangular container as fire is supposed to ward off any impending danger.

Into this fire, both the bride and the groom throw pieces of small wood which has 'ghee' on it so that the fire is kept alive. While they throw this into the fire they recite certain verses after the priest. A God lamp is also on stage and this is kept alight as well. A 'Siva - lingum' is also made and camphor is turned around this as well as the bridal couple are encouraged to become Siva devotees.

On stage the couple are expected to perform whatever ritualistic acts the priest asks them to do. These are mainly turning camphor around the various items and placing pieces of wood and 'samarani' into the fire.

The groom then ties a 'thali' [piece of yellow string] around the neck of the bride. Once the 'thali' has been

knotted, this is the one indication that they are now married. Then he places a red dot [kungum] on her forehead, and this is another indication that they are married.

He also places a ring onto her toe. However, even though women are expected to wear the toe ring, "thali" and dot their forehead many of them do not do this. From a Tamil point of view there are no visible indications that a man is married, except if he were to wear a ring, which is as a result of western influence. After, the wedding ritual which is of an hours duration, the bride is given a God Lamp by her mother and it becomes her responsibility to clean and dot it. She further has to light it everyday.

Whatever activities the priest engages in on stage, he has learned from watching other priests. He has never taken any written instruction as there are no texts that outline and explain these procedures. Thus by word of mouth and by watching the priests performs these rituals.

#### **2.3.4. DEATH**

Death in the Indian community and more especially in the Tamil community is not merely a physical event that ends with the funeral or burial. Upon hearing that a death has occurred, immediate visits by friends, neighbours and family are made. The bereaved are at a loss and the emotional support provided helps to ease the situation. The mortuary rituals constitute social involvement.

#### **MORTUARY RITUALS**

During the funeral, which is sometimes attended by hundreds of people, a prayer is conducted by the older women of the community.

If a married woman has died, then her 'Thali' [chain signifying a married woman ] is removed. This is done by her husband which means he has accepted that she is no longer around and he may marry again since it is compulsory for him to tie the 'Thali' around the woman's neck.

If a married man dies, then the wife may no longer wear the red dot on her forehead as it is her husband who



placed the dot on her forehead when they got married. The absence of the red dot signifies that she is a widow as she is still allowed to wear her 'Thali'.

At the funeral people are allowed or expected to place flower petals inside the coffin. Camphor is also turned around the person.

Previously, it was just men that went to the cemetery or crematorium. However, today it is acceptable for women to attend the burials or cremations.

#### **THE 16 th DAY CEREMONY**

After the burial, rituals are still held for the dead. These are socially significant. It is difficult to accept death, so family and friends rally around and many rituals are performed to help the bereaved come to terms with the situation. It is also believed, by some of the temple priests that I spoke with that it takes the soul 16 days to finally rest. Prayers are done on the 3rd, 5th, 8th and 16th days after the funeral.

The 16th day prayer is more significant in that people are invited to the ritual either by personal printed invitations, telephonically or via an announcement in

the newspaper. Meals are prepared and a temple priest is in attendance. Camphor is once again turned around the photograph of the deceased.

Thereafter the yearly memorial service is done to which people are once again invited.

Tamil traditions ensure that the deceased are not easily forgotten. Besides special rituals being performed during the year, photographs are kept in prominent places in the home.

Another reason why such elaborate procedures takes place is because it serves as a comforting thought to the elderly that they do not have to fear death because they will not be alone. It is a sort of reassurance to them that it is not necessary to fear death.

#### **2.4. CALENDRIAL RITUALS**

An important aspect of many Tamil rituals is their regular and repetitive occurrence. These rituals are based upon the Tamil prayer calender. Certain domestic rituals are allocated dates, days and times in this calender. For the purposes of this essay I cannot discuss all the rituals. However, I shall discuss the Marrie - Amman ritual as it is quite a common ritual

among the Tamil people that I come into contact with. In the Tamil community traditions include rituals that are done with specific needs in mind. Offerings are made to the Gods in the hope of being rewarded. Special sacrifices are made to attain good fortune. Other rituals are performed to combat ill health.

### **MARRIE -AMMAN RITUAL**

There are a large number of Hindu temples in South Africa. Among these there are many which are dedicated to the deity Marrie - Amman. Festivals are celebrated annually in honour of this goddess.

Some devotees of Marrie - Amman visit the temples regularly to offer worship. The Marrie - Amman prayer is also known as the Porridge prayer. The word 'Marrie' means rain and 'Marrie - Amman' means the 'Rain Mother'. The term porridge is used in a different sense from the ordinary English meaning. The term 'porridge' has been used because the mixture used in this ritual looks like porridge, since it is an off-white to cream colour. The mixture is further made from flour or maize and water.

Porridge is made, syringa leaves are gathered and fasting prior to the prayer is observed.

Fasting is done to cleanse the system and mentally prepare the devotee for the worship yet to come. Traditionally, in South Africa, the fast is done for 10 days. During the same period the porridge [ a semi liquid type of food made from mealie meal ] is prepared and allowed to stand with various ingredients which preserve it and cause it to ferment.

The porridge has a cooling effect on the body. It absorbs heat from the body. In a symbolic sense the syringa leaves also has a cooling effect on the body. In addition syringa leaves have medicinal properties. Incidentally syringa leaves are placed on patients suffering from measles for two reasons.

Firstly, they absorb heat from the feverish body and secondly help keep away insects etc., through their strong smell. In Tamil homes when small - pox breaks out, the goddess Marrie - Amman's protection is sought first. So strong is the belief among some worshippers that when there is an incidence of small - pox or measles in the home they hesitate to resort to western medical treatment first lest they offend the Goddess.

Observance of rituals vary from home to home and from temple to temple in South Africa since most of these

traditions have been maintained through transmission via oral means.

## **2.5. CONCLUSION**

There are many rituals that are performed in the Tamil home. These rituals are normally conducted either on a daily, weekly, monthly or yearly basis. In this chapter I have aimed to discuss Domestic rituals conducted in the home where the women, especially the older women play an important role. In many instances, such as the case with my mother, even women in their fifties are not able to conduct the rituals on their own and require the assistance of even older women.

The difference with the women of the earlier generations and the present generations is that the women in their forties [like my grandmother for example] in the earlier generations would have been able to perform the rituals without the assistance of other women but nowadays women need other women to help. During the recent holiday my mother said to me that if we were to have a wedding proposal at my home for either myself or my sister then she would have to invite her aunt, who is now about 78 years old to this function so that she would be able to tell my mother

about the procedures. Whatever my mother knows about rituals and the performance there of she has learnt by watching and by imitation.

Even though my mother probably only visits the temple once or twice in the year she may be considered, theoretically speaking, a devout Hindu because on a regular basis she participates and is also part of the audience at these rituals. Clearly domestic rituals are one important way in which tradition has been transmitted orally. Calendrical rituals play a further role in ensuring that the tradition is maintained since they are performed at regular intervals. But of course as with other religions, public rituals are also important in ensuring the maintenance of some culture. In the next chapter, I shall consider public rituals.

CHAPTER TWO NOTES

1. D.G.Mandelbaum, Society in India, Los Angeles, University of California, 1970, p. 42.

### **CHAPTER THREE : EXAMPLES OF SURVIVING PUBLIC RITUALS**

#### **3.1.INTRODUCTION : RITUALS PERFORMED IN THE TEMPLE**

Public rituals as the name suggests is a different setting for the performance of rituals. The other context in which the rituals may be performed is the temple. The temple is a major feature in India and this has been transferred here to South Africa. In the earlier decades the indentured labourers were instrumental in the building of temples. My paternal great grandfather, Mr Manikum Achary, came to South Africa as an indentured labourer but he belonged to the Brahmin caste in India. He did not follow in his father's footsteps as his father was an 'architect' in India and he was also known for building and the restoration of temples. After his period of indenture in South Africa my great grandfather returned to India to marry his second wife. He returned to South Africa and sought employment on the quarry in the Durban area. He was also a businessman and trader and was actively involved in the erection and planning of temples.

Though largely illiterate, the forefathers of Tamil Indian South Africans brought to South Africa a



heritage steeped in religion and culture - the foundations of the social education of man. They 'planted this heritage firmly in the virgin soil of what was to them a strange land.'<sup>1</sup> The indentured Tamil Indian immigrants followed mainly the Hindu way of life. By implicitly believing in the simple faith that "man does not live by bread alone" they sought to give expression to their spiritual lives by establishing places of worship wherever they were placed. In so doing they enriched and beautified the broad South African spectrum. Even though this may sound much too general and pious, the people did build temples not just for spiritual purposes, but to meet needs in this world, here and now. There are at least two kinds of needs;

- (a) the need for help/ assistance/ protection etc.-  
by those who attend the temples and
- (b) the need of those who build and run the temple,  
to get some income/ status/ prestige etc. from  
creating the temples.

In the first category, examples of specific needs are probably, the need to be cured of an illness. The need to go to the temple does not just arise because one is motivated to becoming one with God, but rather the need to stay alive - of being cured.

Secondly, temples meet the needs of temple builders. They become conspicuous in the public and some of their needs are fulfilled. These men gain social status, enjoy financial rewards, and in general make a profit. Most of these places of worship were constructed on land that was either donated by those that were probably wealthy or money was collected to build the temple. Although the temples were small in size initially and were not wealthy, over the decades they have developed.

Much effort and organisation has gone into the maintenance and administration of the various temples in the communities. Temple building was promoted by all kinds of people for a number of reasons. Being associated with the temple on an administrative level carried with it prestige and status.

Businessmen run the temple and they provide a service. In return they relish material rewards. They also enjoy a high self esteem, status and prestige. Even though people were able to conduct prayer at home with their families, they feel a need to bring their families to the temple. The temple may be considered as providing a more competent system or structure for

effective ritual. At the temple, there was greater access to the deities since all families could not afford to be in possession of statues which represented the various deities.

It fostered closer bonds and breached certain gaps that may have resulted. It brought the people together as they were able to identify with the others.

In this chapter I intend providing a broad classification of some of the rituals that are performed at the temple. These rituals may be divided into the Public [Calendrical] and Private [Individual] use of the temple.

### **3.2. CALENDRICAL USE OF THE TEMPLE**

Some rituals are performed on a daily, weekly, monthly and yearly basis at the temple. At these rituals the priest officiates. The Kavady Festival and the Ganesha Chaturthi Celebration are two of the more common occasions where temple based rituals are performed.

In India, because of the unfortunate circumstances, many inhabitants sought refuge in prayer. As a result, in India, many rituals came about with the intention of trying to combat misfortune. The Ganesa Chaturthi ritual and the Kavady Festival are two of the most

important rituals that are still performed by the Tamil Indian in South Africa in this regard.

### **GANESHA CHATURTHI**

Ganesha is the son of Lord Siva and Mother Sakthi. He is also known as Vinayagar and Vigneshwara. Vinayaga means there is no one greater. Vigneshwara also signifies the remover of impediments and helper. Therefore, the first ritual performed by the Tamil people is to him - whether we buy a new motor car, build a house, commence studies, etc.

Ganesha is a very interesting deity and is popularly regarded as the elder son of Siva. He is usually depicted as a short man with pink, red or yellow skin. Besides his four arms, his most intriguing feature is his elephant's head which completes his image. He has large ears and his upturned or bent elephant's trunk are quite prominently featured.

There are many myths which account for Ganesha's birth and his acquisition of the elephant head. According to my mother, Parvathi, the consort to Lord Siva, wanted to take a bath and so installed him as her keeper of the door to her bath with explicit instructions that he should not allow anybody into the room. In trying to

perform his duty, Ganesha angers Siva who decapitates Ganesha. Upon realizing what he has done he replaced his head with the head of the first living creature that he saw and in this case it was an elephant. The circumstances of his birth and his appearance have made his title, Vighneshwara [Lord of all obstacles] apt. As lord of all obstacles, Ganesha is invoked at the beginning of all Tamil rituals, or symbols related to him may feature prominently in such rituals. It is also a common practice amongst Tamils to commence the performance of any task such as building a new house, taking a holiday, buying a new vehicle or even writing examinations, by first paying tribute to Ganesha. A myth which is quite well known to many members of my family and told to me by my mother is that of Ganesha's precedence in rituals and further emphasises his role as Lord of all obstacles, has him in competition with his brother Muruga. Ganesha and Muruga argue over who is the eldest son. Siva, their father tells them that the one that goes around the world first would be the elder son. Muruga sets off in haste. But Ganesha is impeded by his stature and thus uses his wit to beat his brother. He circles his parents three times and tells them that they are his world. Siva is greatly impressed by this and so declares that Ganesha is the eldest son as well as the first among the lords.

In each of the four hands he holds certain symbols that have interesting meanings. On one hand He has food indicating that He is provider, the flower means life, power, purity and in the other two hands he holds a piercing instrument and a rope signifying that he defends that which is holy from the evil forces.

'The rope is viewed as a rescuing instrument. The rat is his bearer. It suggests that one must keep his ego under control. The rat also symbolises darkness during which period it causes untold damage.'<sup>2</sup>

We are often told at the temple services that we too must remove ignorance and keep our senses under perfect control. If we allow our evil thoughts to take control of us they can cause irreparable harm. The elephant form means strength, patience and retentive memory. Since the mouth is hardly noticeable it has been construed by many of the elder people that I have spoken to that one should not talk unnecessarily. Every year on Ganesa Chaturthi Day, which is normally held in August, special prayers are offered to Vinayagar. It is a prayer of thanks.

At most functions he is represented in the form of a 'Lingum' made of tumeric paste. The lingum has already been discussed in greater detail. I have been told by

the temple priests that the tumeric paste has a therapeutic value. In other words he is the curer of all ills. On top of the paste we place a stem of grass [Arampul]. The Arampul relates to the essential crops necessary for our sustenance.

Here in South Africa the Ganesha Chaturthi Day is still observed although our lives do not depend entirely upon the production of a good harvest but more so because Ganesha is the remover of all obstacles.

Therefore we can say that through the practice or transmission of oral tradition we continue with practices that have little or no bearing on our actual lifestyles.

In India, as I stated earlier, disease and illness were rife. Famine, drought and epidemics wiped out whole communities and destroyed life. Prayer, as a solution seemed the only option that was available and thus the Kavady Festival which has a strong mythological background has become very important in South Africa. In South Africa because of the initial lack of medication and access to doctors, it became necessary to seek preventative measures and thus the Kavady Festival attracted more people in South Africa.



**KAVADY FESTIVAL**

Kavady is a Tamil word used to describe a long stick or pole, usually a bamboo, carried on the shoulder by the labourers to transport goods [fruits, vegetables, etc] by suspending them from both ends of this stick.

Hawkers and peddlers especially, used the kavady to carry their wares from door to door for the purpose of sale. The kavady as we understand it today, is a semi-circular structure, decorated with flowers, ferns, palm leaves and other greenery, consecrated with lime, sacred ashes and peacock plumes and bearing two brass vessels of milk.

This Kavady is carried on the shoulder of a Muruga devotee, from a nearby river to Muruga's shrine in His temple during the Kavady festival .

The mythological background surrounding this function is interesting. According to the temple priest in Verulam, Iduman, a great disciple of the sage Agasthiyar, once asked his guru the secret of eternal life.

The wise master told Iduman that if he could carry the Pazhani Malai and the Thiru Thanigai [ two South Indian mountains] and bring these to him, he would show him the means to achieve his desire.



Undaunted by the mammoth task and the mighty burden, Iduman actually unearthed these mountains and tied them to a pole [ Kavady ], one at each end. He then slung the Kavady over his shoulder and started his homeward journey.

It was hot and humid, and Iduman was tired. Midway through, he set his burden down and rested. When he was ready to start again, he found that he could not lift the Kavady - the mountains became embedded in the earth again. He used all his might but to no avail. He then noticed Lord Muruga in his path. The Youth laughed at Iduman and teased him. "The two mountains are really two mighty Forces within me," He said. " They are Siva and Sakthi. You can never move them." Iduman was annoyed. He angrily asked Muruga to get out of the way. Muruga refused. Iduman became uncontrollable with rage and terribly violent. He attacked Muruga and in the ensuing battle , the mighty giant was slain.

However, Muruga was impressed by the immense faith and belief Iduman displayed and the great pains and suffering he underwent in the attempt to reach his goal. Being the merciful God that he is, Muruga revived Iduman and pardoned him. Thereupon a great change came over Iduman and he became Muruga's greatest devotee.

He carried the first kavady out of absolute devotion to our Lord.

Thereafter Lord Muruga decreed that wherever a temple for Him stood, a separate little temple for Iduman be also set aside. Whoever came to worship Him, shall worship Iduman first.

The Kavady festival was started by the Tamil people thousands of years ago, but the thought behind it-taking a vow to recover from some misfortune- applies today to some extent.

'The underlying principle of the Kavady is Balance - a balance in life between material spiritual pursuit. Life must have harmony and moderation.'<sup>3</sup>

We must maintain discipline, and show love and devotion to God [ and all His creations ] to balance [ offset ] the mighty weight that we carry of our own sins and wrongs.

Since the conception of the festival in antiquity, mankind has made tremendous progress. But whether or not it is still necessary today depends on the individual and the rung he occupies on the spiritual ladder.

'Devotees take a vow to carry a Kavady when they have problems or illnesses. In return they promise to carry a Kavady as a form of gratitude and thanksgiving.'<sup>4</sup>

Over the decades, the number of people carrying the Kavady has fluctuated.

### **3.3.INDIVIDUAL USE OF THE TEMPLE**

From my personal experience I can safely state that Tamil people do not only go the temple when there are major being rituals being performed. Whenever my mother or her sisters had some severe problem with their families, they visited the temple and the priest informed them about the ritual that should be performed. The most important single or family ritual performed at the temple is the Navagaro ritual. This ritual concerns itself with the nine planets. From my conversations with the priests and elderly family members it seems as though Astrology influences our lives to a great extent and thus a ritual must be done to the deities that represent the nine planets.

#### **NAVAGARO RITUAL [9 PLANET RITUAL]**

The Navagaro ritual is done when an individual or a family experiences a severe misfortune such as a member of the family being extremely ill and no apparent cure can be found, or a parent losing his job time after time, or alcoholism making inroads into family life or

even when many accidents occur to a family.

My family was asked to perform this prayer when my brother met with an accident and my sister became ill with migraine and epilepsy, to which medication was just a temporary solution. My mother wanted her to be well enough not to take the medication. Therefore upon consultation with the priest we decided to perform this ritual.

The following explanation I got from the temple priest at Verulam. The Navagaro ritual involves the nine planets. Nine different deities rule the planets.

It is believed that the planets or the movement of the planets rule our lives. Even though this seems a bit far fetched, this is what I have been told. If for some reason the planets are not favourably placed at the time of birth, then one's life may be disrupted with misfortune. If this is the case then this ritual has to be done to appease the deities that rule the planets.

Some preparation is necessary. My family had to follow a vegetarian diet for the duration of the ritual.

Initially, we had done the ritual over nine weeks, but the following year we opted to do it over nine days.

It is suggested that the ritual be performed over nine weeks but it was a matter of convenience to complete it

within nine days. When it was over nine weeks, it was performed on the Saturdays. We had to buy bananas, marigolds, beetle nut and beetle leaf, and tumeric sticks. Each of us had to have nine of each item. In addition we had to have nine one cent coins. Upon reaching the temple we walked three times around it. Then we performed a ritual for Lord Ganesha. This involved milk, fruit and camphor.

The priest took our offerings into the inner sanctum of the temple as we were not allowed into it. He rang a bell, recited some verses and turned the burning camphor around the statue of Ganesha. Thereafter he placed ashes onto our foreheads. Thereafter we had to await our turn to use the nine planet statuettes. My mother led the procedure and my brother, sister and I followed. My father only participated in this ritual for the first year.

We had to place the banana, beetle nut, coin, marigold and tumeric stick over the beetle leaf and go around each statuette which represented the planet. Each time we went around the statuette, we left behind the items and walked back to the start to go around the following statuette. Thus we would have walked nine times around the statuettes and in so doing we would have appealed to each deity to avert any further misfortune.

After the nine days or nine weeks a final ritual was done and here the priest officiated. This ritual involved a fire being lit in a rectangular container and us helping to keep it alive by throwing in "samarani" and "ghee" which I discussed earlier. The fire symbol was also discussed and so it is convenient to state that the fire is supposed to help in averting danger and evil. During this ritual the priest does recite "manthras" and we are asked to repeat them after him. At the end of this ritual which is about eight to ten minutes the temple priest places ashes on our foreheads.

In chapter three, I have tried to give an account of rituals that are performed at the temple. These rituals are either calendrical or of a more personal nature. Even though only the Kavady Festival and Ganesha Chaturthi Day were discussed as calendrical rituals there are in fact too many that are performed to be mentioned in this essay. More important though is that the number of people that attend these public rituals are decreasing as in my own family, where even though my mother is a devout Hindu, this year as well as previous years she did not attend the Ganesha Chaturthi Day at the temple.

Families that experience hardships and misfortune [to which there seems to be no answer except sacrifice or taking a vow] then visit the temple which they hope provides an answer. The nine day ritual is done to invoke the deities to help towards a better life. However from talking to relatives and friends, and even though they know of friends and others that have performed these rituals, they themselves will only perform these rituals if there is an urgent need to perform them. Furthermore, what can be mentioned here is that they do not perform these rituals from reading about them, but rather, by listening to some elderly person telling them that if they perform, perhaps the Navagaro ritual then they may be relieved of their problems. Thus it is possible to state that Tamil people do get to know about aspects of their tradition not from books but rather by word of mouth.

#### **3.4.ORALITY VERSUS LITERACY**

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Even though the Tamil community is a literate community, aspects of orality persist alongside it. The prayer calender is an example where we see the orality-literacy question in focus.



**PRAYER CALENDER**

The prayer calender is printed in English and Tamil. The English print is a transcription of the Tamil ritual dates and other details. Many Tamil people cannot read the Tamil vernacular but use the English part of the prayer calender to ascertain date, days and times for various rituals and ceremonies. The months of the year are dated differently from the English calender.

The first Tamil month, when compared to the English calender, starts in April. Every year the exact date of the Tamil New Year differs. The Tamil calender has days, dates and times set for religious and auspicious days.

Details as far as when weddings may take place are also stipulated. Saturdays and Sundays are the days that dominate as far as weddings are concerned. But, people may choose to marry on other days of the week. One observation is that as a matter of convenience Saturdays and Sundays are chosen. Even though weddings may take place on other days of the week, the Tamil calender only projects the weekend dates.



Therefore, if a couple wanted to marry on any one of the other days then they would have to consult the temple priest. He would then check his books [ PANJANGAM ] which is printed in India in the Tamil vernacular and sent to South Africa. Herein, he would find suitable dates as to when a marriage may take place.

The date which is set is chosen according to a number of variables, eg. the placing of the planets etc. Usually people go to the temple to set and confirm the wedding dates. The temple priest normally enquires as to their preference of time, day and dates. Suitable possibilities are listed and upon confirmation other necessary arrangements are made.

If one were to inspect the calender for 1992 it would be found that during the month of May no weddings will take place because the priests will refuse to conduct the ceremony as there are no auspicious days on the calender.

Of importance though is the fact that these dates do not affect the actual date, day or time that a couple may choose to go to the magistrates court to be legally married.

These days, dates and times are only of significance in so far as the Indian Tamil traditional wedding is concerned.

Because the traditional wedding is not considered as being lawful, couples will have to present themselves at the magistrates court to be considered legally married. The Tamil calender also contains other information such as dates and times for various prayers etc.

### **3.5.CONCLUSION**

Temple worship is not common among the Tamil people. Visits are made in expectation of something. However rituals are performed and in most instances these are done as a result of some specific need. Misfortune and ill health are the two most common reasons for visiting the temple. From my experience, the Kavady Festival and the Ganesha Chaturthi Day are two of the most commonly supported calendrical rituals.

However, on a more private note, the Navagaro ritual is performed to combat personal misfortune. In most cases, people do not engage in these rituals because they have read somewhere about these rituals, but rather because they have been told about them.

**CHAPTER THREE NOTES**

1. Paul Mikula; Brian Kearney; and Rodney Harber  
[editors]. Traditional Hindu Temples in South Africa,  
Durban, Hindu Temple Publications, 1982, p. 3.
2. \_\_\_\_\_. Phoenix Temple Society Souvenir  
BROCHURE , Durban, Rapid Graphic Printers, 1991,  
p. 41
3. Ibid., p. 45.
4. \_\_\_\_\_. Clairwood Shree Siva Soobramoniar  
Temple Centenary Celebration Souvenir Brochure,  
Durban, Atlas Printers, 1989, p. 27.

## **CHAPTER FOUR : EXAMPLES OF SURVIVING BELIEFS**

### **4.1.INTRODUCTION : HINDU MYTHOLOGY**

In an essay concerning the transmission of oral tradition in any migrant community it is necessary to discuss aspects of mythology since they play an important role in maintaining some culture. Mythology and the practice of rituals are interlinked. Rituals involve complex sets of beliefs which are expressed in legends and myths. The idea that one function of a myth is to provide a justification for a ritual is adopted by some of the temple priests that I spoke with. Thus I may be able to state that myths were and probably still are intended to explain otherwise incomprehensible rituals.

Myth functions, or at some time functioned, as the 'explanation' of a corresponding ritual. 'That connections between myths and rituals often exist is undeniable, but which came first is far from certain. And although there are probably no rituals without accompanying myths there are myths without apparent complementary rituals.'<sup>1</sup> This, however is not the case with Hindu myths.

In my experience so far with the temple priests and from conversations with older folk it seems that every myth has a complementary ritual and every ritual has an accompanying myth.

Hindu mythology is thus important in maintaining some aspect of tradition. Hindu mythology is also a rich complex and extensive field. It is impossible for me to discuss all the ramifications of this mythology in a dissertation of this nature. However I intend discussing the key figures from the Hindu pantheon which are prominent amongst the Tamil community. There is the belief among Tamil people that there is one supreme God. The name of this deity is Brahma. His attributes are represented by the three personified powers of 'creation, preservation, and destruction' which under the respective names of Brahma, Vishnu, and Siva form the 'Trimurti' or triad of principal Hindu gods. I shall only discuss Siva as he is the most important Tamil deity.

At the outset I have to mention that I do not know all that there is to know about Siva and the rest of the deities that make up the Hindu pantheon.

Most of what I know I grasped from

(A) Listening and

(B) Seeing

At the temple services which I attended on Sunday mornings with my family, the leader [a man who has extensive knowledge of the Tamil culture and Hindu mythology] of the congregation would talk about Siva and the other deities and saints.

Soon enough I realized that Siva is as important to the Tamils as perhaps Jesus is to the Christians.

Besides listening to the leader talking about Siva, the temple priest would also talk about him whenever we visited the temple so that we are aware of the main deity. The visit may have occurred when we perhaps had to enquire about a suitable date to start the Navagaro ritual or to have a ritual performed for a new car that was purchased. Furthermore, I have heard about Siva at the Sivarathri Ritual, which is a night long vigil at the temple, held in February to remember Siva. At weddings Siva is also mentioned by the speakers who make a speech on behalf of the bridal couple and also by the temple priest who is conducting the wedding ceremony.

I have also learnt about Siva by looking at pictures, paintings, business calenders, statues, wood carvings, statuettes, figurines, copper plaques and brass ornaments depicting Siva in various forms.

My parents have purchased pictures and framed paintings of Siva and the various deities.

We are also in possession of a wide selection of calenders that are printed both here and in India and these have an impression of Siva and the other deities. In addition to this we have statues, statuettes and figurines representing the various deities. Wood carvings, copper plaques and brass wares are in abundance and this is a feature in most Tamil homes. Thus like myself, many Tamil children experience an awareness about the deities at an early stage in their lives. We see God represented in various forms. This imagery plays an important role because it serves the function of identification. Thus, these images serve to focus on a particular visual that may serve as suitable representation of God and in the Tamil home that God is Siva.

In many Tamil homes throughout the country, visual impressions serve an important function as they help in the maintenance of oral tradition. Having pictures and paintings in our living area continually serves to remind us of our traditional heritage. The statues are either made of paper mache, brass, wood or copper.

Their presence serves, to a certain extent, to ensure the preservation of culture, as the children do not, in general, ask questions about the things around them. The 'images' present a way in which the knowledge may be transmitted in an informal way. Even if a child is not curious, he will be told about the deities as they form an important part in the life of the Tamil person. It is impossible not to know about these aspects as we are brought up with these ideas.

Illiterate Tamil people have materialised the religion and iconography is a major part of the Tamil home. In my home as is the case with many other Tamil homes 'Idols' are of some importance. They are found more commonly in the temples. In our home we have statuettes of Siva and Ganesha and pictures of Muruga, Saraswathi, and the other deities.

My mother is a Saivite - believer of Siva, and so were my grandparents. My mother prays to Ganesa, Siva and Muruga as it is a common belief among Tamils that each deity has a special function.



#### **4.2 SIVA**

Siva represents the third aspect of life in the triad. Brahma is known as the creator of life and Vishnu as the preserver of life. Siva is known as the destroyer of evil. Because of his role as destroyer, Siva is frequently associated with death and disasters that threaten to destroy man.

At the same time he appears to be a compassionate being who strives to improve the lot of man. This might seem to be a contradiction but from my conversations with the temple priests it appears that as his function of destroyer of evil he is in fact the saviour of mankind.

In many of the myths the destructive elements of Siva seem to be impulsive and cantankerous. If, in other words, he is angered or provoked, he would give vent to this anger by creating some catastrophe which would end in disaster or destruction. In his role as destroyer, Siva is also the remover of obstacles which lie in the path of God realization.

In my experiences so far I have come across three major images of Siva and these are generally used to symbolise this deity:

a) an ascetic meditating on a mountain

b) Siva - Nadaraja

c) Siva - Lingum

In the first instance he is sitting on a mountain in meditation. He is wearing a tiger skin as a loin cloth. In pictures that I have seen his throat is blue in colour while the rest of his body is white. He has long matted hair, a part of which is tied up in a type of high chignon on his head. Snakes and prayer beads [rosary] are wrapped around his neck and arms.

In one hand he has a trident while the other is held in the gesture of protection. He also carries a rosary, a water bowl, a bow or club. A conspicuous feature of Siva is his third eye which appears on his forehead. Siva's role as protector is also illustrated in a myth which explains his blue throat. This mother shared this story with me. Apparently, the gods and the demons were engaged in battle.

In order for the gods to strengthen themselves the gods have to obtain ambrosia by churning the ocean of milk. A serpent is used as a churning rope and soon begins to vomit poison. This threatens to fall into the ocean of milk, ruining the ambrosia and destroying the gods. Siva attempts to swallow the poison but Parvathi, his consort, prevents this from taking place by placing her

hands in a form of a tourniquet around his neck. The poison, which is captured, turns his neck blue.

The second image of Siva is of him dancing, and here he is known as Siva - Nadaraja, king of dance. In this form Siva is frozen in mid - dance in a pose of perfect consonance. In pictures that I have seen he is framed by a ring of flames which represent the forces of creation. He has four hands. He uses his upper right arm to support a drum like figure. Sound which emanates from here is used to control the rhythm and movement of the dancer and thus the world. He further holds a tongue of flame in his upper left hand. Nadaraja offers protection and blessing and this is symbolised in the gesture of his lower right hand.

The lower left hand is held across his upper body as he points downwards. One of his feet is placed on a small baby like figure which according to the temple priest is a demonic dwarf. This demon is a symbolic of the corruptive elements of man which become obstacle in the path of God - realization. The uplifted feet probably indicates that one may be freed of the material body and material things in life.

Another popular image of Siva is the Lingum. This may be found in the temples, temple yards and in the

gardens of many Tamil homes. In the gardens, a specific enclosed area is set aside for Siva worship and a Siva lingum may be found here. A Siva lingum is a cylindrical column. The 'linga' protrudes out of a hollow base, the 'yoni'. Three white lines are drawn across the column. These, according to my mother are probably reference to the third eye. The 'linga' and the 'yoni' have been generally associated with male and female genitalia and sexual union. Although this interpretation is superficial, according to the temple priest in Verulam, it is not strongly denied by the Tamil people that he has spoken to.

Like all other deities, Siva also has an animal which is used as means of transport. Nandi, is his bull and an important feature of Siva worship is the importance placed on Nandi. Every Siva temple that I have visited has a statue of a bull at the entrance of the temple yard and we are expected to pay homage to the bull since it takes Siva wherever he wants to go to.

#### **4.3.CONCLUSION**

Siva worship among the Tamil people in South Africa is prominent. Siva is essentially a South Indian deity and even though this was brought down in the 1860's

this aspect of the Hindu Triad has remained. Even though the indentured Indians came down as a group of Hindus, the vernacular differences have remained.

One explanation as to why this disparity has remained is because people have made attempts to keep it so. For example, the Saivites, the believers of Siva, have formed an organisation which propagates Siva worship. This organisation known as the Siva Mandram is instrumental in holding services and playing an important role at weddings and funerals. Even though this organisation is trying to play a role in the transmission of tradition, the greater majority of its members and supporters are people belonging to the older generation. Parts of the South Indian way of life and culture were able to be transmitted in South Africa to a certain extent through audio - visual ways as I explained earlier.

By listening to temple priests, other temple leaders and elders I was able to grasp some of the aspects of the Tamil mythology. By looking at pictures, framed paintings and other exhibits such as statues I was able to latch on to some idea of the Tamil culture. However, I must state that I possess limited knowledge about the tradition as compared with my mother, since the transmission does not take place as often or as

prominently as it did when my mother was younger. Furthermore, most of what she knows she had learnt in the first half of her life and in recent years she has practised what she learnt earlier on in life.

I basically know what I do know about Tamil mythology not because of a concerted effort to enquire about it but rather because it was circumstantial, that is, for example, having pictures around the home and thus getting an idea about issues without really searching for it.

**CHAPTER FOUR NOTES**

1.R.P.Gwinn, [ed.], The New Encyclopaedia Britannica  
Volume 8 , Chicago, 1990, p. 471.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: HOW HAVE ASPECTS OF ORAL TRADITION BEEN MAINTAINED ?**

### **5.1.INTRODUCTION**

As is the case with any migrant community, the indentured labourers that came to South Africa brought with them the traditional views and values that they practised in India. These communities and the future generations made attempts to retain the traditions in an attempt to preserve and establish some continuity in their lives. However, since the culture is transplanted onto foreign soil and exposed to a foreign climate, it is inevitable that modifications occur. The result is a dynamically changing culture that seeks to fulfil the peculiar needs of these communities.

In South Africa the Tamil speaking people have pursued many avenues in an attempt to maintain some measure of the traditions that were practised in India. The temple and the home have and still do play an extremely important role in trying to maintain the cultural heritage. To a large extent, the responsibility of ensuring that our culture is maintained is principally shouldered by the women of the household.



The home serves as an agent of transmission of tradition as virtually every Tamil home that I have visited is in possession of pictures of Tamil deities, the prayer lamp and brass ornaments that serve as a reminder that this a Tamil home.

Domestic [private] and communal [public] situations have ensured that some aspects of the Tamil way of life have been maintained. Within these domestic and communal structures there are a number of other institutions eg. the home and temple that have enabled and assisted the transmission of oral tradition. Even though there have been ways and means by which the traditions have been transmitted many problems were and are experienced. In this chapter I shall discuss how aspects of oral tradition have been maintained under the following headings;

- (1) Some attempts at maintaining culture in the  
Community [public]
  - (1.1.) The Temple priest
  - (1.2.) The Temple
  - (1.3.) Music and Dance
  - (1.4.) Vernacular Classes
- (2) Some attempts at maintaining culture in the home  
[private]
  - (2.1.) Moral Practices
  - (2.2.) Ethnicity

### **5.2.THE TEMPLE PRIEST**

The Tamil sees all forms of life as being related to each other as are the rungs of a ladder. In India God is at the highest level, then followed at various other levels by demigods and eventually by men who in themselves occupy a number of rungs. The Priests, [Brahmins] are followed by the Warriors [Kshatriyas], who in turn are followed by the Merchants, farmers and tradesmen [Vaisyas] and finally the more menial trades and non-Aryan tribes [Sudras]. Here, in South Africa, the migrant indentured Tamil labourers were not able to maintain this rigid structure as they found themselves in a foreign land with circumstances totally different from those of their homeland.

Even though they were not able to maintain the exact strata as it was in India, they improvised and in various instances changes were brought about to accommodate their needs here in South Africa. One example is that of the temple priests. In India they belonged to the Brahmin caste and this was the highest caste.

However, in South Africa it was impossible for this status quo to be maintained as there were not enough

members that belonged to the Brahmin caste therefore we had the situation where any person [especially male] who knew something about the language and could speak the vernacular claiming to be a priest and thus performing the functions of a temple priest. Thus, at our temples, there is always someone in charge, but that person may be a

"semi-literate caretaker, or a priest with a considerable knowledge of sacred literature, and his duties range from the simple ritual of keeping the place clean and reading the almanac, to the performance of public ceremonies."<sup>1</sup>

In South Africa among the Tamil people the temple priests play an important role in ensuring the continuation of the traditions however, within the group of Tamil indentured labourers that arrived in South Africa there were relatively few that belonged to the Brahmin caste in India.

What resulted, then was a Tamil community that had no or relatively few religious leaders with a proper religious background as was the case in India.

Therefore there arose, within the community, the need for suitable substitutes since religion, custom and

traditions played an important role in the lives of the indentured workers.

Being faraway from their motherland, meant drawing substitutes from among their ranks. Thus, the consequence, was self proclaimed 'brahmins' [temple priests]. Many of these individuals took on the responsibilities of a temple priest, since they had some knowledge of the written vernacular and were able to read the texts written in the Tamil language. Since they were in possession of the vernacular texts it became acceptable by the community for them to be construed as temple priests.

None of the Tamil temple priests that I spoke to are of 'brahmin' descent. Mr Gopaul Rajoo, the temple priest of the temple in Verulam, was a factory worker. He lives and has lived all his life in a farming area. He learnt Tamil as a young lad and learnt about the Hindu religion and other traditional aspects via word of mouth from his parents and temple visits.

As a young person, he became interested in the Tamil cultural heritage and began to enquire about it. His grandparents came to South Africa as indentured labourers and they worked on the sugar cane farms.

In and around his home on the farm he served as a 'priest' whenever the opportunity arose. He has officiated at weddings, conducted mortuary rituals, and performed other important rituals. When the need arose for a temple priest at the Verulam temple, he got the position because he practised as a temple priest before. He has no formal secondary school education. But he has read extensively over the decades on issues concerning religion and culture.

Thus even though almost all the temple priests are not of 'brahmin' descent many of them perform the tasks that 'brahmins' in India perform.

Some of the temple priests are now employed on a full time basis in the temples. They also conduct rituals outside of their normal working hours [ 6:00 to 18:00 ] and they are paid for these tasks. Many of them have made it their second job since they are already in employment elsewhere.

Those that have it as a second job do so because there is a need for temple priests as well as the fact that they are being paid. For example, the Marrie - Amman temple in Mount Edgecombe has a number of temple priests attached to it.

Because of the snake mound which has developed at the Marrie - Amman Temple, people from all over Natal and even other parts of the country make visits to this temple. It is believed that because of the snake mound the temple has been blessed and those that visit will also be blessed.

In fact efforts by the Huletts Sugar Board to destroy the mound did not succeed. I was told by the locals at the Mount Edgecombe Temple that the person representing Huletts responsible for wanting to destroy this relatively huge snake mound [about 0.5 metres in length] died on the Monday following his decision to destroy the mound and demolish the temple. These changes were necessary since plans were passed to build a tar road through the temple area. After the death, the Huletts company decided not to interfere with the temple or the mound and it <sup>is</sup> now stands at about 1.8 metres. The devotees of this temple have constructed a proper brick and tile temple over it so that it may be protected. Eggs and milk are left at the mound to nourish the snake within it. Since the mound seems to be growing plans are being made to remove the original roof and replace it to accommodate the growth of the mound.

Many temple priests are found around this temple because of the need for them. Phoenix, Verulam, Tongaat and Mt.Egdecombe are Indian areas with growing populations and there is constant need for the temple priests to be readily available. Many of the priests live in the area.

The temple priest is a key player in the transmission of oral tradition and the maintenance of Tamil culture. He has many functions. In most temples his day starts at 6:00. Upon entry into the temple, he has to change the water in the brass chambers. He replaces the flowers placed around the deities with fresh flowers and he cleans the temple and the temple surroundings. Thereafter he may perform an 'ABISHEGAM'. This entails the cleansing process of the 'idols' [murthis].

It is a long process and there are certain procedures that have to be followed. The 'murthi' is washed with water, foods such as rice powder, curd, 'ghee', honey, mixed fruit which has been mashed, boiled rice, milk and rose water. In the process soap, lime and other items such as tumeric powder are used. Thereafter the 'murthi' is dotted and garlanded.

The temple priest also officiates at weddings. He is consulted when people want to marry. He reads the 'PUNJAGAM' and presents alternate options concerning

time and date. Once the details have been sorted out he prepares himself to officiate at the wedding.

Initially the wedding ceremony was conducted in the Tamil vernacular, but with changing times even though he still officiates in Tamil, he explains certain issues in English so that the bridal couple as well as the audience have an idea as to what is taking place. The temple priest will also advise the bridal couple as to their roles and functions once they marry, hence ensuring to a certain extent that some traditional views and values about the cultural way of life is transmitted. He is paid for the services that he renders and he is probably given a 'DHOTI'<sup>?</sup> and shirt.

The temple priest also officiates at mortuary rituals. He conducts the final rituals and rites and also comforts the bereaved family and as he is viewed with some authority his condolences are welcomed.

When a married couple are having marital problems, they may consult the temple priest as he may be able to offer a prayer for them. If a woman is unable to conceive a child, he may once again offer a prayer and she may be asked to make a sacrifice or take a vow and in most cases whatever the priest advises, it is



heeded. If or when the problems are resolved donations are made or a prayer of thanksgiving may be done.

If a member of the family is ill, as was the case with my sister who became epileptic, prayer with the aid of the temple priest seemed to be the solution. We frequented the temple as it seemed the only answer to the problem at the time until she was diagnosed epileptic. My mother has made sacrifices [she is now a complete vegetarian] to the effect that my sister should 'get better again'.

The temple priest consulted his 'PUNJAGAM' and was of the opinion that the planets at the time of my sister's birth were 'not placed properly' and thus it would be advisable to offer a prayer and it was agreed that she would carry the Kavady so as to appeal to the gods that her health improve as she was also diagnosed as having migraine.

Thus, we see that the temple priest plays an extremely important role in the maintenance of traditional Tamil cultural views and values. People draw strength and feel encouraged whether they are speaking about either death, birth, marriage, illness or luck to the priest.

However, what needs to be mentioned is that there seems to be an increasing shortage of local priests and many of them are being brought in from Shri Lanka and India.

### **5.3.THE TEMPLE**

Regular temple worship among Tamil people is on the decline. Amongst my group of Tamil friends and relatives there are none that are regular temple worshippers. If people do not have a specific need to visit the temple then they generally do not. A need to visit the temple arises when one probably has to bless one's new car, enquire about a suitable wedding date or probably perform a ritual to avert misfortune such as the Navagaro ritual. Even though temple worship is probably on the decline there are still those that do go to the temple on a regular basis.

Religious instruction is given in the temple. Religious practice is encouraged by those that lead the temple service congregation. Services are held on Sunday mornings at the nearby temple in the various areas. Those parents that attend these services are encouraged to bring or send their children to these services. However, once the parents stop attending these services then the children also lose interest.

Until 10 years ago I attended the services at the Verulam temple.

However, upon entering university I did not feel the inclination to attend the services any more. A similar situation has occurred with members of my family [cousins that are in my age group] and friends. At the temple service the same routine is followed every week. An opening prayer is done. Every temple commences with the following words:

" Ulagelam unnarndhu otharrku arriyavan neelavulaviya  
neermali venniyan alagil sothiyen ambalatha aaduvaan  
marcilambadi vaazthi vannanguvam " <sup>2</sup>

from the song " ULAGALAM ".

The meaning of the song is as follows :

" Siva is unperceivable through the five senses and his rareness cannot be expounded even by great men. He has matted locks where the crescent moon moves about and the Ganges abounds. He is abundant effulgent light. He dances as the Hall of Wisdom! His flower like Feet adorned with anklets, we shall praise and worship."<sup>3</sup>

Thereafter religious songs are sung. These songs are sung from the 'Thevaram' which is a collection of songs sung by the saints of South India. Each song is written in the Tamil alphabet as well as the Roman alphabet [ English text ].

Thus those of us who do not know the Tamil script are able to follow the congregation because of the transcription. The meaning of the songs are also given. Thereafter discourses are given by the leader of the congregation. Each discourse normally has a moral bearing based on conduct and behaviour.

Thereafter concluding prayer songs are sung. The congregation is thereafter invited to turn burning camphor [ embedded on a brass tray ] around the statues of the deities. Simultaneously one is encouraged to say a prayer in your mind.

#### **5.4. MUSIC AND DANCE**

The close association of music with religion has resulted in the elevation of the art to a rank commanding veneration and awe. But more significantly music and dance provide two methods by which some features of the Tamil tradition have been maintained.

These activities are a major part of any festival, ceremony or function. The eisteddfod provides a formal basis for which the transmission of oral tradition may be continued. Eisteddfods are held yearly at various venues throughout the country where Indians are found in large numbers.

Children as well as adults participate in various sections such as singing, musical instruments and dance. Solo as well as group items are encouraged. Certificates and trophies are awarded to the top candidates. Learned Tamil scholars and other men and women of a highly cultural background are invited to attend these eisteddfods.

My maternal grandfather, Mr.S.P.Pillay, who was a pioneering industrialist responsible for the founding of Pakco (Ltd), a food manufacturing company on the Natal North coast town of Verulam, was also a talented musician. He learnt the traditional classical South Indian 'KARNATIC' music as a young lad from his father who was also a musician and dramatist from South India. My grandfather received many awards, certificates and medals for his singing both, as a young person and even when he reached retirement. As a young man between the years 1925 - 1945 he participated in the local eisteddfods where he excelled and was recognized for

his talent. Later on in life he performed for charities and other cultural occasions and all proceeds went towards some worthy cause.

He also rendered 'katcheris'. The 'katcherie' is a 'common medium for the performance of South Indian classical music. It lasts for an average of two to three hours.' <sup>4</sup>

He also participated and gave 'katcheris' in India and Mauritius where he was highly acclaimed and given the title of 'Senthamizh Isai Semmal' meaning 'the Lion that sits on the throne' by the University of Annamalai in Madras in India for his exceptional performance.

Besides following an interesting musical career, my grandfather was also instrumental in furthering music education. In 1980 he sponsored a young man to study music in India for an entire year. He also purchased the 'Veena', a musical string instrument for me, the Harmonium, a wind instrument for my brother as well as a 'tubla' [drum] for my brother.

It was his wish as well to sponsor a woman to learn the Bharatha Natyam dance in India, but died before this wish could be fulfilled. There are many men and women in South Africa like my grandfather who have sponsored people to study dance and music in India. Dance and music are rich cultural art forms which are characteristic of the South Indian.

### **5.5.VERNACULAR CLASSES**

" Vernacular education was in the beginning largely oral, with traditional wisdom and knowledge being passed on by elders."<sup>5</sup>

Religious and epic poetry was often learnt by heart and vernacular plays were staged frequently. The first Tamil school, for example, was established in Durban in 1899. Such private schools were never numerous at the time. However vernacular classes have and still do play an important role in the maintenance of oral tradition. Initially they were held after school hours either in people's homes, their farms, open spaces or on the school premises. In 1968, in an effort to " co - ordinate the different Tamil organisations and Tamil schools.... to make people conscious of their language and culture, and to organise Tamil schools on better lines "<sup>6</sup>, the South African Tamil Federation was born.

Presently, in the country, classes are held during school hours and even university courses are offered. The maintenance of some aspects of tradition was kept alive by a few people initially either because they were financially secure or because they had the premises or for some other reason.

My grandfather, Mr Veloo Manikum Achary was one such person who made it possible for vernacular classes to be held. My grandparents, Mr and Mrs V.M. Achary were actively involved in trying to maintain some of the traditional aspects of our culture.

Even though my grandfather was educated in English and had a career as an educationalist he encouraged the transmission of Tamil traditions by setting up Tamil schools where ever he taught. Both my grandparents were fluent in reading, writing, comprehending and speaking the Tamil vernacular. Because he was a state worker and received a relatively good salary he was able to make some input into the maintenance of the tradition.

As early as the years between 1942 and 1956 my paternal grandparents made efforts to be involved in community work as far as the Tamil vernacular was concerned.

From 1942 to 1952 my grandfather taught at the Wylde Memorial School in Inanda and set up the Vernacular classes after school hours. Thereafter, he taught at the Sir Kurma Reddy School and once again set up Vernacular classes after school hours. Both him and my grandmother taught Tamil to the children in the area free of charge. My grandparents were also instrumental in teaching music at these classes as it played an important role in the life of the Tamil speaking



people. Similarly there were many other cases where such attempts at vernacular education was taking place not only in the urban areas but also in the rural areas. However, even though my father's parents ensured that they made some contribution as far as the community is concerned to the maintenance of the culture, my father made no contributions as far as the community is concerned.

After completing his matric, my father continued his education at the M.L.Sultan Technikon. He was also educated in the Tamil Vernacular and was a competent violin player, however because of the peer influences he chose to move away from the traditional upbringing and became interested in more westernized activities. My mother is able to communicate fluently in the vernacular and has insisted on my sister, brother and myself going to vernacular classes after English school hours. She is also very interested in music and dance. She is a competent 'Veena' player and has performed at eisteddfods and shows. Like my father, she has made no contributions to the community but rather just fostered a love for music and dance at home.

My brother, sister and I attended vernacular classes for three months in 1975 and then stopped as we moved away from the area. Thereafter in 1981 for a period of

five months I was given individual attention in the vernacular by a friend of my mother.

At this stage I was in secondary school and there were no classes at my school as these classes are held only in primary schools since high school pupils, in general, do not show an interest in learning the vernacular. As it happened my brother and sister did not learn the vernacular and at present they are unable to speak, read or write Tamil.

I am able to read and write Tamil. But I am only able to understand some colloquial Tamil in which I recognise common phrases and words. I am also only able to speak 'broken' Tamil. The reason that I am able to read and write Tamil is because I completed Tamil I at the University of Durban - Westville as an undergraduate.

The university offering Tamil as a recognized university course is in keeping with the move towards some attempt at the maintenance of tradition.

Initially the vernacular classes were held in the communities and either the school premises or someone's home was used. An elder from the community would teach the language and depending on the socio - economic status of the community or the financial status of the person involved he may or may not receive remuneration.

In the earlier years most of the language was taught to children by the parents, especially the mother. But as there were so many children in a family it became virtually impossible for the mother to satisfy this requirement and thus the children were not pressurised to learn the language.

Furthermore as the need for women to go to work arose it became apparent that the home was not fulfilling the task of educating the young in the vernacular. Concerned elders in the community decided on using whatever platform they could to try and ensure that the young were educated in the vernacular. Thus the advent of vernacular classes after English school hours.

This method was an attempt to keep aspects of the language and culture alive. But there was a decline in the number of children that elected to go to Tamil school. This was as a direct influence of the modernized, westernized society that we live in. However with the establishment of the Department of Education and Culture in the House of Delegates there was greater impetus in securing ways and means to ensure the continuation of some aspect of Tamil tradition. Thus in 1985, we saw the introduction of Tamil as a school subject in the primary school curriculum.

Initially, a syllabus was worked out for standard two, three, four and five. Consequently a high school syllabus has been worked out. What is of importance here is that more and more children from Tamil homes take the subject in the primary school but there is a radical drop in the percentage that follow the course into high school.

Thus I may state that the vernacular has managed to survive but only because of the concerted efforts of those that were able to make the necessary sacrifices. Initially, on the farms and even in the urban areas through the efforts initiated by people like my grandparents Tamil children in the various communities were able to learn the vernacular.

With the great move towards industrialization and with English education being of greater importance there arose a reluctance to take the learning of the language seriously. It was treated with indifference as parents also began to show more interest and enthusiasm with regard to English educational accomplishments. However in the 1980's there was renewed interest as the House of Delegates introduced Tamil into the schools.

## **5.6.SOME ATTEMPTS AT MAINTAINING CULTURE IN THE HOME**

### **5.6.1.MORAL PRACTICES**

Tamil parents and the general Indian community place tremendous emphasis on the importance of trying to maintain a proper code of moral conduct. Children are forever being instructed in correct mannerisms and obedience is always expected. Respect for the elder is of paramount importance. However this is not true of all homes as there are cases of 'bad' behaviour which has to be expected because of all the influences that play a role in the life of the young.

Questioning the authority of parents and teachers is not encouraged. Sincerity, honesty and other virtues are regularly emphasised. These moral principles are taught via the means of proverbs and other Tamil sayings which are then explained in English. Some examples [since I do not know many] may be quoted to explain the wrong that has been done and further examples may be given for the correction there of.

Over the years my mother has used some Tamil sayings to instil good values in her children. However the number of sayings that she may have used, is considerably

lower, than probably what her mother used and probably I may never use any of these sayings if I become a parent.

The following is an example of a saying that my mother used to instil proper values at home.

'Arum seya veerumbu' translated into English means:

'Always try to be good'. This saying was used by my mother when she tried to explain to my brother that he must be good. The context in which she used it indicated that to her being 'good' meant him being thoughtful to my sister and myself. Being a male, has advantages in that you have greater freedom. My sister and myself depend to a certain extent on him, because we do not possess a vehicle. Because he refused to take us where we needed to go, my mother decided to use Tamil to explain to him that it is important to be unselfish. We did not understand the saying, so she had to explain it to us. Because children do not understand Tamil it becomes necessary for the parent to translate.

This practice was and is being used on me. However, it will end with me, since I am not in possession of a ready stock of proverbs for the every day happenings that occur.

Another example of a saying which is colloquial that may be used to instil moral values that was transmitted

through oral traditions is the following;

Saying : Oru usara maatu, oru adi kodithu

Translation : One hits a good cow only once.

### **5.6.2.ETHNICITY**

Even though the religious scriptures or texts do not subscribe to or enforce ethnicity, most Indian parents expect their children to marry within the same language group.

Parents in fact may still refuse to allow their children to marry outside the language group and, if they do, then it is without their blessing and sometimes even also without an inheritance. Much anxiety, pain, anger and dislike arises out of such a situation where the parents are unhappy about the choice of a marriage partner.

In fact a number of Tamil expressions have arisen because of this situation and they have passed down by way of mouth. The following is an example that my mother once used.

Saying : Ange woru pambu irkadu, nee ange ille porgiren.

Translation: Where there is a snake, one will not go near.



My mother once used the above saying, when she tried to explain to my brother why she does not prefer a marriage partner for him from another language group. She compared that person to a snake. The implication being that if you know there is impending danger then you will not venture in that direction.

Parents prefer that their children marry within the language group for a number of reasons.

Initially the caste system played a vital role in this aspect since it was very much alive in India. But that system could not survive because there was a shortage of women from the higher castes and the men were forced to marry women from the lower classes.

Now, probably, the most significant reason is so that the wealth may remain within that group.

Even though that structure of society had changed somewhat, other barriers have remained eg. the language barrier.

Other reasons that may be awarded for the insistence of people marrying within the language groupings is to ensure that the children of the marriage do not suffer identity crises; meaning that they are not sure whether they are Tamil or Hindi.

Because there are a number of differences between the Tamil home and the other homes [ eg. Hindi or Moslem ]



parents try to put a stop to the marriage because they believe that they are saving their children from future pain and unhappiness.

### **5.7.CONCLUSION**

Many generations before me have tried to initiate attempts to maintain the culture. The Natal Tamil Vedic Society was formed on the 26th September, 1951 and it has survived. The Society has conducted a library and for some time adult classes in Tamil. It played an important role in fostering Tamil culture and was instrumental in convening the first Natal Tamil Conference in 1926 , when it was called the Young Men's Vedic Society.

The Society has over the years produced several historical and classical dramas in Tamil and among its members have been some of the best musicians and singers in the Tamil community.

But the Tamil community found themselves exposed to many western influences and other social changes which instigated an inevitable move away from the cultural way of life but some aspects were maintained.

Even though these influences necessitated change so that you were accepted socially, many attempts were made by parents and elders in the community to preserve some culture. In the community, the temple and the temple priests have come to serve a need, but once again visits to these places takes place mainly when a specific need arises. If people are not faced with a problem then they see very little need to visit the temple. Visits to the temple on Sunday mornings are undertaken by a very small majority. In fact from my conversation with temple priests, visits to the temple on Sundays are on the decline. Even though music, dance and vernacular classes have played a role earlier, they are not as prominent nowadays. Some attempts at maintaining culture in the home are made, but, to a great degree this is done unconsciously.

**CHAPTER FIVE NOTES**

1. H.Kuper [see chapter one] , p. 196.
2. \_\_\_\_\_. Thevaram, Durban, Atlas Printers, 1978, p.167.
3. Ibid. , p. 167.
4. H.Somaroo, 'Cultural perspective' , in E.J.Arkin, et al [editors]. The Indian South Africans, Durban, Owen Burgess Publishers, 1989, p. 250.
5. R. Mesthrie [ see chapter one ] , p. 17.
6. Devi Bughwan, 'Language Practices' , in B.Pachai, [ed], South Africa's Indians: The Evolution of a Minority, Washington, D.C., University Press of America, 1979, p. 475.

**CHAPTER SIX : CONCLUSION**

I am to a certain extent representative of my generation of Indian people living in South Africa. Because of my various educational achievements and my vocation as a secondary school teacher it has been possible for me to realise that there is a lot that I do not know about my own cultural heritage.

However, I am one of an absolute minority that does possess some knowledge about the Tamil language and traditions. I am fortunate in the sense that I was born into a family that has made some attempts to keep some aspects of the culture alive.

At home, I have never been exposed to any particular religious text that explains aspects of the Tamil culture. But through the word of mouth, I have learnt about the culture, rituals, values and the mythology of the Tamil people in South Africa.

Religious rituals are performed in the home and the temple. The rituals that are performed in the home are conducted mainly by the older women of the community and these women may either be related to the family conducting the ritual or she may be known for her knowledge of the processes involved in performing rituals.

Women tend to play a more important role in the rituals that are performed in the home, especially the life - cycle rituals. One reason for this is probably because women are more involved in the life - cycle rituals. They give birth to the child, and thus they and the child are directly involved here. When a girls reaches puberty, a ritual is done for her and once again her mother and other women play an important role. Before and during the wedding, rituals are performed, and even though both the bride and the groom have to perform certain rituals, after the marriage it is the woman who has to wash and decorate the God lamp on a weekly basis which in itself is ritualistic.

Furthermore, it is her task to light the God lamp every morning and every evening, the only exceptions being if she is menstruating. Thus the woman play a more active role in the procedure at rituals, while the men who are in close proximity are called to perform only certain acts, such as breaking the coconut and probably turning the burning camphor around the lamp. Both calendrical and life - cycle rituals are conducted in the home. Temple rituals are conducted by the temple priests who are mainly men. The calendrical rituals are more common rituals performed at the temple even though the temple may be used for private or individual use. In

South Africa among the Tamil people the number of attenders at the calendrical rituals has declined with the Kavady Festival and the Ganesha Chaturthi Day being the most highly supported.

Once again the reason for the support at these rituals is because people have a need or an urgency and therefore attend. At the Kavady Festival vows are taken, especially, by those that are distressed by some severe misfortune and there is no other solution to their problem than to appeal to God for compassion.

Muruga is the deity involved in this ritual and his help is sought and in return sacrifices are made. Ganesha Day is also supported because he is the deity that is seen as the remover of all obstacles. It seems appropriate then to conduct and be part of a ritual that involves the deity that will remove obstacles in your path.

What needs to be mentioned here, is that not all of these temple priests who conduct these rituals are direct descendants of the Brahmin caste which is the highest caste in India. In South Africa one does not need to belong to the Brahmin caste to perform the functions of a priest and some aspects of the Tamil

culture and the rituals have survived even with the absence of a caste system. In fact, in India, the Brahmin is the highest caste but the indentured Tamils that came here, came mainly from the lower castes.

In recent years structured attempts have been made by the House of Delegates to introduce Tamil and other languages into the school curriculum. However, even though children at primary school take the subject, interest at high school dwindles. Naidu is of the opinion that the Tamil language itself, has now reached a degenerate form and even "this degenerate form would only be partially understood by a Tamil - speaking Indian; 75 % would not comprehend at all." <sup>1</sup>

✓ Furthermore, the tradition has managed to survive without literature and in the earlier years there were only a few texts available, but now the numbers have grown with a number of bookshops selling literature pertaining to the Tamil.

However, the mushrooming of bookshops is a relatively recent development and in the earlier years whatever was transmitted, was transmitted through oral means, through word of mouth and through example.

It was, and is still not, a common practice to explain

to people why one was doing what one was doing. People learnt not only by word of mouth but also by watching. Thus, oral tradition is not only verbal transmission, but it also involves the visual or ocular.

Observation and participation are central to the transmission of tradition or some aspects of it. Among the Tamil people, oral tradition, is a visual one, to a great extent, in that images and pictures play an important role in the transmission of culture. Great emphasis is placed on the proliferation of images in temples and other institutions. In fact, most businessmen that produce calenders, invariably, have a picture of one or the other deity on it.

# The home also serves as an agent of transmission as Tamil homes do possess these calenders as well as other visual impressions such as paintings, carvings, brass wares and other ornaments that serve to unintentionally remind us of our tradition. In fact, many young people do not pay any particular attention to these stimuli but they are probably inadvertently aware of them.

# Although the term tradition is very broad and carries many implications the adjective oral with tradition seems to create the impression it is transmitted



✓ overwhelmingly by word of mouth. Oral tradition thus suggests or emphasises one mode of transmission of tradition.

Oral tradition is too limited a term to explain how the transmission of culture has taken place. It involves more than just speaking and listening - one has to act as well.

It is by imitation and by participation, either as part of the audience or actively engaging in the ritual, that people preserve tradition. A lot of this tradition would not have survived if it did not meet a need.

The migrant indentured Tamil community which was uprooted from India with not much resources, has endured because it has used the culture to survive. In the process of tradition being transmitted, mutual help was provided.

Thus, it is not just what people say, not just epic poetry, but what people do that matters in the transmission of tradition. It is not possible to study oral tradition if you limit it to the word only, it becomes necessary to study behaviour as well.

**CHAPTER SIX NOTES**

1. Devi Bughwan. [ see chapter five ]. p. 510.

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