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Snakes, Goddesses, and Anthills: Modern Challenges and Women's Ritual Responses
in Contemporary South India

By

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B.A., Colgate University, 1997
M.T.S., Harvard Divinity School, 2001

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An abstract of
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Abstract

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By Amy L. Allocco

This dissertation is an ethnographic study of contemporary Hindu snake (*nāga*) traditions and the worship of snake goddesses (*nāgāttammaṅ*) in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Specifically, it analyzes the repertoire of vernacular practices connected with *nāga dōṣam* (snake blemish), a malignant condition that is believed to result from inauspicious planetary configurations in an individual's horoscope. This astrological flaw is most often linked to having killed or harmed a snake, and is faulted for delaying marriage and causing infertility. Indigenously, these afflictions are identified as distinctly "modern" problems and understood to be increasingly prevalent. Because South Indian *nāgas* have long been associated with fertility in belief, custom, and local mythology, *nāga* traditions offer a religious framework to respond to these modern dilemmas, and the worship of snake goddesses has dramatically expanded as a result. New media, such as devotional magazines, have also played an important role in the popularization of *nāga dōṣam* traditions, its ritual remedies, and particular snake goddess temples. I propose that these innovating *nāga* traditions represent a distinctively local, culturally inflected "modernity" and reflect some of the gendered tensions of contemporary Tamil social life. This dissertation, then, analyzes how traditional religious practice can serve as a flexible, modern means through which to negotiate a range of shifting social and economic contexts. It charts *nāga* ritual traditions (which include recontextualized as well as more explicitly "invented" rites) as they are being self-consciously adapted to meet a spectrum of new ritual and social needs that these challenging contexts inspire. These rituals are primarily performed at local, neighborhood snake goddess and anthill temples, which form an urban network of sites well-known for their power to counter *dōṣam*. These local goddesses, some of whom were previously known for curing pox-related illnesses, enjoy a dynamic and expanding ritual repertoire, a growing annual festival tradition, and the patronage of devotees from an increasingly broad array of caste backgrounds.

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NOTE ON TRANSLATION AND TRANSLITERATION

The contemporary Tamil language exhibits a wide diglossia between written and spoken forms, and spoken Tamil varies widely in different regions of Tamil Nadu and at different caste and class levels. A great deal of its religious vocabulary -- the terms, concepts, and categories this study interacts with most frequently -- relies on Sanskrit words. This use of Sanskrit is not uniform, however. Against the backdrop of ongoing debates in Tamil Nadu about whether temple priests should chant mantras in Sanskrit or in Tamil, some religious specialists consulted in this study deliberately use only the Tamil forms of these terms. Many of the terms in question also have established Anglicized forms, which is not surprising given the centuries of contact and exchange with the English-speaking world. Tamil is a truly layered language, and there are instances where even a single deity name may be rendered three or more different ways within the same temple complex: on signs, in temple literature, and in the oral productions of its priests and devotees.

My transliteration decisions were guided by several desires, chief among which was to produce a readable text that would be accessible to a wide audience. To this end, I generally follow Sanskrit spellings for religious, ritual, and other terms, both

because these forms would be most familiar and recognizable to many of my readers (and allow them to place my discussions in conversation with other scholarly treatments of similar issues), and because many of those with whom I spoke used these forms themselves. For example, I opt for *darśan* rather than the Tamil *taricaṇam*, and *bhakti* instead of the Tamil *pakti*. In a few cases I have struck a compromise between forms, and render certain words in their Sanskrit form but with the addition of the final -m that was typically found in spoken Tamil, because its omission would have placed the term in an artificially Sanskritic register. Examples of terms that reflect this compromise are *prasādam* (Skt. *prasāda*; Ta. *piracātam*), *abhiṣekam* (Skt. *abhiṣeka*; Ta. *apiṣēkam*), and *liṅgam* (Skt. *liṅga*; Ta. *liṅkam*). In almost all places I include the Tamil term in parentheses upon first usage, and I also provide the Tamil forms of most terms in my glossary. The reader will, however, note some variations, particularly when I quote verbatim.

The vast majority of my fieldwork was carried out in Tamil. Taped interviews and Tamil texts were translated by me, often in collaboration with fieldwork assistants. In the excerpts from these sources that I include here, my glosses, stage directions, and other interpolations are enclosed within square brackets. I indicate specific words or phrases

that were originally spoken in English with two asterisks (e.g., *main*), and also indicate if a quoted conversation was conducted in English. In a few places in the text I use italics to indicate emphasis.

With ease of readability in mind, I have omitted diacritical marks for most proper names, including the names of individuals, caste names, and place names. Instead, I use the most common English forms of these words, which facilitates identification and the reader's ability to locate places and temples on maps and in other scholarly studies. I do, however, use diacritics for names of specific texts (e.g. *Mahābhārata*). For deity names I have chosen the most common English form, so Shiva rather than the Sanskrit *Śiva* or the Tamil *Civaṅ*. When it comes to temple names I do not use diacritics, except for the first time I mention my primary research site, Mundakakkanni Amman Temple, and two other main snake goddess temples where I conducted fieldwork and which are discussed at length in this dissertation. Their full names are included at first usage and thereafter they are called by shortened names without diacritical markings. Diacritics are also provided in the Glossary for a few key goddess names and temple names. Where I use diacritics in Tamil words I follow the standard Madras University Tamil Lexicon

system and also italicize, but where words have passed into common English usage (e.g., karma, sari, mantra) I use neither diacritics nor italics.

Finally, in spoken Tamil plurals (designated by appending the suffix *-ka*) are rarely indicated. I have supplied a final -s in my English translations to indicate plurals where appropriate, but have not added them to Tamil words where they did not occur in direct speech.

ABBREVIATIONS

lit. literally

MK Amman Muṅṭakakkaṇṇi Ammaṅ

Ta. Tamil

Skt. Sanskrit

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO A TRADITION IN TRANSITION

Finding the Field

I distinctly remember my first visits to Muṇṭakakkaṇṇi Ammaṇ temple (lit. the goddess/*ammaṇ* with wide, attractive eyes, or eyes like red lotuses; hereafter MK Amman), in Chennai, South India, now nearly a decade ago. My fieldnotes from those initial visits contain general observations and impressions about the temple, and each hand-written page is scattered with question marks and issues I flagged to follow up on later. Although my Tamil was weak then and I hadn't yet built up my arsenal of fieldwork skills, I continued to visit this popular Hindu goddess a few times a week. Her temple was just a short walk from the venerable research institute where I was engaged in language tutorials, and women I knew there encouraged me to visit MK Amman on Tuesdays and Fridays, days considered particularly "special" for her worship during the Tamil month of *Āṭi* (mid-July to mid-August).¹ My notes dwell longest on the rituals I saw female worshipers performing at the grouping of stone snake images (*nāga cilai* or

¹ Appendix One of this dissertation provides a chart which correlates the Tamil months with their respective Gregorian months.

nāgakkaḷ) located under a holy tree at the temple and at the anthill that is nestled in the tunnel-like roots at the base of the banyan tree behind the goddess's sanctum.

It was not until a few years later, when I was beginning to refine my focus for a dissertation topic, that I discovered how these many snake stones came to be established under the sacred tree at MK Amman, and in many other temple courtyards and roadside shrines. Over the course of translating an insert included with the Tamil-language almanac released at the Tamil New Year in 2004, I learned the particulars about *nāga dōṣam* (snake blemish), a malignant condition believed to result from inauspicious planetary configurations in an individual's horoscope. An astrological flaw that is most often linked to having killed or harmed a snake, *nāga dōṣam*, which disproportionately affects women, is faulted for delaying marriage and causing infertility. This pull-out feature also detailed other reasons for *nāga dōṣam*, and outlined a range of ritual solutions (*parikāram* and *nivartti*) that afflicted individuals could perform to relieve this condition, successfully marry, and conceive. Included in this spectrum of ritual therapies is the ritual consecration of snake stones (*nāga pratiṣṭhā*), and worship of anthills (*puṟṟu*), established snake stones, and snake goddesses (*nāgāttammaṇ*).

The material on snake goddesses and *nāga dōṣam* contained in the almanac supplement led me back to MK Amman and, as my research progressed, to a constellation of local goddess temples in and around Chennai's Mylapore neighborhood which participate in dynamic ritual relationships with MK Amman. I started posing questions about *nāga dōṣam* to worshipers there, as well as within larger circles of friends, scholars, and priests. I quickly found that *nāga dōṣam* is an exceedingly common phenomenon; almost everyone I asked about this horoscopic blemish had a story to share about their own, a relative's, or a friend's experience with this condition. Moreover, these experiences were recent: rather than being memories from the distant past, the vast majority of them were from the previous year or the last few months, and many were in progress, still unfolding and with a resolution yet to be determined. It became clear that *nāga dōṣam* traditions – and the expansion of snake goddess worship – were very much of the moment, and were being constructed and shaped in dialogue with what people understood to be their distinctly “modern situations.”

As I began to record personal narratives from some of these individuals and my research network widened to include astrologers, drummers, and ritual musicians, and other religious specialists, I became aware that understandings of *nāga dōṣam* vary

widely, that its repertoire of remedial rituals is fluid and open-ended, and that at all stages – from diagnosis to ritual healing – this tradition is in the process of being constructed, revised, and invented. Although both *nāga* worship and *dōṣam* (flaw, blemish) as a concept have long histories in India, it became apparent to me that these practices and ideas are being self-consciously combined and shaped in innovative ways in contemporary South India, and that they exist in dynamic relationship with what are indigenously perceived to be the challenges of “modern” times and particularly “modern” afflictions.

Chief among these problems is the fact that the average age at marriage for females in contemporary Tamil Nadu is increasing, and that difficulty conceiving and infertility are becoming increasingly prevalent. In local analyses, these problems are understood as the effects of *nāga dōṣam* and are directly linked to “modern times,” a correlation which enables Tamils to highlight the range of social, economic, and religious transformations they recognize from the last generation to this one. While there are a number of potential responses to the “modern problems” of delayed marriage and infertility, a repertoire of ritual performances associated with *nāga dōṣam* and snake

goddesses has emerged as a visible and popular framework for negotiating these challenges.

Context for a Changing Tradition

This dissertation project is animated by an interest in the trajectories of religious change in contemporary South Indian Hindu traditions, especially as they interact with indigenous articulations about gender, social change, and ritual power. I reflect on these broader issues through a particular focus on *nāga* traditions, which constitute an example of a traditional religious framework that is being self-consciously adapted to meet a spectrum of new ritual and social needs. Specifically, I consider the expanding ritual repertoire (which includes recontextualized as well as more explicitly “invented” rites) connected with *nāga dōṣam* to assess how religious practice serves as a flexible category for negotiating change and resolving what Tamils classify as quintessentially “modern” problems.

Because South Indian *nāgas* have long been associated with fertility in belief, custom, and local mythologies, this tradition was well-poised to respond to fertility

difficulties as they have become more prominent in recent years. Media has played a definitive role in the popularization of snake goddesses and *nāga dōṣam* traditions, and this dissertation describes the proliferation of new media focused on this malignant condition, the ritual remedies for it, temples understood to be powerful in relieving it, and the mythology surrounding the deities and planets associated with it. Popular media functions as a key component of the landscape of vernacular Tamil religion and exhibits a high degree of intertextuality with *nāga dōṣam* ritual performances.

Rituals responding to infertility and delayed marriage are primarily being performed at the local, neighborhood level, and in Chennai a network of snake goddess and anthill temples has emerged as popular for countering *dōṣam* with courses of ritual practice. These local goddesses, some of whom were previously known for curing pox-related illnesses, are increasingly associated with rituals to mitigate or remove *nāga dōṣam*'s malefic effects, and they enjoy a dynamic and expanding ritual repertoire, a growing annual festival tradition, and the patronage of devotees from an increasingly broad array of caste backgrounds. This dissertation analyzes the newly popular rituals associated with *nāga dōṣam* and snake goddesses as one set of responses to the

perceived “*dōṣams*” of contemporary times, and charts a ritual tradition that is in the process of self-conscious change and expansion.

I adopt a performance-centered approach in my analyses of these ritual practices, and focus both on the critical dimension of gender in this complex of ceremonies and beliefs and the ritual relationships with snake goddesses that female devotees perform and embody, particularly during the *Āṭi* festival season. My examination of this tradition’s repertoire – which includes its ritual performances, festival celebrations, and vernacular texts – as well as the narratives of the devotees and ritual specialists who engage with and continue to construct it, sheds light on how individuals are recontextualizing “traditional” religious frameworks and shaping the landscape of contemporary South Indian Hinduism.

This dissertation argues that these rituals function as modes of response to rapidly shifting, contemporary contexts (which engender both new anxieties and new aspirations) and constitute an idiom through which “modern” problems, including late marriage and infertility, are creatively negotiated. Rather than the values associated with progressive, modern times displacing religious belief and ritual practice, I argue that the challenges posed by modern times and the uncertainty engendered by rapid social

and economic change have proven to be fertile ground for *nāga* worship and *nāga dōṣam* rituals to take root and proliferate. Indeed, these modern contexts ultimately catalyzed the self-conscious expansion of and innovation we currently see in these traditions, and – as one response to modern times – these rituals themselves have come to be understood as “modern.” I argue that these traditions, which crystallize the concerns of this modern moment and have been refashioned to meet its ritual needs, reflect the gendered tensions between more traditional assumptions and expectations about what constitutes wholeness, health, a successful social self, and an appropriate progression through the life cycle, as well as new understandings of, and aspirations about, these matters.

Mylapore and Shared Boundary Identities

The majority of the research for this project was conducted at an informal circuit of small goddess temples in the Mylapore neighborhood of Chennai.² Settled earlier than the surroundings areas, Mylapore continues to feel like a place apart in many ways,

² On Mylapore’s history, temples, and the interleaving of and (redefining of) the “ancient” and the “modern” see Chapter Two of Joanne Punzo Waghorne’s detailed and rich study of Hindu temples and middle-class religion (2004).

suffused as it is with temples, dance, concert, and marriage halls, and traditional shops selling ritual accoutrements, religious goods, and temple items. Shiva's majestic Kapaleeswarar temple stands at Mylapore's heart, and MK Amman and most of the other temples I spent my time at are within walking distance of this grand structure and the traditional neighborhoods that fan out around it.

I first lived in this neighborhood for six months in 1995 on a semester-long study abroad program with Colgate University in what was then called Madras (the official name of the city was changed to Chennai in 1996). I then spent a year in Mylapore from 1997-1998 under the auspices of a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship, during which I began researching Hindu women's rituals and vows. I returned to Mylapore in 2001, and spent the summer between completing my Master's degree at Harvard Divinity School and beginning my doctoral training at Emory University taking Tamil language classes and visiting temples. I have lived there for part or all of every summer thereafter, sharpening my Tamil, conducting fieldwork, and studying at the Kuppuswami Shastri Research Institute (KSRI). Although I loved Madurai when I lived there for the year I was enrolled in the American Institute of Indian Studies (AIIS) Tamil Language Program in 2003-2004

and even considered splitting my dissertation research between Madurai and Chennai, the latter, and Mylapore especially, called me home and I returned.

I had carried out enough preliminary fieldwork to decide that MK Amman would serve as my primary research site, and so, when I arrived in 2006 with a year of dissertation research ahead of me, I sought out an apartment that was within easy walking distance of this temple. Chennai was suffering an acute housing shortage and the rental market was tight, so I considered myself fortunate to find a flat located about halfway between MK Amman and KSRI, where I carried out the textual reading portions of this project. I moved in the day before *Āṭi*, the goddess's festival season, began, before the apartment was even ready, to comply with traditional wisdom which discourages starting any new ventures and shifting residences during this month.

By the first *Āṭi* Friday, an auspicious and ritually heightened occasion, the full impact of taking on this particular apartment struck me. I could hear the ritual drumming at MK Amman from my flat. In the early days of my project, when I was still acclimating to the rhythms of the festival and its ritual performances, this was an enormous advantage. If drumming woke me before daybreak, I could bathe quickly and be at the temple just minutes later to see what kind of ritual was underway. Better still, my balcony

gave me an excellent vantage point over the lane below, which formed part of MK's (and many other local goddess temples') procession route. Because my lane led to the main road, the residents of the several densely populated enclaves nearby processed down my street carrying offerings to MK Amman on days they were performing elaborate domestic *pūjās*. I jumped up from my desk many times and followed such processions, gaining invitations and access to rituals that I would never have known of otherwise.

Most significant of all was that my landlord's house was part of the goddess's *ūr*, her village or home place, and fell within the boundaries (*ella*) of her protection. MK Amman was my, and everyone else in that *ūr*'s, *ellaiyammaṇ*, or boundary goddess. Because the protection of the *ellaiyammaṇ* is such a deeply resonant indigenous category, this fact carried weight with many of MK's female devotees. They were always delighted when they found out where I lived, both because the proximity of my apartment to their own homes meant that they could easily visit me, and because it marked me as eligible to participate in a special relationship with MK, much like the ones they shared in with her. Demonstrated by the fact that these female devotees often remarked upon our shared geography and mentioned it by way of introducing me to someone new, the location of my residence (fortuitous in my view, but no coincidence according to my

neighborhood friends) within the *ellai* served as a site of mutuality and reciprocity that helped these women and I to bridge at least some of our other differences.

The Ethnoscape

Building on to the description of Mylapore's local temple spaces offered above, here I sketch this project's "ethnoscape" (Appadurai 1990) in an effort to contextualize the sites and goddesses that lie at its heart. I describe MK Amman in fuller detail, and introduce another snake goddess temple that forms part of this area's informal circuit. This temple network is constituted and animated by a dynamic range of ritual relationships, and by the practices and performances of individual worshipers who traverse this circuit with their desires, concerns, and afflictions. Related to my discussion about how MK Amman has jurisdiction over and serves a particular area (*ūr*) as its border goddess, this section considers how the goddess marks her presence in particular religious spaces within that *ūr*'s interior.

MK's temple pamphlet states that it was in Mylapore, in a pond full of lotuses, in *svayambhū* form with the trident as her emblem, that "Mother Mundaka Kanni appeared with eyes like freshly-blooming lotuses to shower grace on her devotees" (*Aruḷmiku*

Muṇṭakakkaṇṇiyammaṇ Tirukkōyil Tala Varalārruc Curukkam).³ The most commonly encountered claim about the age of MK Amman's temple is that it is 1,300 years old. Temple records show that the structure was renovated extensively in 1979 and then again in 1992 in advance of the reconsecration ceremonies (*kumbhābhiṣekam*) that were performed in 1993.

The goddess's *svayambhū* form, which is installed in the temple's sanctum sanctorum, is a two-foot-high stone image with the raised outline of a trident on its surface. Her stone body is visible during the bathing ceremonies (Skt. *abhiṣeka*; Ta. *apiṣēkam*) that are performed by her non-Brahmin priests every morning; when these conclude she is dressed and covered in so many flower garlands and other offerings that her shape and features are indistinguishable. On the temple's tower and on its banners and other visual representations she is rendered anthropomorphically, as a goddess who is feminine and benign but who often has loosened hair and small fangs, and who has a crown of *nāga* hoods extended over her head.

³ See Waghorne's discussion of an 1855 revenue survey of Mylapore which has a "pagoda" marked at the current site of MK Amman; "The unnamed pagoda rests at the edge of a large, now long-vanished, irrigation tank that recalls the close association of Mundakakkanni with water and lotuses" (2004, 151 and Figure 3.2).

The temple's sanctum is made out of woven thatch, and several priests and worshipers narrated the various ways in which the goddess has intervened to prevent both temple officials and committed devotees from building a more permanent structure for her. These individuals regard her choice of a thatched dwelling as a gesture of solidarity with her devotees, many of whom are poor and live in similarly provisional residences.⁴ Her *sthala purāṇam* interprets her humble residence as an indication that MK Amman is unassuming (*eḷimaiyāṇa*, Kēcikaṇ 1992, 68) and also “cool,” like the goddess Sitala (*cīṭaḷatēvi*, the North Indian goddess of smallpox; 78).

In addition to the self-manifest stone image in the sanctum, devotees worship the goddess's movable festival image, and, as described above, snake stones, the anthill (i.e., the tunnel-like roots of the banyan tree behind the sanctum), and the divine snake believed to reside therein. Situated next to the anthill is a shrine with a stone cobra

⁴ The idea that individual goddesses resist the development of their temples and prefer to remain under a thatched roof is a common motif at Tamil temples, including Nagattamman (to be discussed below and in Chapter Four) and Vekkali Amman in Uraiyur, near Trichy. Vekkali Amman's *sthala purāṇam* correlates the goddess's insistence that she remain under open sky with her desire to live comparably to how her devotees live:

How is it possible for all the people to get good houses? Even now there are many who live in open places. That is why, in fulfillment of her promise, the goddess remains in the open place with the sky as her roof. This may be regarded as a story (*kata*), but her grace is demonstrated through it. When the children are suffering [without facilities] the mother cannot live with good facilities. The mother lives like this to demonstrate her highest ideals (*Uraiyūr Aruḷmiku Vekkāḷiyammaṇ Tirukkōyil Tala Varalāru* 2001, 10).

image, erected to provide a representation of the snake who seldom ventures out nowadays because of the temple's crowded atmosphere. The temple pamphlet links worship at this cobra shrine with the relief of *nāga dōṣam*, and provides a more inclusive list of the goddess's special powers; "This mother is known for curing one from pox, diseases, blindness, paralysis, and lameness. She also removes sorcery and evil spirits, removes *nāga dōṣam* and planetary *dōṣam*, and helps the weak and poor to prosper. The holy water which is distributed here is a cure for all ailments. This temple is a powerful place to make vows and petitions" (*Aruḷmiku Muṇṭakakkaṇṇiyammaṇ Tirukkōyil*, n.d.).

The temple's *sthala purāṇam* devotes a long discussion to MK Amman's ability to relieve a constellation of ill effects caused by *dōṣam*, which include a woman's delayed marriage, the early death of her husband, diseases affecting her husband, inability to conceive children (especially male children) or deliver children who live full life spans, and troubled family lives. It promises, "The women who worship her and offer milk and eggs to the *nāga* in the anthill at the back of the temple will remove their *nāga dōṣam* and lead happy lives with their husbands and children" (Kēcikaṇ 1992, 107-108). This 200-page temple history also discusses the "close relationship" between MK Amman

and *nāgas*, who sing lullabies to her, decorate her body, and cover her head with five hoods that spread out like an umbrella. Additionally, it explicitly states that she is the *nāga* who lives in the anthill; “Not only does the goddess wear *nāgas* as her ornaments, but she also appears in the form of a *nāga*. ... She eats the eggs and milk and then goes away inside the anthill,” (72). Through the worship of this goddess’s *nāga* form and her snake stones, the *sthala purāṇam* says, those who suffer from *dōṣam* can remove their deficiencies (*kurai*) and lead happy lives (80).

MK stands at the center of a network of local, non-Brahminic goddess temples (various forms of Mariyamman, Nagattamman, and Ankalamman, as well as local goddesses) in the Mylapore area. She is considered the “main” or “big” (*periya*) goddess for the area, or *ūr*, and is especially distinguished from other goddesses by the fact that she is a *svayambhū* goddess, not established with any human involvement. Devotees also point to her status as the *ellaiyamman* as another characteristic that sets her apart, and call her the *akkā*, or big sister goddess to all the other goddesses. As one local devotee explained, “When you go to an *ūr*, the one at the border is the border goddess. She is the one who protects us, the *main,* the one without whom we cannot live. We serve her first, and then serve the other goddesses. Everybody has their own

big goddess [*periyāmmaṅ*], but for our *ūr* MK is the one, the one who guards our borders.” Additionally, MK Amman is described as her devotees’ “support” (*tuṇa*) and as a goddess who does not recognize caste or religious differences (*jāti matam kiṭaiyātu*).

I understand these goddess temples as constituting an informal circuit not because devotees visit them in any given order or on some sort of cycle, but because these temples participate in ritual relationships with one another and, most importantly, with MK Amman. These ritual relationships are embodied and performed most vividly during the goddess’s festival season the month of *Āṭi* (discussed in Chapters Four and Five), when a delegation from each local goddess temple comes to MK Amman to conduct its festival’s opening rituals. I identified twenty-five Mylapore-area temples which comprise this circuit and participate in these kinds of ritual relationships with MK Amman, and this study draws on participant-observation at and interviews with ritual specialists and devotees from each of these sites.

The only other temple on the circuit that is of similar stature to MK Amman is the Aruṃmiku Nāgāttammaṅ Ālayam (discussed in Chapter Four in the context of an *Āṭi* bangle ceremony; hereafter Nagattamma), where the snake goddess is also believed

to *svayambhū*. A brief description of this temple will illuminate the many similar features of the two temples and serve to illustrate the shared characteristics that link them as part of the same class of goddesses, whose temples constitute a reflexive network of local goddess shines. Like MK Amman's temple, Nagattamman's temple is located in an interior neighborhood street. Neither temple is on a bus route or on a road wide enough to be considered a major thoroughfare. Unlike MK's temple, however, Nagattamman's inner sanctum is too small to enter, and devotees must line up in the street for *darśan*.⁵ In terms of its physical footprint, it is much smaller than MK Amman and is less widely known outside of its immediate area, although its popularity and reputation have been steadily growing in recent years.

The snake goddess installed in Nagattamman's sanctum sanctorum is a beautiful, anthropomorphic image, and behind the sanctum an anthill stands at the base of intertwined sacred trees. The temple's *sthala purāṇam* states that originally only an anthill existed in that place, and after passerby sensed some power there people began to light lamps and worship. In 1942 an enlivening rite (*pratiṣṭhā*) was performed for

⁵ Increasing numbers of Nagattamman's devotees also take advantage of the convenience of "drive-by *darśan*," whereby they momentarily halt their vehicles opposite the sanctum and hastily peer in at the goddess enshrined within.

Nagattamman and a simple temple was constructed from woven coconut fronds. A subsequent temple custodian decided that the goddess should no longer be housed under a thatched roof but should instead have a concrete tower above her sanctum. This custodian then developed a very high fever, and Nagattamman communicated through oracular speech (*aru! vāṅku*) that she did not desire that improvements be made to her temple, and that she preferred to remain in a thatched enclosure. After begging her forgiveness, the custodian became well again and in 1976 the temple compound wall was built, stone images of the *navagrahas* (nine planets) were installed, and a consecration ritual (*kumbhābhiṣekam*) was performed. However, no permanent roof was built. In 1978 the government assumed control of the temple's finances under the Hindu Religious Charitable Endowments Board (HRCE) (*Srī Nāgāttammaṅ Tirukkōyil Cakti Valipātu* n.d., 3).

This account is corroborated and expanded in the following narrative, recorded from one of this snake goddess's most attentive devotees:

It is a very, very, very old temple. In the beginning it was only an anthill. The goddess was in the thatched hut with a thatched roof, and the roof was very small. There was no development at that time. One lady was doing something [for the goddess]. She prepared everything and performed the goddess's bathing rituals [*abhiṣekam*]. At that time there was no daily worship or bathing.

These things developed little by little. They wanted to build a structure to replace the thatched roof but the goddess didn't allow them to build it. She is very simple. She is a simple lady. She said, "I don't want [a concrete roof]." Then slowly, little by little, daily worship and bathing rituals were developed.

This *nāgāttammaṅ* is entreated for the same blessings and boons as are other goddesses of her class: familial prosperity and good fortune, fertility, health, good jobs, marriage alliances, and exam results. Relief from *nāga dōṣam* also figures among her powers, as this female devotee explained:

Many people come to this temple to rectify *nāga dōṣam*. They come because they want a child. If they are sick they write [their petition] on a piece of paper, put a one-rupee or five-rupee coin, and tie it there [on one of the temple's holy trees]. When their wish is fulfilled they will come to the temple again and offer something to Nagattamman. That is called *karikaṅam* [a vow].

Nagattamman's *sthala purāṅam* enumerates this temple's three special features – namely, that its goddess is *svayambhū*, its temple managers (*dharmakarttākkaḷ*) are both honest and devoted, and its priests (*arccakarkaḷ*) serve willingly – and asserts that collectively these features account for the temple's unique and intense power (*śakti*), and its ability to protect devotees (*Sri Nākāttammaṅ Tirukkōyil Cakti Valipātu*, 8).

A significant number of miracle stories circulate at Nagattamman's temple, both orally and recorded in the temple's literature. I heard these stories for a long time before

I interviewed any of their protagonists, all of whom are women who experienced fertility issues and later delivered healthy babies as a result of this snake goddess's blessings. One narrative concerns a Brahmin woman who suffered twelve years of childlessness and whose doctor diagnosed her husband with low sperm count and poor sperm motility at the same time their astrologer diagnosed him with *nāga dōṣam*. The couple was advised to adopt a child but resisted, believing instead that Nagattamman would eventually reward their faith in her with a baby. Since he was the one with the horoscopic and physiological problems, my friend's husband diligently offered milk at Nagattamman's anthill every day until his wife learned she was pregnant. This woman related her story to me with tears flowing down her face, repeating over and over, "Nagattamman is everything to us." Now five years old, their son drinks a sip of holy water from this snake goddess's temple every day after his bath.

Sources and Methods

The circuit of local goddess temples described above anchors this dissertation's ethnoscape, which is populated by devotees, priests, ritual specialists, astrologers, ritual musicians, and sculptors (who carve the stone snake images that devotees install and/or

worship in *nāga dōṣam* rituals). I recorded their narratives and ideas in interviews and in notes summarizing countless additional conversations and encounters. Many of these dialogues were conducted in individual homes (sometimes mine and sometimes theirs), but a significant number of interviews were carried out in more public spaces, particularly at temples. Whereas some of these were one-time meetings, such as in the context of a festival, I spent substantially more time with the vast majority of these interlocutors, whether visiting their homes for coffee and conversation, or in more structured follow-up interviews. Almost all of my interviews were carried out in Tamil, and were later translated by me (sometimes with the help of a fieldwork assistant). When I quote from the few conversations that took place in English, I indicate that this was the case, and when quoting those who spoke in Tamil but used a smattering of English (as so many of my respondents did), I mark their English words or phrases with asterisks.

Because the ritual worship of snake goddesses is overwhelmingly the practice of women in Tamil Nadu, the majority of the devotees with whom I worked on an everyday basis were female. Male devotees were more numerous during festival celebrations, and I interviewed many men who undertook vows or embodied the goddess through possession during the *Āṭi* festival season. While all of the astrologers, ritual musicians,

and sculptors with whom I interacted were male, and the preponderance of the temple priests and other ritual specialists were as well, I did encounter a dozen female priestesses and ritual experts. I visited each of their temples and domestic shrines several times, witnessed and participated in their festivals, and on occasion arranged to meet them at other temples to observe them conducting particular ceremonies.

Additionally, many of the women who were seemingly “ordinary” devotees throughout the year assumed prominent leadership roles in ritual performances during the *Āṭī* festival season, and I arranged to speak with them about these more public dimensions of their ritual relationships with the goddess.

Those with whom I worked came from a full spectrum of caste backgrounds. All of the female ritual specialists described above are non-Brahmin, as are the priests at MK Amman and at the network of local goddess temples in which I focus.⁶ I did,

⁶ In my fieldwork I found that the Brahmin/non-Brahmin dyad continues to be the locally meaningful category for identifying caste. This dyad is regularly and explicitly invoked when individuals talk about and/or classify people, temples, ritual practices, and customs. For example, the salient category when discussing a temple is whether the officiating priests are Brahmin or non-Brahmin, but if they are non-Brahmin, their precise caste is rarely considered relevant. Similarly, many of the individuals whom I interviewed specifically self-identified either as Brahmin or non-Brahmin, but seldom volunteered their exact non-Brahmin caste unless I elicited it. Following these indigenous conventions, I typically note whether a speaker is Brahmin or non-Brahmin before quoting from them in this dissertation, especially when this identification has some bearing on or provides a contextualization cue for interpreting his or her narrative.

however, interview a number of Mylapore's Brahmin temple priests and Brahmin ritual specialists who preserve close administrative and neighborhood ties to MK Amman. I became acquainted with some of these Brahmin priests when they were retained to perform occasional *pūjās* at MK Amman, such as *nāga pratiṣṭhā* rites, or to chant during the performance of an entirely new ritual that was added to the *Āṭi* repertoire in 2005.⁷

Although I was told that Brahmin priests from Kapaleeswarar temple (which falls, along with MK Amman, in a constellation of fifteen temples that are administered by the same Executive Officer, who is appointed by HRCE) are called to MK Amman to officiate at the once-in-twelve-years *kumbhābhiṣekam* (reconsecration) ceremonies and a handful of other rituals, I personally never witnessed a Brahmin priest enter MK Amman's sanctum.

I spent fourteen continuous months in Chennai and Tamil Nadu and observed three full cycles of the *Āṭi* festival there (2005, 2006, and 2007), plus a portion of its

⁷ This ritual, the "flower shower" festival (*pūccorital vijā*) involved 1,008 women (each of whom had signed up in advanced and paid 100 rupees to participate) carrying flower-filled baskets on a local procession and then performing "flower *abhiṣekam*" over the goddess's *svayambhū* image. The idea for the "flower shower" ritual was borrowed from the wealthy and enormously popular Samayapuram Mariyamman temple (a site that is discussed by Harman 2004 and 2006, and Younger 1980), located to the south of Chennai in Trichy, and was clearly intended to appeal to a more upwardly-mobile class of devotees. The "flower shower" *pūjā* fits well with Waghorne's contention that the goddess is gentrifying, both visually and ritually, in contemporary Tamil Nadu (2004, especially Chapter 3).

celebration in 2008. During the *Āṭi* season I spent my days and nights at temple ritual performances and at domestic *pūjās*, employing participant-observer methodologies and engaging many devotees in conversation in local temple spaces. I typically collected names and addresses from ritual drummers and priests too in-demand to speak with me during this season, and used the midday hours when the temple was closed to call on female devotees to inquire about their *Āṭi* vows and ritual performances. In the intervening months I transcribed and translated my interviews, interviewed a range of ritual specialists and devotees, and consulted with scholars and others to clarify questions and concepts. I also participated in numerous other festivals, vows, and related observances throughout the year in an effort to place these snake goddess traditions in their broader ritual repertoire; these occasions facilitated exchange about contemporary Tamil religious practices with a wide spectrum of worshipers and added greater depth to my study.

In addition to this ethnographic fieldwork, I also engaged in textual reading of Sanskrit sources related to *nāgās* and fertility rites⁸ to provide historical scope and additional depth to this project, and read a range of popular Tamil-language sources on

⁸ See Appendix Two for a survey of some of this literature.

related topics. My work with Sanskrit materials raised numerous questions concerning historical continuity, caste-specific religious practices, and the transmission of ritual knowledge, which I pursued in directed studies with scholars at KSRI. Among the Tamil-language texts that I translated are temple pamphlets and *sthala purāṇam*, newspaper features, booklets on *nāga dōṣam* and *parikārams*, and articles from religious magazines. Most of the temple literature was available for sale or easily procured at individual temples, although it took me months to obtain copies of some *sthala purāṇam*. I bought short booklets and longer books on various astrological blemishes and their remedial rituals from Mylapore-area religious goods stores, and sometimes turned to the personal collections of astrologers when I could not locate particular publications. I regularly purchased *bhakti* magazines at local newsstands in order to find relevant articles, and bought back-issues from a local lending library. Some of the female devotees with whom I worked shared articles from these religious magazines with me, and one friend frequently clipped articles from Tamil-language newspapers on topics in which she thought I would be interested.

Although I do not quote extensively from these sources in the chapters of this dissertation, many of my instincts and questions were sharpened through reading this

material, and my engagement with this body of Tamil-language literature provided me with the vocabulary – both literally and figuratively – to carry out this project. I came to understand over time that these popular Tamil texts are part of the landscape of vernacular religion in ways that the Sanskrit texts are not, and that this genre of Tamil sources exhibits a high degree of intertextuality with the practices and performances I was most interested in. In this reciprocal dialogue, magazine content is influenced by popular demand and interests, and therefore reflects Tamil religious concerns; at the same time, these articles shape individual practices, temple rituals, and religious sensibilities, and may serve to create or amplify religious concerns.

My study of vernacular snake goddess traditions and the ritual practices associated with *nāga dōṣam* foregrounds the religious lives and personal narratives of particular individuals, as well as their gendered negotiations with emerging social realities. This approach privileges the local because, as I have argued above, it is within local boundaries and in local networks that sites, temples, deities, and individuals are indigenously “placed” and interpreted. Indeed, it is at the level of local religious forms, practices, personalities, and places that I can most clearly identify and account for fluidity, negotiation, and change, as opposed to attempting to conjure some “standard”

model about which I might make more sweeping generalizations.⁹ A focus on vernacular religion enables us to, as Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger puts it, “identify sites of potential fluidity, flexibility, and innovation in a religious tradition,” (2006, 2). Analysis at this level of vernacular practice makes it possible to hone in on the making and unmaking of snake goddess and *nāga dōṣam* traditions at this particular historical moment, and to evoke the rhythms of ritual and religious repertoires at a moment when they are being created, expanded, and contested. Here, by concentrating on the transformation of “traditional” snake goddess and *nāga dōṣam* rituals and their broader relationships to “modern” contexts, I am able to identify how religious practice is one category through which contemporary Tamils are confronting their changing social environments and mediating the anxieties these shifts engender.

⁹ As Bruce M. Knauft points out, generalization “is not intrinsically bad” (1996, 289). He argues that the point is to use generalizations heuristically (rather than “to pretend that they mirror the complexity of underlying variations”), and proposes that “one way to lessen the distance between the general and the particular in the history of our own scholarship is to give specific citations in notes and references” (289).

Snakes and Anthills

The tradition of snake worship is both old and widespread in India, with roots stretching back to Vedic mantras and epic myths. It is possible that the fear of snakes and their poison was an early motivation for their worship, or that some of snakes' unique characteristics, such as the periodic shedding of their skin, led to their being ascribed magical powers and eventually being deified. Whatever initially catalyzed religious and ritual interest in snakes as a class of beings, it is clear that Indian traditions have long regarded them as divinities linked with water, fertility, and anthills. In textual sources and iconographic representations, snakes are associated with a range of Hindu gods and goddesses: Vishnu reclines on the great serpent Adishesha, Krishna dances on top of the venomous Kaliya, snakes serve as Shiva's ornaments, and Ganesha wears a *nāga* as his sacred thread. A snake accompanies Murugan, and *nāga* hoods curve over Mariyamman's (and other local goddess's) head. Both Lakshmana and Baladeva are considered be avatars of Adishesha, as is Patanjali, the sage who is best known as the author of the *Yoga Sūtras*.

Although *nāga* worship is ubiquitous in India today, it has received little sustained attention as a vernacular tradition in its own right, particularly from contemporary

scholars. This oversight is, perhaps, attributable to the fact that *nāga* traditions are characterized by a diverse array of ritual practices and have thus proved difficult to classify or categorize. Further, these traditions are inflected very differently in their varied regional contexts; in most parts of north and central India *nāgās* are regarded as male deities, while across south India and in parts of eastern India, *nāgas* are imaged and worshiped as snake goddesses. Since *nāga* worship traditions fall within the realm of non-textual vernacular religious practices (or what was earlier termed “village religion”), they have occupied a somewhat marginal position relative to Hindu traditions identified with the Sanskrit textual tradition, Brahminic ritual, well-defined sectarian traditions, and large temple complexes. In addition to being figuratively marginal in conceptual status relative to the “great” tradition, snake stones were historically encountered in spatially peripheral locations such as village boundaries, with all their connotations of danger and liminality, where they received worship with other stone images representing local guardian deities and deceased ancestors.

Beyond Naga Panchami, a festival that honors snakes and is celebrated in markedly distinct ways in various parts of India, few ritual features or narrative elements unify *nāga* worship traditions across the subcontinent. While this diversity and ubiquity

may have historically rendered *nāga* worship difficult to lift out of its particular, local settings and characterize, in some vernacular contexts the assemblage of beliefs and practices related to *nāga* worship appear to have shifted from conceptual and geographic peripheries to the center of religious life in recent years. Indeed, in contemporary, urban Chennai the worship of snake goddesses, or *nāgāttammaṅ*, is a vibrant, enormously popular, and rapidly expanding tradition. It is increasingly visible, appealing to a surprising cross-section of castes and sects, and host to an innovative and evolving ritual tradition.

Forms of the Snake Goddess in Tamil Nadu

Here, at the southeastern tip of India, the snake goddess takes a variety of physical forms and thereby offers her mostly female devotees several modes through which to approach her. First, she is represented as an anthropomorphic goddess, typically in figures sculpted from black stone or cast in a range of metals. Her face is benign and beautiful, and above the tall crown that indicates her divinity an arc of snake hoods shields her head. The snake goddess may be installed in the sanctum sanctorum of temples that are dedicated to her and where she is the main goddess, or her

likenesses may occupy subsidiary shrines at temples, primarily Shiva and other local goddess temples, where she is not the principal deity. The snake goddess sometimes appears as a full-body image, with legs and two or more arms, and at other times she is a head-only image. The latter is her most common depiction, and this iconographic form serves as a visual allusion to the classic Mariyamman myth, which features decapitation, switched bodies and heads, and apotheosis.¹⁰ In many inner sancta a full-bodied goddess sits on a platform above a head-only representation, which is established below, and both images enjoy identical worship. Temple priests daily bathe and anoint these anthropomorphic *nāgāttammaṅs*, dress them in lustrous silks, and adorn them with jewelry, colored powders, and flowers. Devotees bring similar offerings to snake goddess temples to those they present at other shrines; these include coconuts, fruit, flower garlands and blossoms, milk, incense, and camphor.

Second, the snake goddess takes the form of an anthill (*purru*, sometimes referred to as a termite hill or white-ant hill), which is conceived of as a *svayambhū* (self-manifest) eruption of the goddess from the earth. These conical, earthen mounds may

¹⁰ For discussions of the many versions of this myth and of the goddess Mariyamman, see, for example, Beck 1981; Craddock 1994 and 2001; Doniger 1995; Harman 2004 and 2006; Masilamani-Meyer 2004; Meyer 1986; Nabokov 2000; Ramanujan 1999b; Egnor 1983; Younger 1980 and 2002, among others.

grow to be as many as six or more feet in height, and feature tunnel-like passages where snakes are believed to enter and exit and at the openings of which devotees will typically place their offerings. The emergence of these natural signifiers of the snake goddess is often the initial indication that she has chosen to reveal herself in a particular place. Many oral narratives and written temple histories (*sthala purāṇam*)¹¹ concerning the origins of individual snake goddess temples note that the anthill appeared first, worship followed, and that a shrine with an anthropomorphic image was constructed much later. One non-Brahmin man, who administers a small, private Nagattamman temple in Mylapore, described how when an anthill formed and began to grow against the outer wall of his house he realized that it heralded the goddess's presence: "The anthill is a sign of her grace. It is her body, slowly growing from the dirt of the earth. It is only because of the anthill's appearance that we built this temple. The *nāgāttammaṇi* is in the anthill and she is the anthill. We worship the anthill and the snake; both the snake and the anthill are deities [*cām*]."

¹¹ I use the more widely known Sanskrit term *sthala purāṇam* to refer to the place histories of particular temples throughout this dissertation, although the more common Tamil terms for them are *tala purāṇam* (place story) and *tala varalāru* (place history).

The soil (*maṇ*) of the anthill is believed to have curative powers and, as such, is ingested by those who seek healing from disease and illnesses, and by those who suffer malevolent possession. At temples where anthill mud is distributed as *prasādam* (a substance infused with the deity's grace), devotees may also consume a pinch of it. This soil is sometimes tied in a small bundle and hung at the entrances of homes to ward off malicious spirits and the evil eye, and one woman I know dabs some in her bellybutton as a protective measure for her grown children. Finally, I have been told that anthill soil has ritual uses during temple reconsecration (*kumbhābhiṣekam*) ceremonies and that it is one among the ingredients that should be placed in a sacrificial fire before it is kindled.

Anthills are also understood as the dwelling places of actual serpents,¹² and these snakes are recognized as a third form that the snake goddess takes. A female healer described the goddess's multiple manifestations this way, "The goddess came and sat in an anthill. We see her there as a snake. Both the anthill and the snake are the goddess. Sometimes she is a snake, sometimes she is an anthill. Always she is *śakti* [feminine power]." Although Tamils acknowledge that anthills are built by ants or

¹² In its enumeration of snake habitats, the *Agni Purāṇa* (294.21) lists the anthill (*valmīka*) and the hollows at the bases of trees (*udyāna koṭara*).

termites and not by the snakes themselves, they believe that snakes take up residence in anthills and thus sanctify them by virtue of their divine presence, rendering them worthy of worship.¹³ An astrologer explained,

The anthill is actually the residence [*viṭu*] of the snake goddess. So when I want to pray to the snake goddess, I go to the anthill. I do not know if the snake is inside or if it has gone out, but still, the moment I see an anthill I associate it with the snake goddess who lives inside it. It is something like going to Delhi and visiting Raj Bhavan [residence of the President of India]. Did you really meet Abdul Kalam [President of India at the time of conversation]? No, but you get the satisfaction of having visited his place. Just like that, by praying and pouring milk at the anthill you get the feeling that you have met the snake goddess herself.

Some of those with whom I spoke likened the anthill to a temple in which the snake goddess (in her reptilian form) is established. A female devotee, who embodies her chosen deity in possession, put it this way, “Nagattamma lives inside the anthill, which is her temple [*kōyi*]. Much as we live in a house to protect ourselves from the sun and the rain, so she lives in her temple. She will not give *darsan* [Ta. *taricaṇam*, auspicious sight] to many people, because they will fear her form. But she has appeared to me and to others like me who have overwhelming *bhakti* [devotion].”

¹³ This belief that snakes take over dwellings established by ants is captured in a Tamil proverb that says, “Ants serve as the snake’s carpenters.”

In addition to regarding the anthill as a manifestation of the goddess and the abode of divine snakes, some devotees narrated mythological episodes in which an anthropomorphic goddess “sits” in an anthill, either to worship or meditate, or because she is angry or in hiding. Her contact with the anthill and presence there renders the anthill identical with her, infused with her power and divinity, and therefore an object of worship equivalent with the goddess herself.

An example of these contiguous forms is found in the charter myth of the Mel Malaiyanur Ankalamman temple (located near Gingee in southern Tamil Nadu), where an enormous, crumbling anthill stands in the inner sanctum near an anthropomorphic stone image of the goddess.¹⁴ In an oral version of this story, narrated by one of the temple’s hereditary priests, Shiva severs Brahma’s fifth head and the goddess Saraswati curses both Shiva and his consort, Ankalamman. While Shiva roams the world, suffering from *brahma-hatyā dōṣam* (Ta. *piramakatti*, the sin of killing a Brahmin) and attempting to dislodge the skull that persistently sticks to his hand, the goddess comes to Malaiyanur and “sits” in an anthill.

¹⁴ Ankalamman is variously called Ankalapameswari and Ankali. For more on this temple, see Eveline Meyer’s 1986 study of Ankalapameswari and Isabelle Nabokov’s 2000 ethnography of a class of rituals performed on its premises and elsewhere.

The goddess Ankalamman came and sat here in the form of an anthill. The fishermen tried to break up that anthill but found that it was impossible to do. Then the goddess appeared before the fishermen and instructed them, saying, “Because of Saraswati’s curse I am here, so you perform *pūjā* [devotional worship] daily and I will help your family members and lineage.” That is why we [the fisherman caste] do *pūjā* for the goddess. The king became convinced of the miraculous powers of this anthill and granted some land for this temple. Then Shiva approached the anthill and spoke to the goddess who was concealed there. She told him that because of her *śakti* and the *śakti* of Malaiyanur he could remove his *dōṣam* here in the cremation ground.

This myth establishes the basis for the worship that continues to be performed at

Malaiyanur’s anthill – whose soil is distributed today as blessed *prasādam* to devotees.

In addition to describing how the anthill was sanctified by her presence and stands near

her anthropomorphic image in the inner sanctum, the temple’s *sthala purāṇam* extends

this chain of identities to include the goddess’s manifestation as a divine snake; “Angrily,

from within that anthill, the goddess rose up as a snake and spread out her hood.

Although she possesses terrible poison, she blesses people with her grace”

(Shantirashekar n.d., 36). Thus, at Malaiyanur, the goddess is manifest as an anthill,

anthropomorphic stone goddess image, and as a divine *nāga* who lives in the anthill’s

depths.

Finally, the snake goddess also takes the form of snake stones (stone slabs on which are carved snake images, or coiled snake sculptures) which are typically installed under sacred trees at temples. These *nāga* images exhibit a variety of representations: they may show one polycephalous snake, two intertwined snakes, or a single coiled snake with one extended hood. These snake stones often have either decorative embellishments, like flowers, etched into them, or sectarian markings, like small *liṅgams* (Ta. *liṅkam*; the mark or emblem that represents Shiva), or images of dancing Krishna or Ganesha.

Snake stones are enlivened in *pratiṣṭhā* rites which kindle breath and life (*uyir*) in these stone forms, and devotees and priests identify these images as *nāgāttammaṅ* only after this ritual has been performed. Like any permanently installed temple image, these stone *nāgās* require daily worship after they are enlivened. These *nāga* stones are not only exceptionally common in contemporary Tamil Nadu, they also function as the snake goddess's most accessible form, since her devotees regularly bathe, anoint, and decorate them with their own hands in embodied displays of devotion that are relatively rare or less possible with the goddess's anthill and anthropomorphic forms.

The snake goddess's multiple forms are by no means mutually exclusive; they share space at many temples and are joined by other signifiers of the goddess, which include sacred trees and her trident. At one modest Nagattamman temple in Chennai two anthropomorphic stone images grace the sanctum sanctorum, one a head-only sculpture and one a full-body image. A cluster of snake stones stands under a slender peepal tree in the temple's courtyard, and a small anthill has gradually appeared nearby. An oiled stone image of the goddess's head surrounded by flared snake hoods has been installed next to the anthill, along with a trident, and the anthill is wrapped in a yellow sari to "block" the divine snakes that reside within from emerging. At this single, rather ordinary temple, a spectrum of the goddess's manifestations and forms is present, offering devotees multiple means through which to approach and participate in ritual relationships with her.

At MK Amman, too, these multiple forms of the snake goddess interact in dynamic relationship, but with one notable addition. At this temple the snake that lives in the anthill – here, the tunnel-like roots of a gnarled and now decaying banyan tree behind the sanctum – is believed to emerge daily at midnight to have *darśan* of and worship the *svayambhū* stone goddess image installed in the sanctum sanctorum.

Numerous devotees and priests told me that years ago, when the temple's interior was still sand, the snake's tracks were visible each morning, but that now only the watchman can confirm the divine *nāga's* nocturnal worship. A small shrine with a carved stone cobra image has been established next to the banyan tree so that offerings for the rarely seen divine reptile can be left here. The idea that one form of the goddess visits another of her manifestations every day is a significant theological concept which illustrates that the *nāgāttammaṅ's* multiple identities function both as independent embodiments and extensions of the goddess, who is neither contained nor exhausted by any of them, even as she continues to abide in the slithering snake, the goddess image, the anthill, and the snake stones simultaneously, at MK Amman and at many similar temples.

Worship of the snake goddesses is overwhelmingly the practice of women in Tamil Nadu today, and it is almost exclusively women who embody the snake goddess in possession and speak her prophecy (*aruḷ vāḱku*). Female devotees feed milk and eggs to snake stones and place these offerings at anthills to be enjoyed by the divine *nāgās* thought to dwell within. They adorn the *nāgāttammaṅ's* various forms with flowers, vermilion (*kurikumam*) and turmeric (*mañcaḷ*) powders, and offer oil lamps, coconuts, bananas, and other fruit. These devotees undertake a wide range of vows to

honor and propitiate the snake goddess; they fast, conduct cycles of *pūjās* for her, and promise her pleasing gifts of saris, jewelry, and other items if their wishes are fulfilled.

During the goddess's festival season in the sultry Tamil month of *Āṭṭi*, when the goddess is believed to heat up and expand, these vows also intensify, and may include

firewalking, ritual piercings, carrying milk pots in procession, ritually feeding the goddess

her favorite foods, and dancing her presence in possession events. Although

nāgāttammaṅs are also worshiped for generalized prosperity, protection, and well-being,

they are primarily entreated for fertility. The snake goddess is closely associated with

conception and marriage, and her devotees consider her to be uniquely receptive to their

desires for offspring. When individuals experience difficulty arranging their marriages or

with conception, the planets Rahu and Ketu, who I introduce below, are typically blamed,

and it is to rectify the blemishes that they induce that devotees most often turn to the

snake goddess in contemporary Tamil Nadu.

Rahu and Ketu

Within the repertoire of rituals dedicated to snake goddesses, in this dissertation I concentrate on those performed to counter *nāga dōṣam*, the malignant condition

believed to result from inauspicious planetary configurations in an individual's horoscope and linked with delayed marriage and infertility. Specifically, the planets whose unfavorable positions are faulted for causing this astrological flaw and these adverse effects are two planets called the "shadow planets" (*chāyā graha*), Rahu (Skt. *rāhu*; Ta. *rāku*) and Ketu (Skt. *ketu*; Ta. *kētu*). Believed to be the last to join the nine planets (*navagrahas*), a grouping of astrological deities who are understood to exert both positive and negative influences in individual lives, Rahu and Ketu enjoy a thriving ritual tradition in South India that aims at securing their favor.

Along with the planet Saturn, or Shani (Skt. *śani*; Ta. *caṇi*), Rahu and Ketu are regarded as inauspicious planets and are best known for causing misfortune during the cyclical periods (*taca*) when they rule an individual's horoscope.¹⁵ Individuals who fall under Rahu's and/or Ketu's gaze (*pārva*) are believed to suffer as a direct result. Much as the strength of these meddling planets fluctuates over the course of an individual life cycle, so Rahu and Ketu preside over particular hours of the day. Rahu reigns over *rāhu kālam* (Rahu time), an inauspicious ninety-minute period of every day. Ketu is also associated with *rāhu kālam*, as well as with another inauspicious ninety-minute interval

¹⁵ For discussion of a parallel condition, compare the malefic influence of Honi in the tale "The Twelve Years of Affliction" recorded and discussed by Narayanan (1997, 109-24).

called *yama kaṇṭam*, which is ruled by Yama, the god of death. Many Hindus avoid beginning any new work or auspicious undertaking during *rāhu kālam* and *yama kaṇṭam* and, in particular, prefer not to commence worship during these periods of the day.

While the list of adversities attributed to these shadow planets in oral narratives and Tamil-language print sources is long and varied, two difficulties stand out as hallmarks of their deleterious influences. Rahu and Ketu are considered to exert particularly calamitous influences on marriage and fertility; more specifically, they are believed to obstruct both. Their malevolent powers are faulted for delayed marriage, inability to conceive or frequent miscarriages, and the premature death of one's spouse. As will be discussed in Chapter Three, those who are afflicted by Rahu's and Ketu's harmful gazes might worship at their shrines located within other temples, make a pilgrimage to the Rahu and/or Ketu temple in southern Tamil Nadu, or embark on cycles of more involved remedial rituals (*parikāram*) in an attempt to neutralize their undesirable effects. What ritual therapies a sufferer ultimately pursues typically depends on the advice of his or her astrologer, and will usually be dictated by the precise positions these shadow planets occupy in that person's horoscope.

Rahu and Ketu are created and attain their planetary status as a result of the events in the important Hindu “churning of the ocean” myth. Versions of this narrative can be found in the epics *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*, as well as in several *Purāṇas*.¹⁶ These multiple accounts are distinguished from each other by sectarian leanings, relative degrees of specific detail, and alternative renderings of key elements. Similarly, priests, devotees, and astrologers recount oral versions of the “churning of the ocean” myth that emphasize particular themes and elements while omitting others. The summary that I provide here is based on an amalgamation of sources, including my reading of Tamil and Sanskrit versions of the “churning of the ocean” myth and oral narrations of varying lengths and specificity that I recorded during my fieldwork.

In a time when the gods and the three worlds were burdened by the demons’ afflictions, the gods approached Brahma and asked for counsel. He advised them to bring a selection of herbs to the milky sea and enlist the help of the demons to churn the ocean to produce *amṛta*, the nectar of immortality. Although the gods and demons were

¹⁶ For a rendering of the “churning of the ocean” myth based on the *Mahābhārata*, see O’Flaherty’s *Hindu Myths* (1975, 274-80, especially 278 on Rahu), as well as her helpful list of other versions of the myth (336). A translation drawn from the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* is included in Dimmitt and van Buitenen (1978, 94-98). In *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* this narrative is found in *Bālakāṇḍa*, Chapter 44.

usually rivals, and characteristically engaged in escalating cycles of competition, the lure of the *amṛta* proved powerful enough for them to join forces to obtain it. With Mount Mandara as their churning stick and the *nāga* Vasuki as their churning rope, the two groups, one on each side, churned the milky sea. One by one, delightful objects and divine beings emerged from the cosmic ocean. These treasures were followed by the dreadful *halāhala* poison, emitted by the exhausted Vasuki. Shiva consumed this poison, suffering only from a discoloration of his throat, and the churning continued until a pot of *amṛta* was successfully procured.

With the coveted nectar now before them, both the gods and the demons expressed misgivings about how the *amṛta* would be distributed. Only after Vishnu assumed the enchanting feminine form of Mohini would each side form orderly lines to receive their respective shares of the ambrosia. Motivated by the suspicion that this charming woman did not intend to share the nectar with the demons, Svarbhanu crept from his place among them and joined the gods' column. Just as he sipped his serving of *amṛta*, Surya (the Sun) and Chandra (the Moon) recognized Svarbhanu as a demon, and informed Mohini of his fraud. With great force Mohini hurled a whirling discus (or, in some versions, the serving ladle) at Svarbhanu, decapitating him and causing the

universe to tremble. Because he had swallowed some of the nectar, however, his head became immortal.

In some iterations of this myth, Svarbhanu's severed head and torso immediately ascend to the sky and assume planetary positions, while in others the dismembered demon has to petition Shiva before he is granted celestial standing. These divergences notwithstanding, the head of the demon is fused with the body of a snake and becomes Rahu, while Svarbhanu's torso joins a five-hooded *nāga* head and becomes Ketu. Because Surya and Chandra revealed the demon's deception, Rahu and Ketu developed an instant antagonism toward them that endures today. Rahu and Ketu continue to chase these celestial bodies through the skies, devouring them periodically in solar and lunar eclipses.¹⁷

Rahu and Ketu are feared in contemporary South India not only for the obstacles they pose to marriage and fertility, but also for the harmful effects associated with eclipse days. While it is widely believed that people should not bathe, eat, or go out

¹⁷ Solar eclipses are particularly associated with Rahu while lunar eclipses are especially linked to Ketu. While I was conducting fieldwork in 2007, both a total lunar eclipse and a solar eclipse occurred in the month of March (on March 4 and March 19, respectively); their proximity was much-discussed in newspaper and *bhakti* magazine articles, and a number of remedial rituals to counteract their inauspicious effects were performed at Mylapore-area temples.

during these occasional occurrences, pregnant women are considered especially vulnerable to the negative effects of eclipses. In particular, Tamils believe if eclipse “rays” fall on a pregnant woman, her child will be born deformed or disfigured, and that any activity she undertakes during an eclipse will have a literal effect on the body of her baby (e.g., if she sews during an eclipse the newborn will emerge with its skin pricked as if by many needles).

Rahu, in particular, is closely linked with the class of *nāgāttammans* and other goddess temples that are discussed in this dissertation. Female devotees visit the temples or shrines of these goddesses to perform *pūjās* to propitiate Rahu and counteract Rahu’s unfavorable effects during *rāhu kālam*, and worshipers entreat these snake goddesses for fertility and successful marriages that they believe to be blocked by Rahu. As evidenced in the oral narratives of her devotees and priests as well as in the temple’s *sthala purāṇam*, MK Amman shares a particularly intimate connection with Rahu. MK is often described as being ornamented with snakes (*nākāparaṇi*), an appellation that the *sthala purāṇam* takes to include Rahu and Ketu (Kēcikaṇ 1992, 47-48). This text includes a lullaby that is sung to MK and in which Rahu and Ketu are invoked as “red-headed snake” and “black-headed snake,” respectively, and are

portrayed as playing with the goddess. The temple history suggests different ways to split Muntakakkanni's name to arrive at different meanings, and one of these permutations relies on taking the first portion as *muṇṭa* (headless trunk or torso) to indicate a relationship with Rahu, who loses his head after drinking the *amṛta*. It also proposes that her name may refer to MK's own head-only form, which alludes to the beheading of Renuka in the Mariyamman myth, a narrative which is mentioned above and treated in some detail in Chapter Four.

Further, MK's *sthala purāṇam* describes this goddess as especially powerful for eliminating *dōṣam* caused by Rahu and Ketu; "Those who are affected by *nāga dōṣam* and other *dōṣams* should come and worship MK on seven consecutive Tuesdays or Fridays in order to remove these and make their lives happy. ... Through her grace they will definitely experience the removal of this *dōṣam*. MK has the power to control unfavorable planets and helps her devotees to get married, have children, and lead good lives" (Kēcikaṇ 1992, 107-109). The explicit portrayal of MK Amman as a goddess who is capable of restraining hostile planets, removing *dōṣam*, and assisting with marriage, fertility, and prosperity reveals the extent to which these concepts are interwoven and how central these powers are to this deity's identity. Significantly, the *sthala purāṇam*'s

discussion of MK Amman's relationship to snakes and *dōṣam* is framed in an overarching narrative that emphasizes the antiquity of this goddess and her temple, and the ancient character of the vows and prayers that may be offered by devotees seeking to remedy *nāga dōṣam*. This appeal to the authority of "ancient" tradition is a key element in MK's temple literature and the wider, expanding *nāga dōṣam* ritual tradition.

Snake Worship and *Nāgas* in Scholarly Sources

The Indian tradition of snake worship has attracted the intermittent interest of missionaries, British civil servants, folklorists and other scholars who have noticed its close association with fertility and anthills, commented on its regional varieties, traced out its underlying mythologies, and speculated about its resonances with and relationships to cultural practices in contexts far beyond India. Isolated references to snake deities appear in colonial sources on South India (Dubois 1899; Elmore 1913; Thurston 1906), and Edgar Thurston's *Omens and Superstitions of Southern India* (1912) includes a short chapter on snake worship that pairs his observations of ritual practices related to *nāgas* with material from nineteenth-century print sources. These contributions are particularly notable because the South Indian views on and customs

concerning snakes that they preserve are remarkably similar to those in evidence today.

The following passage, from Henry Whitehead's 1921 *The Village Gods of South India*,

demonstrates how observations that were recorded nearly a century ago continue to

bear a close resemblance to the traditions and practices I encountered in my own

fieldwork:

The worship of serpents, especially the deadly cobra, is common all over South India. In one village of the Wynaad I came across a Mission school which was visited almost daily by a large cobra, which glided undisturbed and harmless through the school-room. Neither teachers nor pupils would have dared to kill it. Constantly they fed it with milk. In many towns and villages large slabs of stone with figures of cobras, often two cobras intertwined, carved in bas-relief are seen on a platform under a large tree. They are worshipped especially by women who want children (22).

Several studies comment on the long-standing association between serpent worship and tree worship in India, whose connection endures even today and surfaces throughout this dissertation, especially in the tree marriage ceremony treated in Chapter Six. James Fergusson (1868) dealt with these overlapping domains of belief and practice most extensively, and although William Crooke (1894) referred to correlations between tree worship and progeny, he characterized the persistent pairing of tree and serpent worship as entirely the consequence of Fergusson's volume. Much later, K.P.

Aravaanan (1977) picks up and extends this inquiry into the relationship between *nāga* worship and that of sacred trees, demonstrating the persistence and continuing relevance of these linkages.

Several of these early scholars attempted to interpret the literary and material culture connected with *nāgas* with reference to larger historical frameworks, and their endeavors stirred debate within the intellectual circles of their time. Fergusson played a role in the larger Orientalist project of constructing a history for India. As Bernard S. Cohn points out, Fergusson's method relied on stringing together material fragments to narrate portions of India's history (1996, 91). Specifically, Fergusson considered sculpture and architecture uniquely useful for understanding ethnology and the religions of India, and aimed to transform objects – usually in disembodied states, devoid of their context – into history itself (see Cohn 1996, 92-96). With regard to serpent worship and the *nāgas*, Fergusson took the *nāgas* to be an ancient race of snake-worshippers who employed the *nāga* as their emblem. J. Ph. Vogel rejected Fergusson's theories, calling them "strange and baseless," and opined that his views "will hardly find any adherents among really competent scholars of the present generation," although he did

concede that Fergusson's tome contained significant information about ophiolatry in India and other nations of antiquity (1926, 2).

C.F. Oldham (1901) proposed that the serpent gods of Kashmir and surrounding Himalayan regions were worshiped as deified rulers of an ancient race whose totem was the hooded *nāga* and whose chief deity was the sun, and identified the *nāgas* as ancestors of the present Hindu people. Within a few years he had developed this argument further, and suggested that the *nāgas* were actually deified human beings who comprised hostile tribes opposed to Aryan invasion and could claim descent from the sun (1905, 31-32). In his book Oldham interpreted an assemblage of *Mahābhārata* episodes and other myths pertinent to *nāgas* in historical terms. For example, he understood the "churning of the ocean" narrative, discussed above, as an allegorical description of early maritime commerce (1905, 59). William Crooke (1894), too, demonstrated a similar historicizing tendency, and approached the many *Mahābhārata* episodes that feature snakes with the interrelated goals of tracing characters and sites, conferring historical status, and rescuing historical events and details. Overall, both Crooke's and Oldham's approaches were based on the assumption that practice could be explained by reference to the material preserved in textual sources.

A number of scholars have concentrated on the artistic representation of *nāgas*, *nāga* images, and iconography (Fergusson 1868; Krishnan 1967; Levitt 1991; Rao 1990; Smith and Narasimhachary 1991; Zimmer 1946). J.H. Rivett-Carnac (1879) is emblematic of some of these earlier efforts in that he drew comparisons between snake images in India and early European rock markings, in an apparent effort to identify some shared influences or a common source. Vogel (1926) also discussed iconographic styles and some particular snake images. Nishipada Deva Choudhury (1991) relies on and reviews many of Vogel's findings, although his article pays special attention to icons of the snake goddess Manasa, who is discussed further below. Sadhu Charan Panda's study, which focuses primarily on the *nāga* cult in Orissa, devotes a full chapter to iconographic issues and describes particular images and sculptures (1986, 49-91).

Other scholarly sources offer a survey of *nāgas* in Sanskrit textual traditions (Mandlik 1869; Sinha 1978). Although some of them read like miscellanies, and provide something akin to an annotated list of textual references, others delve into specific myths in more detail. Y. Krishnan (1967), for example, examined the mythology underlying the conflict between Garuda and the *nāgas*, which I treat in Appendix Two of this dissertation and which bears on the Garuda Panchami festival discussed in Chapter

Four. Both G.V. Davane (1975) and Rajanikant Pant (1981) deal with narratives concerning Rahu and Ketu and the relationships between these shadow planets and eclipses, and Davane includes a cross-cultural dimension to his exegesis of these myths. Other scholarly explorations of eclipse phenomena include Crooke (1894, 10-13); Cornelia Dimmit and J.A.B. van Buitenen (1978, 75); K.G. Gurumurthy 1981; and Elwyn C. Lapoint 1981.

Vogel's 1926 study contributes a singularly in-depth consideration of textual sources on *nāgās*, concentrating particularly on narratives from the *Mahābhārata*, *Jātakas* and *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*. Relying on a combination of data from field visits carried out in the Himalayan regions in 1901, contemporaneous scholarly sources, and themes derived from his textual survey, Vogel's introduction summarizes and comments on a vast assortment of beliefs and customs related to *nāgās*. P. Banerjee's (1973) assessment of textual sources on the *nāgās* recapitulates many of Vogel's findings, and also relies heavily on Fergusson.

While many of these scholars tended to read local religious practice and social custom through the lenses of material culture and textual tradition, Walter H. Tribe's 1901 contribution to *Harper's Monthly Magazine* takes a different tack. His article

provides a vivid first-hand account of *nāga* worship practices he observed at temples and in villages in the Himalayan regions, including a discussion of *cheḷās*, disciples who are chosen by the serpent deity to be its human agent or mouthpiece. Oldham (1901) and Vogel (1926) also discuss the snake deity possessing disciples and speaking through them, a practice that this dissertation focuses on in some detail. Interestingly, in these sources both the *cheḷās* who serve as the snake deity's host and the snake deity itself are both male, a striking difference from my own South Indian fieldwork contexts. Tribe's turn-of-the-century portrait of snake worship customs also includes references to the esteem that anthill mud is held in as a curative substance, a belief that endures in present-day South India and finds mention elsewhere in the scholarly literature (e.g., Vogel 1926), as well as in textual sources (e.g., *Atharva Veda* 6.100).

Several of the colonial ethnographic sources on snake worship, which are included in folklore compendia or embedded in catalogue-style presentations of religious practices, also contain evocative reports whose portrayal of the customs, beliefs and ritual practices associated with *nāgas* is strikingly similar to those of contemporary South India. Collectively, these contributions establish the long historical trajectory of snake worship in India, as well as its geographic range. One such example is L.S.S.

O'Malley's wide-ranging *Popular Hinduism: The Religion of the Masses* (1935), which is representative of the class of descriptive sources on customs and practices related to snakes that I outline next. Although O'Malley's study is more sophisticated in its integration and presentation of material than many of its counterparts, the author placed explicit value judgments on the "superstitions" and "strange practices" that characterize "popular Hinduism." Nevertheless, his account of *nāga* worship in South India is significant because it demonstrates that by this point the beliefs that killing a snake would result in the curse of infertility, while *nāga* worship would lead to progeny, healing, and sustained health, were already established.

It is believed, even by Brahmans, that to kill a snake is a sin that will be punished by childlessness or leprosy, and snakes are worshiped in the belief that they are able to confer a number of blessings including, as in so many other forms of worship, the birth of a child, good health and immunity from disease, especially leprosy and skin diseases. Worship goes on before carved and other representations of snakes, and the lower castes make offerings to live snakes of articles which they will consume, like eggs and milk, as well as less digestible substances (1935, 165-66).

Additional scholarly sources also describe snakes as having a range of powers and abilities, which include the capacity to bless as well as curse. The list of benefits *nāgas* can confer always features conception and a safe delivery, while their anger is

commonly thought to result in barrenness, miscarriage, stillbirth, illness, and untimely death (e.g., Smith and Narasimhachary 1991, 238). The literature characterizes snakes as guardians of treasure, which may be located underground in the *nāgas*' subterranean kingdom of Patala, or hidden in this world, particularly in an anthill (e.g., Irwin 1982, 343; Vogel 1926, 21-23; 28). Several folkloric accounts mention that every snake is believed to have a precious jewel set into its hood (e.g., Vogel 1926, 25), and the desire to possess this valuable gem is often cited as a reason that humans kill snakes and are cursed with *nāga dōṣam*. Crooke (1894) provides a list of many of these practices and beliefs, but while some of them are drawn from his first-hand observations, many of them are second- and third-hand recollections. I heard similar descriptions, characterizations, and explanations from Tamil priests and devotees over the course of my fieldwork, carried out a century or more after some of these contributions were written or compiled. This continuity is especially significant given the historical and geographic range these sources cover, and the fact that most of these beliefs and customs were transmitted through oral tradition.

Snakes are also described as possessing a lethal gaze (Smith and Narasimhachary 1991, 237; Vogel 1926, 16-17), a portrayal that did not surface in my

research. Many accounts note that Indians consider it a sin to kill a snake, and describe cremations and other elaborate death rites that are observed in cases where a snake is slain (Aravaanan 1977; Mandlik 1869; Panda 1986; Panikkar 1900; Vogel 1926).

Particular sources link snakes with deceased ancestors, whether as demigods that carry offerings to their spirits or some liminal reincarnation of them that have returned to earth (Aravaanan 1977; Crooke 1894; Keith 1925, vol. 1 194). I heard nothing in my own fieldwork about how snakes that may have been accidentally killed are treated, nor did I record any narratives that associated snakes with departed forefathers.

Within the body of scholarly literature that investigates snake worship more broadly across India and across time periods is a subset that focuses on the complex of beliefs and traditional practices surrounding *nāgas* in particular regions of India.

Remarkably, only a single, brief article by G. Santhi (1991) focuses on *nāga* worship in Tamil Nadu. In a few short pages she outlines a five-part classification scheme for serpent worship,¹⁸ describes the general characteristics of Tamil *nāga* traditions, and

¹⁸ Santhi's five types of serpent worship (worshiping beneath peepal and neem trees, worship of anthills, worship under sacred trees, worship of serpents in the home, and the worship of snake goddesses associated with Mariyamman) overlap significantly with the six categories of Tamil serpent worship provided in Aravaanan's comparative study (namely, "special temple worship, serpent worshipping beneath pipal and margosa [neem] trees, worshipping of serpent anthill,

lists (but does not discuss) beliefs and proverbs connected with snakes. Santhi also emphasizes the antiquity of serpent worship in India and posits South India as “the birthplace of the serpent cult” (85).

Nāga worship in Kerala, where snake groves and shrines attached to individual properties are common, has aroused a great deal more scholarly interest than this tradition has in neighboring Tamil Nadu (Bala Ratnam 1946; Mehra 1956; Menon 1901; Palathara 1952; Pannikar 1900; Pisharoti 1925; Vogel 1926). Several sources single out the Keralite *nāga* temple at Mannarsala for discussion, where a matriarch performs the sacerdotal functions (Bala Ratnam 1946; Pannikar 1900). When I visited this temple in 2003 I discovered that although a matriarchal figure presides over the rituals and is the central focus of this temple’s life, a male *nāga* deity presides in the temple’s sanctum. Mannarsala is identified in some narratives as the site of the Khandava forest (whose relevance to the great *nāga* Takshaka is discussed in Appendix Two of this dissertation) from the *Mahābhārata*. The temple has become the final resting place for hundreds of stone *nāga* images that have been placed there by Malayalee families who can no longer tend their ancestral snake shrines, and hundreds of additional snake stones are

worshipping of serpent under sacred trees, worshipping of serpents adjacent to Lord Kanapati [Ganesha] and house worshipping of serpents” 1977, 74).

offered by childless couples (who also seek the individual counsel of the hereditary priestess about their conception) annually. While the gender of the temple's ritual specialist and its *nāga* deity are the inverse from most Tamil *nāga* temples at which I worked, Mannarsala's close association with fertility serves as a unifying feature across the two contexts. Additionally, the all-night rituals of Kerala's Pulluvan caste, during which multiple *nāgas* are drawn in elaborate mandala-style ritual diagrams and ritual musicians invoke snake deities to possess and communicate through female mediums, has attracted scholarly notice (Aravaanan 1977; Bala Ratnam 1946; Mehra 1956; Menon 1901; Neff 2003; Pannikar 1900; Thurston 1906, 290-91; Thurston with Rangachari 1909, vol. 6: 226-35). To the best of my knowledge, this ritual tradition (which I observed in 1995 but understand is performed infrequently in contemporary Kerala) has no explicit connection with fertility and features both male and female possessing *nāga* deities.

Significant scholarly attention has also been paid to the snake goddess Manasa, whose worship is localized in northeastern India, particular West Bengal and Assam.¹⁹

¹⁹ Although most of the literature concentrates on her worship in Bengal (Bose 1927; Dimock 1962; Dimock and Ramanujan 1964; Haque 1975; Jash 1986, 1990; Maity 1966) and Assam (Choudhury 1991; Das 1986, 1987; Goswami 1979), some studies treat Manasa and her

The presence of a Sanskrit *Marigala* textual tradition may account for some of this awareness, as might Manasa's vernacular myths and narratives, which continue to enjoy a vibrant contemporary performance tradition.²⁰ Based on my limited fieldwork on Manasa traditions in particular districts of West Bengal and Assam in 2007, a number of clear differences between Manasa and the Tamil snake goddess emerged. In both Bengal and Assam Manasa is primarily imaged as a benevolent and beautiful anthropomorphic goddess, and is sometimes worshiped in the form of an earthen pitcher. In particular areas of Bengal she is identified with the *sij manasa* tree (*Euphorbia Lingularia*), which is dressed and worshiped as one of this goddess's forms, with an elaborate clay pot, and with an "earthen heap" (which may or may not be the same as an anthill). Offerings are made to actual snakes in these regions, but these reptiles are not considered to be among Manasa's manifestations. Possession is not a

narratives more generally (Bhattacharya 1977; Bose 2004; Gupte 1916; Lamb 2000; Rao 1977; Sutherland 1991), and one focuses on Manasa in Orissa (Samal 2000).

²⁰ Manasa is also worshiped by some Muslims in both Bengal and Assam, and Muslims are prominent participants in Manasa's performance traditions; in Bengal Muslim artists paint her story-scrolls (*paṭ*) and sing her narratives, and in Assam Muslim artisans design Manasa's pith (fibrous reed) paintings. This crossing of religious boundaries in the worship of Manasa may stand as an additional distinguishing feature from Tamil snake goddesses, because although officials at some Tamil *nāgāttammaṇ* temples told me that Muslims pray there, I personally did not observe any Muslim men or women worshiping at these sites.

feature of Bengal's Manasa traditions, although it is an important component of Manasa worship in Assam. In addition to her anthropomorphic and earthen pitcher forms, Manasa is also worshiped in the form of snake images in Assam. Manasa is not principally defined as a fertility goddess in either Bengal or Assam, although some women may approach her with fertility concerns. Interestingly, since the premise of Manasa cursing her myth's protagonist is his refusal to abandon his worship of Shiva in favor of this snake goddess, some scholars suggest that her narrative may preserve a historical sectarian conflict between her worshipers and Shaivas (Kishore Bhattacharjee and Sk. Makbul Islam, personal communications). Pranabananda Jash makes a significant correlation between the worship of Manasa in northeastern India and the ritual attention accorded to snake goddesses in South India; he argues that in India the worship of an anthropomorphic serpent goddess is confined to Bengal, some parts of Bihar and Assam, and the South (1986, following Bhattacharya 1977, 131-33).

Numerous studies mention and/or consider the connection between *nāga* worship and fertility, an association which stands at the center of the contemporary South Indian beliefs and practices. That the appearance of snakes in an individual's dreams is interpreted as an indication that she will soon or has recently conceived is

attested by several sources (Aravaanan 1977; Ghosha 1870; Santhi 1991; Smith and Narasimhachary 1991, 237) and surfaces in narratives I recorded in my fieldwork. Gail Hinich Sutherland (1991) treats the nexus of symbolic associations that exists among *nāgas*, fertility, water, and eroticism, while Balaji Mundkur (1983) undertakes an ambitious cross-cultural survey of snakes as fertility and sexual symbols that includes an appreciative assessment of psychoanalytic understandings of the snake as a stand-in for the human phallus.

M.S. Gopalakrishnan (1974) cites interconnections among water, women, earth, and trees in the fertility cult that he asserts stands at the heart of India's serpent worship traditions, and submits that the chief reason women worship snakes is to be freed from barrenness (see also Vogel 1926). H. Daniel Smith and M. Narasimhachary describe the association of *nāgas* with rains, fertility, creation, and propagation (1991, 237), and Binod Chandra Sinha's *Serpent Worship in Ancient India* also notes fertility themes in *nāga* worship, especially in South India, where women desirous of offspring offer snake stones (1978, 73). In this sweeping volume, Sinha also treats snakes in Buddhism and Hinduism, and looks at relevant texts, artifacts, and temples in all periods of Indian history before moving on to other civilizations, countries, and cultures. Other broadly

comparative studies, such as Aravaanan's (1977), which moves back and forth between India and Africa and is something of a miscellany, confirm the connection between *nāgas* and fertility and also link divine snakes with anthills. While many of these structural and symbolic approaches confirm some of my findings from Tamil Nadu, especially the mutual imbrications between *nāgas* and fertility, none of them takes vernacular *nāga* traditions as their central focus, nor do they contextualize their suggestions in terms of a range of dynamics such as place, gender, and local religious repertoires as I attempt to do in this dissertation.

Anthills in Scholarly Sources

The religious imaging of anthills and the powers associated with their soil are discussed in a variety of scholarly sources (e.g., Crooke 1894; Moses 1928), as is the close association between anthills, *nāgas*, and religious practices focused on obtaining offspring. As O'Malley remarks, "Ant-hills in some areas are not infrequent objects of adoration, apparently because they are thought to be mysterious emanations from the earth, subsidiary reasons being that they are the abode of snakes and resemble the lingam of Shiva in shape" (1935, 40-41).

Significantly, the great majority of the references to anthills in the scholarly literature pertain directly to South India, particularly those that link women's worship at anthills with fertility aims. Eveline Masilamani-Meyer notes that Ankalamman and other goddesses become manifest as snakes, and that snake stones are offered by women in association with their desire to bear children (2005). She observes, "Snakes live in termite hills, and therefore, termite hills are also identified with deities. The deity's ever rejuvenating powers, its androgynous nature, its centrality (around which all revolves), its chthonous as well as heavenly character, its firmness as well as its fluidity are some of the meanings inherent in the symbols of snake and termite hill" (109).

In the context of a larger discussion about Tamil deities and "fixity," or their tendency to be rooted in very particular places, Masilamani-Meyer describes the propensity for deities to appear as snakes and as termite hills (2004, 48-50). She confirms that termite hills (especially if they house a snake) may become temples, "because the termite hill or the snake of both are regarded as deity" (50), but also notes examples where both the snake and the anthill can be of either sex, a god or a goddess, a gender diversity that I did not encounter in my fieldwork. Masilamani-Meyer describes snakes as messengers through which the deity may communicate with humans (but

does not discuss possession as one of the goddess's communicative modes, as I do in Chapter Five of this dissertation), and mentions a series of phenomena associated with snakes, including fertility, renewal, immortality, rain, and water (50).

Drawing on indigenous schema which divide space into successive landscapes, Masilamani-Meyer classifies the anthill as a "wilderness symbol," and characterizes these earthen mounds and snakes as elements of the undomesticated realm that humans occasionally, and with some attendant risk, come into contact with (2004, 50; 98).²¹ In her evaluation, both of these symbols mediate between inherently different kinds of worlds and are ambivalently imaged in Tamil Nadu. Masilamani-Meyer's categories are based on fieldwork carried out all over Tamil Nadu (except for the Nilgiri Hills and the Kanyakumari area), in urban and rural temples, although it appears that the majority of the sites she surveyed were village temples (17). If the anthill and the *nāga* were once geographically marginal phenomena or features of a distant, alien, or less accessible realm, they no longer seem to occupy such positions in urban Chennai;

²¹ See also her 2005 discussion, in which (following Günther Sontheimer's model of *vana*, or undomesticated space, wilderness, and *kṣetra*, or domesticated, settled space) Masilamani-Meyer argues that certain Tamil deities are able to bridge these realms. She classifies the snake and termite mound as belonging to the *vana*, but says that they occasionally appear in the village and they have "symbolic value" (e.g., rain and fertility for snakes; world axis or centre for termite hill) that connect them to the *kṣetra* (109-110).

nāgāttammaṅs and their anthill multiforms are situated firmly at the center, and are the focus of a dynamic ritual tradition in spaces that range from urban temples to private homes to village wayside shrines.

L.K. Bala Ratnam (1946) described women in Kerala worshiping snakes and feeding milk to snakes that live in temple anthills when they desire offspring, and Santhi (1991) elucidates similar practices in neighboring Tamil Nadu. She writes that devotees worship snakes by offering milk and eggs at anthills because they believe *nāga* deities dwell therein, and relates snakes' presence at anthills to their appetites for the resident ants and rats. Santhi also notes that anthill mud is believed to be an antidote for snake bite, while other authors provide more wide-ranging discussions of the ritual uses of this substance (e.g., Aravaanan 1977; see also Tribe 1901; Vogel 1926). Further corroboration of the associations among anthills, snakes, and divinity is provided by a nineteenth-century source, which also mentions that women pray at anthills "where serpents are said by local tradition to reside," and on festival days may worship live snakes which are brought to anthills by snake charmers (Mandlik 1869, 170).

The colonial ethnographies on South India document specific instances that connect anthills with *nāga* worship. Elmore related a story in which a king had a vivid

dream about a daughter who was born to him in an anthill. The king had his servants dig up an anthill, inside which they discovered *pūjā* utensils and a goddess image named Renuka (1913, 82). Elmore noted, “Dravidians worship ant-hills, which this legend of Renuka may be the origin” (83). His allusion to the Renuka-Mariyamman myth, which is discussed in Chapter Four of this dissertation, is significant because in contemporary Tamil Nadu anthills continue to be a feature at many Mariyamman temples and other shrines dedicated to her class of local goddesses. In a separate narration, Elmore surmised that villagers who worship at anthills were actually worshipping the spirit of a young boy who allegedly disappeared into an anthill and traveled to the *nāga* netherworlds (115-16). Here the anthill has mysterious and potentially deadly resonances by virtue of its association with snakes, and villagers initiate worship because they are afraid the boy’s ghost may trouble them as a possessing evil spirit.

Whitehead recounted that one goddess shrine consisted only of an anthill until Durgamma appeared to a woman and communicated that she was living in that anthill and wished to be worshiped there. The anthill grew in size and a shrine was subsequently built. The *pūjāri* told Whitehead that a snake used to come and eat the

offered eggs and milk, but has not been seen lately (1921, 74-75). This account shares important similarities with narratives such as that from Nagattamman's temple, included above, which identify the anthill as the inaugural marker of a goddess's presence in a particular place, whose appearance typically catalyzes a cycle of divine visions, worship, and temple-building.

John C. Irwin's "The Sacred Anthill and the Cult of the Primordial Mound" (1982) discusses anthill worship in light of sources as diverse as Vedic hymns and insights from field research carried out in 1979 at Periyapalayam (Norma Elaine Craddock's site, discussed below). He argues that anthill worship held a central place in Vedic religion and is an "ancient cult that survives in many parts of India up to the present day," particularly in South India (339). He attributes cosmological, primordial symbolism to anthills, and marshals evidence from "surviving beliefs and practices" (including the associations of anthills with village goddesses, blood sacrifice, agricultural fertility, and hook-swinging) "to throw light on the meaning of obscure passages in ancient texts" (345). In his attempt to unravel elements of the *brāhmaṇa* ritual system, J.C. Heesterman focuses on the "head of the sacrifice" in the *agnicayana* ("the piling up of *agni*," or fire; a sacrificial ritual) and, ultimately, identifies this head with the anthill.

Heesterman grounds his interpretation in a passage from the *Black Yajur Veda* in which an anthill with seven holes substitutes for the severed head of a hero who falls in battle which is to be offered in the sacrifice, and concludes, "Symbolically the head and the anthill are identical" (1967, 39).

David Shulman cites and expands on Heesterman's identifications, and applies these sacrificial models to the task of interpreting the origin myths of the historic Tiruvarur temple in Tamil Nadu, where Shiva is the "lord of the anthill" (1978). Craddock relies both on Heesterman's formulation and Shulman's integration of this Vedic framework to a modern Tamil temple context (1994). She focuses on a form of Mariyamman named Bhavaniyamman who was discovered inside an anthill at the Periyapalaiyam temple near Chennai, and argues, with Shulman, that Tamil deities are almost always revealed or born in some act of violence (25). Craddock and Shulman both explore the trope where a goddess's image or a *lingam* is discovered in an anthill after a cow inexplicably releases its milk there. A crucial element in these narratives is that some would-be devotee typically digs up the anthill, causing the deity to bleed, thus exposing the deity in the midst of an act of aggression which usually features the mingling of milk and blood. While these studies are both suggestive of wider motifs and

patterns and provide interesting comparative material on anthill shrines and the nature of Tamil divinity, nowhere in my fieldwork did I encounter similar myths, either in oral tellings or in written temple histories. Further, Tiruvarur is the only site which I am aware of where a male god (in this case, Shiva) sits in an anthill rather than a goddess.

***Dōṣam* in Scholarly Sources**

Little has been written about *dōṣam* and its spectrum of harmful effects. The most focused and detailed source on *dōṣam* is the chapter “Blood Across the Stars: Astrology and the Construction of Gender” in Karin Kapadia’s *Siva and Her Sisters*, an ethnography treating caste, class, and gender in a Tamil village in the late 1980s (1995, 68-91). In the midst of a discussion of Hindu astrological beliefs and their relationships to gender, puberty rituals, and marriage, Kapadia describes how individual horoscopes may display *dōṣam*, “astrological flaws or dangers,” that foretell potential marital difficulties (72). She argues that *dōṣam* is a gendered category in Brahminical astrology, because far more Brahmin women are marked as transmitters of horoscopic affliction than men, while in non-Brahmin castes men are as likely to have *dōṣam* in their horoscopes as women (72). Kapadia’s study makes an important contribution toward

accounting for permeability that is believed to exist between individuals who share blood or marital relationships when one has an astrological blemish. She chronicles caste-specific perspectives on how *dōṣam* endangers the sufferer and affects her family members and kin network, and her careful indexing of perceptions to the castes among which she conducted her participant-observer study pushed me to analyze the relationships between caste and *dōṣam* more explicitly.

In sharp distinction to my own findings, Kapadia writes, “Central importance is given by the lower castes to what they call the ‘Cobra Flaw’ (*Naga Dosham*) in a menstrual horoscope. This important lower-caste astrological danger does not even exist in the astrology of either Brahmins or Chettiars” (74). Whereas I encountered *nāga dōṣam* across the spectrum of Tamil castes, including among Brahmins and other elites, Kapadia categorizes this astrological defect as “a very striking example of the way in which the lower castes have adapted and refashioned upper-caste astrology” (87). Although Kapadia links *nāga dōṣam* with delayed marriage and notes that it also poses a threat to the longevity of the groom, she does not discuss its effect on fertility or describe cases where *dōṣam* is faulted for a woman’s inability to conceive, scenarios that typify the narratives I encountered. According to Kapadia, *nāga dōṣam* occurs in

three forms: in a woman's horoscope, on a woman's body in the form of a cobra-shaped mark on her thigh, and when a cobra crawls on a woman's menstrual cloths and thereby becomes polluted (87-88). My research confirms the forms of *dōṣam* that Kapadia describes as well as corroborates the centrality of offering eggs and milk at *nāga* shrines and anthills that she documents; additionally, I identify other causes of *nāga dōṣam* and outline a fuller repertoire of ritual therapies for its removal.

David M. Knipe's article, "Softening the Cruelty of God: Folklore, Ritual and the Planet Śani (Saturn) in Southeast India" deals focuses on one type of planetary *dōṣam*, contains helpful content about Rahu and Ketu (whom Knipe calls Shani's "malevolent cohorts"), and describes a range of *śāntis* (pacifying rites) and *pūjās* that may be performed to reduce Shani's malefic effects. Interestingly, Knipe discusses a genre of rites that constitute an "unloading of misfortune and affliction by ritual means" in which *dōṣam*, which cannot be cured, is transferred to another person or entity in an effort to diminish its destructive effects (234). I found a similar ritual logic animating particular *dōṣam*-removal rites that I researched (e.g., the transfer of *dōṣam* to a banana stem, discussed in Chapter Two), and evident in the personal narratives of some ritual specialists who elaborated on the risks that performing *dōṣam parikārams* entails for

them personally. Because it draws on research carried out in neighboring Andhra Pradesh and relies on a combination of textual reading and ethnographic fieldwork with individuals who suffered from *dōṣam*, Knipe's contribution resonates both with the content and methodologies of this dissertation.

Writing about nearby Sri Lanka, Gananath Obeyesekere describes the cult of the goddess Pattini as a medical system (interwoven with Ayurveda, which posits that the constituent elements of the universe also comprise individual bodies, whose humors must be balanced to achieve and maintain health)²² in which the Sinhalese understanding of *dōṣam* encompasses a wide class of misfortunes (1984, 40-49). This worldview attributes *dōṣam* to factors including the wrath of the deities (possibly for defaulting on a vow), demonic attack or envy, evil spirits, and bad planetary constellations. Among *dōṣam*'s negative effects are family discontents, drought, and famine, and ritual performances conducted by specialists are undertaken to extirpate these deficiencies and their negative effects. Most significant for our purposes is Obeyesekere's category of *graha dōsa* (planetary *dōṣam*), which he explains is

²² Intriguingly, in the course of a description that classifies *nāgās* according to their characteristics, moods, habitats, and actions, and details their bites, types of poison, and life course, the *Agni Purāṇa* mentions that they both generate and are endowed with imbalances in their *doṣas*, the three primary constituent elements (Chapter 294).

irrevocably determined at birth due to unlucky planetary influences, and is the most difficult type to eliminate (46). Sacrificial rites (*bali*) serve as potential ritual solutions for planetary *dōṣam*, though they are confined to diminishing or averting its negative effects rather than capable of curing this flaw, since it is considered irremediable (46).

William S. Sax describes how Garhwalis believe that failure to periodically perform the ritual dancing of the Pandavas (*pāṇḍav līlā*) in Garhwal “may result in ontological diseases of the collective body,” or *doṣ*, which he glosses as “fault,” “blemish,” and “sanction” (2002, 49). In this region and ritual context, Sax reports that *doṣ* is understood “not so much the result of a divine being’s ill will as an automatic result of people’s failure to complete their religious duties” (49). This idea resonates with the causative relationship several Tamil devotees and priests drew between the non-performance of ritual obligations and the manifestation of *nāga dōṣam*. Sax’s characterization of perceptions about *doṣ* in the *pāṇḍav līlā* tradition, however, stand in contrast to his portrayal of this blemish or sanction in an earlier study, focused on the Himalayan pilgrimage tradition of the goddess Nandadevi (1991). Here *doṣ* is unambiguously something that the goddess “lays on” those who have displeased her; Sax describes how Nandadevi is understood to express her frustration by levying a

curse (*doṣ*) on her neglectful kin in her natal village, who must then invite her home and fête her with festival celebrations (91-92).

In/Fertility in Scholarly Sources

Recent literature on fertility, pregnancy, and childbirth in India has tended to emphasize encouraging development indicators (such as the dropping maternal and infant mortality rates) and to focus on the move away from some traditional birthing practices and techniques in favor of an increasing biomedicalization of birth (Nagaraj 2000; Parasuraman et al 1999; Radha Devi 2006). One such study is Cecilia van Hollen's *Birth on the Threshold: Childbirth and Modernity in South India* (2003), whose foci lie very close to the interests of this dissertation. This monograph offers an ethnographic account of Tamil women's shifting reproductive health and pregnancy rituals and suggests that these changes are part of the global modernizing project. The work of scholars like Margaret Jolly (2002) characterizes changes in birthing practices in traditional cultures in terms of the evolving tensions between modernity and tradition, while volumes like Edwin R. Van Teijlingen et al's (2004) assemble comparative perspectives from different world areas around the role of the midwife and contemporary

transitions in preferences concerning labor and birthing. On the whole, non-medical (or non-allopathic) explanations for infertility and culturally-specific remedies for infertility, whether ritual therapies or treatments drawn from indigenous healing systems and repertoires, seem to be treated within broader studies, rather than serving as the focus for a single, ethnographic study.²³ Some of the essays in Carol P. MacCormack's edited volume (1982) concentrate on local interpretations of fertility in different contexts, including Dennis B. McGilvray's article, which provides information about these matters from neighboring Sri Lanka.

Particularly thought-provoking for me on matters of in/fertility and religious practice, belief, and possession has been Gillian Marie Goslinga's recent dissertation, *The Ethnography of a South Indian God: Virgin Birth, Spirit Possession, and the Prose of the Modern World* (2006). This ethnographic study shuttles back and forth between a temple on the outskirts of Madurai (that I also visited regularly when I lived in Madurai from 2003-2004) whose presiding deity, Pandi Munisvaran, is known to grant the boon of children to his devotees, and a nearby infertility clinic where an increasingly wide

²³ See, for example, Flueckiger on childless women planting *bhojalī* (sprouts/seedlings) in the hopes of securing fertility (1996, 45), and Nabokov (2000) on exorcism rituals performed for women whose inability to conceive is attributed to demonic attack and malevolent possession.

spectrum of women go to seek medical interventions for their fertility issues. Her dissertation places sites and therapies that might initially appear to have little in common in a single healing repertoire, and uses personal narratives to illustrate – at times quite poignantly – the continuity that Tamil women themselves see between these healing idioms. Goslinga relates Tamil Nadu’s “emergent ‘crisis of infertility’” to the “onslaught of things modern” (115), whose impact she contends is gendered. She correlates changes in diet, the presence of pesticides and chemicals in the food chain, increasing work pressures and stress levels, and even the switch to western-style men’s briefs (which have the “ill effect of overheating testicles ... and thus literally burning the sperm off”) to dramatically falling sperm counts, and rising obesity among women as contributing to the disruption in ovulation and menstrual cycles (115). Goslinga’s research emphasizes the range of treatments, both “spiritual” and “medical,” that many Tamil women simultaneously employ for their infertility (see also Bellamy 2007; Flueckiger 2006; Nabokov 2000 for similar discussions of repertoires of healing practices), and argues that this faith in non-scientific therapies was also gendered (148). Her attention to contemporary articulations of gender and formulations of the “modern” – categories so close to my own analytic foci – coupled with her unflinching self-scrutiny and sometimes

searing assessments of fieldwork dynamics, provided me with much to consider as I began to write this dissertation.

Tamil Goddesses and Tamil Ritual in Scholarly Sources

Several recent ethnographic studies of Tamil ritual and religious traditions have provided me with rich material within which to contextualize my own research. Isabelle Nabokov's *Religion Against the Self: An Ethnography of Tamil Rituals* (2000), which analyzes Tamil possession, exorcism, and expulsion rites, has been particularly influential. I have also benefited from her consideration of Tamil women's laments and funeral songs, titled *No One Cries for the Dead: Tamil Dirges, Rowdy Songs, and Graveyard Petitions* (Clark-Decès 2005), and, most recently, her reflections on Tamil ritual and the fieldwork encounter in *The Encounter Never Ends: A Return to the Field of Tamil Rituals* (Clark-Decès 2007). The Tamil ritual world that Nabokov evokes is deeply resonant with my own, more urban Tamil ritual landscapes, and also provides a great deal of comparative material that helps to cast the practices I treat into yet another repertoire. In particular, her 2005 study of Mel Malaiyanur exposes the coercive

structures of some Tamil ritual contexts, and has inspired me to consider more carefully the less explicit motivations and dynamics of Tamil ritual processes.

Diane P. Mines' study of Tamil ritual and social relations, *Fierce Gods: Inequality, Ritual, and the Politics of Dignity in a South Indian Village*, has also caused me to reconsider the relationships between deities and places in my own fieldwork. Mines outlines what she calls the "triad of relations" (person bound to place, god bound to place, and god bound to person), which she says characterizes Tamil religious and social understandings (2005, 173). Additionally, her analysis of procession performances influenced my own interpretations of *Āṭi* procession sequences, and her reflections on how spaces and places reflect social hierarchies has expanded how I evaluate the dynamics of local landscapes in my own work (on related issues, especially space as a "practiced place" in Tamil Nadu, see Selby and Peterson's 2008 edited volume, including Mines' essay).

Joanne Waghorne's *Diaspora of the Gods: Modern Hindu Temples in an Urban Middle-Class World* (2004) chronicles the resurgent interest in Hindu temples in Chennai, which includes temple-building, renovation, and new architectural forms, as well as new ritual idioms and public display. Her study has been a conversation partner that I often

revisited and which inspired me to look at urban spaces (especially Mylapore) and deities (especially Kapaleeswarar and MK Amman) I knew well from new angles, and to attune my eye to material and visual forms. Waghorne's focus on middle-class religious sensibilities (through an examination of the words, actions, and visual productions of those who self-identify as middle class [20]) helped me to ask new questions of my own research sites and to pay better attention to the caste and class cues at each of them. I was also influenced by the rationale she provides for the assortment of sources – what she calls a “multimedia scrapbook” – on which her study relies (21). Perhaps most influential for this dissertation is Waghorne's discussion of the gentrification of the goddess, and her insistence that as Tamil goddesses attract special attention, new patrons, and new devotees at this historical moment, these *ammans*' middle class renovators also function as innovators (131-32). She correlates the recent “rise” of independent Tamil goddesses with “a period of rapid economic, political, and social change in urban areas, especially Chennai” (134), and describes how Mariyamman, once considered a “village” goddess, has experienced a “mercurial rise in popularity” among urbanites (133) and how the goddess's “coarser elements” are being cleaned up in the process (170).

Other relatively recent studies of Tamil goddesses also analyze the relationships between local goddesses and shifting social, political, and economic contexts.

Mariyamman's myths, temple sites, and ritual traditions have been discussed by Craddock (1994; 2001), Harman (2004; 2006), and Younger (1980; 2002). Most significant about each of these sources is that they foreground change, both in terms of the new classes of devotees that Mariyamman is attracting, and with respect to the new concerns that these devotees, assailed by the challenges of modern contexts, are mapping onto this goddess. Younger discusses how Mariyamman devotees in Trichy increasingly invoke the goddess to respond to an increasingly broad range of concerns;

The worshippers still bring to the goddess their anxieties about fertility and sickness, but equally prominent are concerns about job security, marriage arrangements, and other problems which arise from the uncertain social standing of urban life. The goddess who once guaranteed the preservation of a lineage and the fertility of the village lands is now approached to care for those who suffer the uncertainties of rapid social change and to lend sanctity and prosperity to the life of a busy city (1980, 501).

Harman, too, argues that Mariyamman is in the process of being transformed by a new class of upwardly mobile Hindus who have left the village behind and moved to the city for employment and opportunity (2004). He characterizes this transformed goddess as "mellowed," and describes a move away from blood sacrifice and more painful vows

toward more moderate forms of devotion that focus on meditation, singing and acts of charity in the community.²⁴

In addition to these studies, I have read and re-read Meyer's *Arikālaparamēcuvari: A Goddess of Tamilnadu, Her Myths and Cult* (1986), which surveys Ankalaparameswari temples across Tamil Nadu, learning from different aspects of her dense and comprehensive study each time. This monograph, and her subsequent book on Tamil guardian deities and folk religion (*Guardians of Tamilnadu: Folk Deities, Folk Religion, Hindu Themes*, 2004), helped me to articulate early questions about narrative and form, and have provided invaluable references for themes, myths, and interpretations of recurrent symbols. Karin Kapadia's (1995; 2000) examination of gender, perception, and religious participation in a Tamil village was another valuable resource. Although I learned a great deal from her discussions of

²⁴ For other discussions of Mariyamman and change, especially in the powers attributed to this goddess and the range of petitions brought before her, see Craddock 1994 and Egnor 1983. Although his ethnographic study of the goddess Chandi is based on fieldwork carried out at a temple in urban Orissa in the early 1970s, James J. Preston documents a similarly widening range of needs that devotees ask the goddess to fulfill. He observes, "As the stresses of modern life and the need for more cash, material goods and opportunities for upward mobility increase, people turn more to goddesses who have protected them for centuries from hostile forces like disease, famine and flood" (1985, 79). Like Waghorne, Preston identifies growing urbanism and new patrons as contributing significantly to the emergence of innovative popular styles of Hinduism.

Tamil kinship, astrology, and gender dynamics, it was from Kapadia's focus on the particular relationships between possession and caste that I have benefited from the most. Lynn Foulston's comparative study of local goddesses in Cholavandan (near Madurai) and Orissa was a helpful resource on matters of classification of goddesses and their rituals. Finally, the first two volumes of Alf Hiltebeitel's *The Cult of Draupadī* (1988; 1991) served as a rich encyclopedia for all things Tamil and ritual.

Delayed Marriage and Infertility: Perceptions and Realities

The emerging focus on *nāga dōṣam* is directly related to the perception that delayed marriage and infertility are particularly modern problems that are currently on the rise, and that these trends are the result of *dōṣam* combined with the increasing power of Rahu's and Ketu's malefic influences. On an anecdotal level, it was not very difficult for me to establish the fact that *nāga dōṣam* and its related malignancies were being treated to a great deal of attention. Starting in 2004 with the pull-out feature focused on *nāga dōṣam* included with the new almanac, I was able to trace dozens of similar articles in Tamil-language print sources, and was told that these were part of a new level of visibility for this condition. Friends reported in 2005 and 2006 that *nāga*

dōṣam was featuring in the storylines of several of the Tamil television serials that were popular among housewives, and one acquaintance described how his mother became convinced her daughter was suffering from *dōṣam* after watching some of these episodes and an astrologer's talk show. *Nāga dōṣam* seemed to be on everyone's lips: my fieldnotes are filled with snippets from casual conversations where *nāga dōṣam* surfaced naturally, or in which I indicated that I was researching this topic and my interlocutor described friends or relatives who had *nāga dōṣam*, suggested temples for me to visit, or supplied other relevant information.

Also at the anecdotal level, I knew that marriage was indeed coming later for many Indian women and, by extension, fertility might be affected.²⁵ Later marriage, relative to marriage age a generation or more before, is even more prevalent in Tamil Nadu and other South Indian states than it is in North India, especially so in metropolitan areas like Chennai, where I carried out the majority of my fieldwork.²⁶ As more young

²⁵At the time of my fieldwork, I had read Cecilia Van Hollen discussions of the "success story" of Tamil Nadu as compared to other Indian states in terms of its Total Fertility Rate (TFR): in 1995 Tamil Nadu's TFR was 2.2 while the nation's was 3.6 and Uttar Pradesh's was 5.1 (2003, 148). See below for more current statistics from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS).

²⁶ See K. Nagaraj's study (2000), which discusses the relationships between Tamil Nadu's declining fertility rate and a host of factors, such as urbanization, agrarian transformation, family planning programs, the Dravidian social movement, changing marriage patterns, and a range of

women pursue higher education and take on careers outside the home, they or their families are electing to wait a few years longer before arranging their marriages.

Parents may also be inclined to take their time in selecting a groom, preferring to consider an array of potential partners for their well-educated and employed daughters.

Rising dowry expectations and emphasis on ritual display in class-conscious Chennai often plays a role in slowing marriage arrangements down, as brides' families struggle to assemble the jewelry, cash, and consumer goods considered necessary to stage increasingly expensive weddings and, hopefully, secure their daughters' futures.

Further, as some women become more involved in choosing their own marriage partners, they and their families are weighing a widening array of factors, including whether her husband/in-laws will permit her to remain employed after marriage, how resources will be allocated in their home, how "traditional" or "modern" the prospective groom and his family appears to be, and what their expectations about offspring might be. One astrologer told me that compared to the increasing "demands" from both sides in the marriage-arranging process and the unwillingness of new spouses to "adjust" their

socio-economic dynamics (including rising levels of expectations and aspirations concerning the standard of living). See also the analyses provided by D. Radha Devi, which rely in part on the data from the second NFHS (2006, especially Table Four and Chapter Four).

expectations to marital realities, these days his job – matching horoscopes – is the easy part of effecting a union.

To see whether I could confirm and potentially add some specificity to these impressions, I began surveying a wide sampling of Tamil women (across castes and classes, and in rural and urban locations) about their own marriage ages, and those of their mothers. I also asked them the ages of their first pregnancies, and what they thought a good age to get married is in today's India. My informal analysis revealed that marriage age was indeed shifting; whereas many of these women's mothers married between age sixteen and nineteen, the next generation of women was marrying at ages that spanned from twenty-one to twenty-six. In many cases I recorded a seven year shift within one generation, from a mother's age at marriage to her daughter's. Notably, the majority of women with whom I spoke told me that they consider the age range from twenty-three to twenty-seven years the best for getting married. While most women seemed to "support" later marriage when speaking in the abstract about ideal marriage ages, I suspect that their progressive attitudes would not extend to their own daughters, who would likely be expected to marry earlier and whose horoscopes would be scoured for *dōṣam* if any delay presented itself.

Just as I concluded my fieldwork in August 2008, the International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) released the third National Family Health Survey (NFHS-3) state report for Tamil Nadu. This comprehensive, 139-page document summarizes the findings on the state's population, health, and nutrition based on 5,919 interviews with women aged fifteen to forty-nine, and 5,696 interviews with men aged fifteen to fifty-four years old (NFHS-3 2008, 1). The Tamil Nadu report details fertility rates (TFR, or Total Fertility Rate), infant mortality rates, frequency of contraceptive use, attitudes toward vaccinations, gender roles, awareness of HIV and other diseases, and a host of related issues. In terms of age at first marriage, the Survey found that the median among women aged twenty to forty-nine in Tamil Nadu is 19.4 years, as compared to the national median of 17.2 years. (NFHS-3 2008, 3). The report notes that Tamil Nadu's fertility rate, which has been declining steadily over the years that the three surveys were conducted (i.e., from NFHS-1 to NFHS-3; see table below), is the lowest in the nation except for Andhra Pradesh and Goa, with which it is tied. All three states have a TFR of 1.8 children per woman, lower than the replacement level of fertility; "In all three states, at current fertility levels, a woman would have 0.9 children less during her lifetime than a woman in India as a whole (2.7 children per woman)" (4).

Figure 2: Total Fertility Rates for Tamil Nadu as Compared to India According to National Family Health Survey 1, 2, and 3

TFR (Total Fertility Rate)	NFHS-3 (2005-2006)	NFHS-2 (1998-1999)	NFHS-1 (1992-1993)
Tamil Nadu	1.8	2.2	2.5
India	2.7	2.9	3.4

In Tamil Nadu it has traditionally been regarded as ideal if a couple conceives soon after marriage and the wife delivers her first healthy baby somewhere near the couple's first anniversary. One woman explained that because children are so important, a woman's in-laws would want to know sooner rather than later if there was a "problem" with the new bride, so that their son could remarry if necessary. While this timeline is still widely considered both auspicious and appropriate, many women told me that they had other plans and opinions about childbearing and timing their pregnancies. I heard from educated, newly married women about husbands who agreed with them about waiting a few years before starting a family, until they were better established in their careers, more financially secure, or had had time to get to know one another and enjoy life together. Some of these women said their in-laws were aware of (and in some

instances even encouraged) their plans to postpone childbearing, while others said that their in-laws would not be pleased if they knew delayed pregnancy was planned, and they needed their husbands to handle his relatives' persistent questions. Several women said that they while they had not taken any concrete steps (like using contraceptives), they were employing a variety of strategies to avoid getting pregnant (including avoiding sexual intercourse), and a few women confided that they were using contraception without their husband's knowledge because they were not ready – for personal or professional reasons – to have children yet. Despite having made deliberate life choices, I knew of couples who acquiesced to their parents' pleas that they embark on a cycle of *dōṣam*-removal *pūjās* when they did not conceive in what their elders considered a timely manner. Their cooperation was, in some cases, meant to conceal their contraceptive use, but in others it acted as something akin to “insurance” in case they experienced difficulty conceiving later, when they hoped to have children.

Invoking Tradition and Ritual as Responses to the Blemishes of “Modern” Times

While some Tamil women (and men) are choosing to delay marriage and conception, many other Tamils perceive later marriage and conception ages as negative

phenomena linked with “modern times” and with the “modern” condition of *nāga dōṣam*.

On the whole, later marriage and delayed conception are not interpreted as choices attesting to individual freedom, ambition, and prerogatives. Instead, they translate as “blocked” marriage and infertility, anxiety-inducing conditions that threaten the established social order, gender norms, economic structures, and ritual and religious codes. In their personal narratives, most Tamils correlate these conditions with “modern” times, and contrast “these days” with “those days,” and “now” with “then,” to indicate the transformations they recognize from the last generation to this one.

It is common for speakers (even those who do not “know” English) to sprinkle English words into their Tamil narratives, and thus recontextualize the meanings of these terms within an indigenous Tamil register. The English word “modern” was one such term that surfaced frequently in my research, and as our discussions developed I came to understand that those who invoked it did so to distinguish this generation from the previous one and to draw explicit contrasts between the problems of earlier times and current ones. Rather than reflecting nostalgia for some now-lost “tradition,” their use of the word “modern” and (and references to “these days” and “nowadays”) marked the dramatically shifting social norms, caste mores, and gender roles they have found

themselves facing in recent years. In addition to later marriage and conception ages for their children (and the move toward fewer offspring among younger couples), specific examples of change that Tamils discussed with me include urbanization, migration away from one's ancestral or birthplace for employment opportunities, changing residence patterns and the move away from joint families, and women working outside the home. Throughout this dissertation, then, I use the word "modern" in this indigenous vernacular sense rather than as an analytic term associated with a long intellectual history and formidable body of scholarly literature. The ongoing transformation of values about the age of marriage and when (or even if) to conceive – which I characterize as a shift from a culture of expectation to a culture of aspiration – hinges on evolving ideas about what might constitute a fulfilling family life and a new interest in so-called "modern" lifestyles defined by individual choice, consumption, and material aspirations.

As an established religious framework that helps individuals make sense of these modern challenges, *nāga dōṣam* has emerged as a "traditional" mode for diagnosing, classifying, and interpreting "modern" problems. This interpretive category offers concrete causes for an individual's affliction, as well as embodied solutions. Designed in consultation with traditional astrologers and ritual experts, *nāga dōṣam* ritual therapies

constitute structures of healing that aim to overcome the challenges of modern times by ritually facilitating successful marriages and the delivery of healthy offspring.

Invoking tradition as a means of approaching disquieting situations and negotiating change is, of course, neither new nor confined to India. As Obeyesekere points out, “Ever since Evans-Pritchard’s pioneering work on the Azande, anthropologists have shown time and again the need for human beings to explain ‘misfortune’ in religious terms” (1984, 44). Individuals have long sought meaning in religious traditions in the midst of upheaval and unrest, and have resorted to traditional ritual systems when confronted with suffering, hardship, and disease. The questions that these trying contexts have raised – about ethics, efficacy, and healing – have often been cast in religious vocabularies and considered within the boundaries of religious communities. *Nāga dōṣam* is no different: at the temples that comprise its informal circuit, those who travel there to remove *dōṣam* and its attendant impediments to their marriages and fertility form something akin to what Nabokov describes as a “congregation of suffering” (2000, 5). They (or those who have compelled them to come) are motivated by the desire to assert ritual control over life situations gone awry

and to bring the challenges they associate with modern times back within the purview of the traditional healing idiom that characterizes *dōṣam*-removal *pūjās*.

Building on these indigenous discussions about tradition and contemporary times, in the next section I characterize local analyses of the relationships between “these times” and the expansion of *nāga dōṣam*, and provide excerpts from the narratives of Tamil devotees, priests, and astrologers about why *nāga dōṣam* has become so prevalent in Tamil Nadu in recent years.

***Dōṣam* on the Rise**

I was struck by the wide range of indigenous explanations for *dōṣam*'s apparent expansion in recent years, and the correlations that individuals drew between this phenomenon and their changing social environments. When I asked one ritual musician (who also performs *dōṣam*- and sorcery-removal *pūjās*) in 2005 if he saw any changes in *nāga dōṣam* compared to ten years ago, his answer linked the surge in this malignant condition with the erosion of traditional marriage practices in contemporary Tamil Nadu, including increasing numbers of love marriages and marriage outside one's caste and/or

religion. He implied that an element of choice in matters related to marriage poses dangers to timely and successful unions.

It [*nāga dōṣam*] has greatly increased. The religion [*matam*] has changed. One says, 'I will go like this!' and another says, 'I will go like that!' Love marriage! Intercaste marriage! Interreligious marriage! If they do these things, the age of marriage will get later and later. In these times, they change their minds constantly, and do not listen to their elders.

Other interlocutors also suggested that people's increasingly fickle natures and self-centered worldviews – which, similar to changing marriage patterns, are understood to be characteristics of modern times – play roles in the escalating number of *nāga dōṣam* cases. Many also invoked choice as a relevant category, although their opinions about whether the freedom to indicate one's preferences and wishes (whether about marriage timing or partner) constituted a positive or a negative development differed markedly. Speaking in English, one Brahmin father of two daughters told me, "Nowadays, *nāga dōṣam* has become excessive. The main reason is the Kali Yuga [the current and most degenerate of the four world ages]. But, if you see the social side of it, even those children would not like to marry early. They want to marry only later. Earlier they were married out of compulsion. Now we ask them what they would like."

The Kali Yuga was mentioned by many individuals, who evidenced attitudes ranging from resignation to disgust about what they view as the debasement of religious culture in this period. One priest characterized the present as “the peak of the Kali Yugam, when people use rituals as *shortcut* methods to avoid the karma of their sins.” He described those who approach him for countermeasures against *nāga dōṣam* as focused only on “quick service *pūjās*” and escaping *dōṣam*’s negative effects, rather than being curious about proper ritual procedures or interested in ongoing cycles of worship to propitiate Rahu or the *nāgas*. Some people explained that only in the Kali Yuga would humans interfere with snake habitats so frequently, kill or otherwise harm snakes, and neglect their worship. The Kali Yuga stands as one indigenous formulation of the shifts evident in contemporary social and religious life, and this category is often invoked in descriptions of the disconcerting changes associated with modern times.

One very devout man who consults on religious matters from a small office near Mylapore’s Kapaleeswarar temple was very explicit about the “invention” of the *nāga dōṣam* tradition. He cast this recent trend in the context of wider Tamil social reform and anti-Brahmin movements, whose influence he credited with waning temple attendance and religious interest in the 1960s and 1970s. According to this gentleman’s analysis,

Brahmin priests, who he described as suffering from declining temple revenues and patronage, “created” *nāga dōṣam* to bring worshipers back to their temples.

Understand this simple fact: thirty years ago there were no remedial rituals [*parikāram*] for *nāga dōṣam*. If you consider the Thirunageshwaram [a Rahu temple, discussed in Chapter Three] *tala* [*sthalā*] *purāṇam* from thirty years ago, there was no Rahu mentioned in it and no remedial rituals. During Periyar’s [leader of the Tamil non-Brahmin movement who died in 1973] time the temples were in poor condition, so to develop them the priests created a *story* involving astrology, and said, “If you pour milk [as an offering to remove *dōṣam*] it is good,” and, “If you pray at this temple it is good.” These days, all the astrologers have created *drama.*

This gentleman was not alone in correlating the new awareness of *nāga dōṣam* with the designs of ritual specialists who stand to benefit from the religious commerce this condition engenders. Brahmin priests, who rely on income earned by performing rituals to live and to feed their families, were cited most often as having a hand in the “publicity” about this horoscopic flaw, followed by astrologers who cast and interpret the horoscopes that are diagnosed with *dōṣam*.

This point was brought home to me in a striking way at several *ammaṅ* temples that I visited after reading articles that touted them as powerful sites for curing *dōṣam*. Most of the priests I met had little or no knowledge of these claims or on what basis they were made, and many told me these *pūjās* were new forays for their temple. Further,

the pamphlets and *sthala purāṇam* at these temples contained neither myths linking the site to *dōṣam*, Rahu and Ketu, or snakes, nor any details about *dōṣam*-removal rituals that could be performed there. One priest described how after noticing that independent ritual specialists were bringing clients to their temple to perform *nāga dōṣam parikāram*s more and more often, the priests collectively decided that in the future these ceremonies should only be conducted by in-house *pūjārīs* (temple priests). At one temple in a small hamlet south of Chennai, the priest told me that a younger priest returned from a temporary assignment at an urban temple suggested that they begin advertising *nāga dōṣam pūjās*. They bought an erasable whiteboard, wrote up a description of the *nāga dōṣam* rites they would be offering, and hung it on one of the temple's trees. This priest said that the response had been good so far, and that they were planning to have a permanent sign made.

Many of those with whom I spoke, however, were not so cynical about the rise of *nāga dōṣam*. One non-Brahmin retiree who offers astrological consultations at his home also related the increase in *nāga dōṣam* to perceived changes in people's religious dispositions, as well as a wider culture of selfishness. He observed, "*Nāga dōṣam* is increasing in the last few years. I am seeing more and more cases. I think it is because

people have lost their moral fear. They have become more materialistic and they don't believe much in God. They only go to the temple for visiting, looking at this one's sari or jewelry; they don't go to pray to God. *Nāga dōṣam* is not increasing due to ignorance – it is due to selfishness.” While selfishness was consistently described as a characteristic of modern times, those with whom I spoke variously categorized this attitude as a cause of *dōṣam* and implied that selfishness is an outgrowth of *dōṣam*.

Significantly, for some respondents, this selfishness extends to the choice to not have children, which they understand to be increasingly common among young couples in urban areas, and which they link with a move toward modern lifestyles. A chief pitfall of this decision is that failing to continue one's lineage renders meeting ritual obligations to ancestors and family deities an impossibility. In these narratives, not having offspring is not an outgrowth of infertility caused by pre-existing *dōṣam* but a selfish, modern decision that ultimately results in or manifests as *dōṣam*.

For several individuals, learning they had *dōṣam* in the midst of acute difficulties, such as after a miscarriage, provides both a meaningful framework for suffering and a clear therapeutic path toward wholeness. Such personal crises may prompt a devotee's faith in *nāga dōṣam* as a traditional explanation for modern reproductive challenges that

also offers a range of accessible ritual therapies aimed at averting similar future difficulties. One non-Brahmin woman in her forties told me that soon after her daughter miscarried they consulted an astrologer who diagnosed her daughter with *nāga dōṣam*. The astrologer recommended that the young woman worship at a *nāgāttammaṇ* temple three times per week and offer milk and eggs at an anthill.

The astrologer said, “The case is so clear. I could have told you if you had come earlier and she could have done a remedial ritual and delivered this baby.” So, we worshiped at that snake goddess temple, and lit lamps, and made offerings at that anthill. My daughter got a lot of interest in this Nagattamma, and then she conceived a second time. Suddenly, the doctor told us that there was some problem. I was so worried. This was a major difficulty, because it was definite that her husband would send her away if she lost that baby. But the doctor said that baby has some problem, and that it was not in the uterus. But my daughter only believed in Nagattamma. Nagattamma told her in a dream, “I know the reason [this happened] but I won’t tell. This time you will get a child. Your body can do anything, but I am going to be born in your stomach.” As Nagattamma said, my daughter got a girl child.

Here the *nāga dōṣam* and its ritual therapies offer a framework for managing the grief prompted by a miscarriage, concern about continuing reproductive health troubles, and the economic and social worries provoked by potential marital rejection. This woman is instructed to make offerings to the snake goddess and, over the course of her remedial

rituals, develops a passionate devotional relationship with Nagattamman, who then blesses her with a successful pregnancy, despite her doctor's dire predictions.

Speaking in English, a Brahmin man narrated a similar story in which he and his wife were inspired to pray at a Nagattamman temple and offer a snake stone there after their twins did not survive a difficult delivery. This tragedy motivated the couple to worry that the wife's *dōṣam*, which she ritually treated before her marriage, was not fully expunged. In their case, loss catalyzed ritual action; without conferring with an astrologer, the couple decided to consecrate a snake stone at their local Nagattamman temple in a bid to ensure that *dōṣam* would not interfere with their next pregnancy.

We knew there had been mild *nāga dōṣam* for her. Her parents finished that *hōmam* [fire sacrifice] before our marriage and we did not think about that again. I did not believe in those things much. But then I felt we should do something more, so we arranged that *nāga pratiṣṭhā*. That [snake] stone is still at the Nagattamman temple today; I will show you the exact one.

After praying to Nagattamman that everything should be all right, she conceived again. We went to the doctor, the hospital – you know the Apollo hospital? It is supposed to be a very big hospital. There one chief was there, a gynecologist. She [his wife] had the first scan at around sixty days and she [the gynecologist] told me that this time also the baby will not be all right. She told me that the baby will have some congenital malformation, and you will have to terminate. From the hospital we came directly to this Nagattamman temple. We only prayed. We prayed at that snake stone we had done *pratiṣṭhā* for. We said that this should

not happen. Some flowers fell, so we felt it was a good indication, meaning that she [Nagattamman] was there, like that. Then her father told us, “No, we will have an alternate opinion.” We had fixed a date for the termination of the pregnancy already. He knew somebody, through somebody, so we fixed an appointment. Then again we went there [to the hospital]. And after the test, the gynecologist said, “You don’t worry, I will take care.”

Every month we went there [to the hospital], consulting her only, but at the end of nine months she [his wife] was admitted and again she had an emergency operation, but by Nagattamman’s grace we got a good child. You have seen her [his daughter]. So we consider her the girl given by Nagattamman, because otherwise she would have been terminated, at that time itself. When she was in her mother’s womb itself, she would have been terminated. I strongly believe that that was prevented by Nagattamman. You would have never met my daughter.

For this couple, the idea that lingering *nāga dōṣam* might be the reason for the loss of their twins was so persuasive that they elected to offer a snake stone at their local Nagattamman temple in an effort to secure future offspring. They continued to express their devotion to this goddess after they conceived a second time and, after their gynecologist recommended that they terminate their pregnancy, experienced a “sign” from the snake goddess that altered their course. This family believes that after they installed a snake stone at her temple, Nagattamman blessed them at several key junctures, both by wiping away the remaining traces of *dōṣam* and rewarding their

devotion, and that their daughter is alive as a direct result of Nagattamman’s miraculous and timely intervention. They continue to share an intimate relationship with this goddess and to pray to her in enduring gratitude for the blessing of their child.

One non-Brahmin woman, who I met when she was engaged in a cycle of rituals to reduce her younger daughter’s *nāga dōṣam*, explained that her elder daughter had also suffered from the same malignant condition. Over the course of our conversations she framed her narrative in terms of how “common” it is for young women to experience *dōṣam* – and thus delayed marriage – “these days” because of particular planetary configurations. She believed that her older daughter’s marriage was arranged successfully as a direct consequence of their faithful performance of the rituals prescribed by their astrologer, and had full confidence that if they followed his advice in her younger daughter’s case they would meet with similarly good results.

Mother: My first daughter had *sarpa dōṣam* and her marriage was *late.* So the astrologer asked her to light the lemon lamp [lamps fashioned from halved, inside-out lemons filled with oil] weekly on Tuesdays during *rāhu kālam*. It is very special if you light these lamps during *rāhu kālam*. Still her marriage was not set; there was some difficulty about her dowry. So the astrologer said the *dōṣam* was still blocking it, and so every Tuesday she should also put three lemons on [the prongs of] the goddess’s trident at the temple when she lit the lemon lamps. One Tuesday, just as we were walking home from the temple, my second daughter

came to us in the lane and said that the boy's family was at our house and they wanted to fix the date for the engagement.

ALA: Your second daughter also has *dōṣam*, doesn't she?

Mother: Yes. Now we are searching for a groom for her. According to the astrologer's instruction we went to Kalahasti to do the *dōṣam*-removal *pūjā* there. I asked him why both of my daughters have this *dōṣam* and he told us that in this time the planets are like this for so many girls. Mostly all the girls have *dōṣam* these days. This is why Kalahasti is crowded, even on Mondays and Wednesdays [i.e., relatively less common days for worship]. The astrologer asked me to wait to fix her marriage until two months have passed, because her planets will be better then. We even got two horoscopes from potential grooms, but the astrologer said that they will not suit for my daughter. He said that they would immediately have some conflicts between them, and that they would separate quickly, and their relationship would be broken. He said they would part and that she would come back to my home.

For this woman's lower-class family, arranging marriages for two daughters in quick succession is, indeed, a particularly modern challenge. It means attempting to strike some delicate balance among a range of factors, which include her family's social status, her daughters' own aspirations, their potential in-laws' dowry demands, and their stark economic realities. Marriage arrangements involve a great many choices, and these choices are coded with economic, religious and social signifiers that are read and avidly discussed by relatives, friends, and acquaintances. This woman must attempt to

arrange a second daughter's marriage close enough to the first such that the younger girl's wedding is not too noticeably "late," but must also try to space them out enough that she will be able to amass sufficient financial resources (including loans) to be able to fund it. *Nāga dōṣam*, then, serves as one explanatory model for the timing of these marriages, and functions as something like a compass that assists this mother in navigating uncertain terrain. She is assured, and has faith, that if she follows a relatively simple course of ritual therapy, her daughter's marriage arrangements and marital life will proceed smoothly. Her astrologer's formulation of *dōṣam* also signals that she is not alone in the anxiety she is experiencing as she tries to negotiate these cross-cutting issues; instead, she has the sense that her situation is "common," shared by many other families, and that her difficulties are the fault of the planets, rather than somehow her own.

These indigenous formulations about *nāga dōṣam* and its contemporary expansion hinge on perceptions about modern times and reference the challenges that contemporary changes pose to more traditional understandings of social and gender roles, life and world cycles, and the nature of religious commitment and ritual action. Anxieties about these issues have in recent years been framed within the flexible idiom

of *nāga dōṣam* and mapped onto women's bodies, which have served as sites for the negotiation of traditional and modern values, social status, and reproductive choice in many cultural contexts. These anxieties have also given rise to a dynamic and fluid ritual system, which is characterized at all levels by borrowing, revision, and innovation. These ritual performances and the wider, expanding *nāga* worship tradition, therefore, reflect the ways in which religious practice serves as one category through which many Tamil individuals are creatively negotiating the gendered tensions and wider currents of change that characterize their contemporary contexts. In addition to functioning as one set of responses to modern dilemmas, these vernacular rituals themselves are indigenously understood to be "modern."

The Organization of the Dissertation

Chapters Two and Three focus explicitly on *nāga dōṣam*, the malignant horoscopic condition that is primarily faulted for leading to late marriage and infertility. Chapter Two first contextualizes *dōṣam* as an increasingly inclusive category and describes the polyvalent Tamil religious landscape, where multiple interpretations abound in what Margaret Trawick describes as "intentional ambiguity" (1990). I outline

the five main causes of *nāga dōṣam*, as indigenously articulated, and delineate the ways in which some of these causes are gendered and/or indexed to caste. I argue that these causes (which include astrological defects, harming or killing a snake, sins from previous lives, and issues related to a snakelike mark on a woman's thigh or her inattention to her menstrual cloths) should be viewed as a spectrum of interactive, complementary etiologies rather than as discrete and mutually exclusive. Further, I argue that contemporary understandings of *nāga dōṣam*, what constitutes it, and what causes it have shifted considerably from more traditional interpretations and that this expanded repertoire is articulated in response to indigenous formulations about what characterizes modern times.

In Chapter Three I describe and analyze the repertoire of ritual therapies that are employed to counter *nāga dōṣam*. This indigenous repertoire includes worshipping at snake stones and anthills, making simple offerings of wooden cradles or ritual threads, and undertaking a ritual expulsion for a possessing spirit induced by an individual's *dōṣam*. It also encompasses establishing and enlivening a snake stone, offering a silver *nāga* image as a ritual gift, and making pilgrimages to sacred sites known to be powerful for removing *nāga dōṣam* (such as to the Rahu and Ketu temples at Thirunageshwaram

and Keezhapperumpallam, or to the regionally important temples at Kalahasti and Rameshwaram). These ritual therapies are similar to the expanded repertoire of causes discussed in the previous chapter in that they, too, are expanding in number and are being reframed in response to indigenous conceptions of modern times and the “modern” problems of late marriage and infertility. These ritual responses are performed at the local – and to a limited degree at the regional – level where Tamils participate in a self-conscious identification of circuits of temples that are powerful for relieving *dōṣam*. Indeed, I argue that the popularity of these sites and networks is itself a recent innovation.

Chapters Four and Five concentrate on the goddess’s festival season, which spans (and overflows) the Tamil month of *Āṭṭi*, and analyze this intensifying ritual period both in terms of the public performance of snake goddess devotion and its association with the growing *nāga dōṣam* tradition. The most vibrant and dramatic example of snake goddess worship in contemporary Chennai, the *Āṭṭi* festival is a key site for assessing the growing visibility and popularity of *nāga* traditions in Tamil Nadu. In Chapter Four I characterize the features and elements that mark this period as special and as particularly suitable for undertaking vows dedicated to the goddess. I argue that

the local networks of goddess temples (especially snake goddess and anthill temples) that have experienced a surge in popularity by virtue of their association with *nāga dōṣam* are responding to – and extending – the growing interest devotees are showing to them by hosting innovative festivals during the month of *Āṭi*. In addition to describing the repertoire of devotional and ritual propitiations that distinguish this period, I highlight four ritual performances that involve *nāga* worship and share fertility aims and analyze a specific ethnographic iteration of each festival occasion.

Whereas Chapter Four outlines *Āṭi*'s broader ritual repertoire, Chapter Five concentrates on the multiple ritual performances that comprise the three-day *Āṭi* festival at two specific Chennai snake goddess temples. This repertoire is important because it establishes the range of rituals and vows – both old and new – that are dedicated to snake goddesses. Further, this focus on two particular sites enables us to identify specific areas of religious change, flexibility, and innovation. Although not every ritual element is performed at both temples, these weekend-long festivals typically include the construction and establishment of the goddess's "life" in a ritual vessel, possession sequences, oracular speech, processions, food offerings, and ritual piercings. The variations in these two temples' *Āṭi* festivals are indicative of the cross-cutting influences

of each temple's disparate local geographies, social settings, and ritual relationships. I use these specific examples to argue that the combination of the growing popularity of this class of goddesses and of sites associated with *nāgās*, anthills, and *dōṣam* and the emergent, fluid nature of this tradition at this particular moment make it possible for a previously unremarkable shrine to capitalize on an even tenuous association with *nāga dōṣam* and rise to prominence.

Chapter Six examines three specific sites for innovation in *nāga* traditions – one diagnostic, one social, and one ritual – all of which I argue are framed in direct response to indigenous understandings of what constitutes modern times and the challenges posed by them. Whereas the innovations discussed in earlier chapters are more aptly characterized as recontextualizations or reconfigurations of existing sites of authority and ritual practice, those discussed in this chapter are more explicitly new or “invented.” I begin by analyzing the case study of a man whose horoscope does not support a standard *nāga dōṣam* diagnosis, but whose astrologer read this condition “back” onto his birth chart because his symptoms seemed consistent with this astrological blemish. I consider whether this kind of presumptive diagnosis fits within an “invention of tradition” model, and argue that reformulations of frameworks like the *nāga dōṣam* tradition, which

is presented as “old,” “original,” and “authentic,” offer culturally meaningful structures for interpreting shifting modern contexts. Rather than the trajectory only moving “forward” – such as in annexing additional innovative ritual therapies to counter *dōṣam* – it is also moving “backwards” in terms of opening up new possibilities for what constitutes a *dōṣam* diagnosis.

Next, I describe social innovation and how local goddess temples like MK Amman are increasingly shared spaces at which Brahmins can now be found worshipping in significant numbers. I argue that these social shifts are framed in terms of the anxieties of modern times, during which only this class of non-Brahmin goddesses is perceived to be powerful enough to heal *nāga dōṣam* and alleviate modern problems. Finally, I describe a holy marriage between two trees that was conducted in 2006 to treat the *nāga dōṣam* of a young woman who was experiencing delayed marriage, and analyze this innovative ritual performance in terms of indigenous commentaries on tradition and modern times. I argue that this ritual innovation, which emerged in direct dialogue with distinctly modern dilemmas, repurposes traditional ritual resources to address the modern problem of late marriage and demonstrates that *nāga dōṣam*'s ritual repertoire is still in the process of expanding and unfolding.

Finally, the Conclusion offers broader reflections about how this innovating tradition will continue to shift over time, and provides examples of how transnational Hindus have begun to interact with this complex of rituals and practices. I discuss the implications of innovating *nāga* traditions and ritual practices connected to *nāga dōṣam*, and argue that the traditional bank of symbols associated with snakes in India imposes some limits on how this repertoire may develop and shift over time. The narrative of this self-consciously innovative ritual tradition, which emerged from the crucible of modern concerns, is still in progress; in time we may see MK and her class of local goddesses picking up additional new “work,” especially as social and economic change continues and inspires new concerns and problems.

Following a Glossary, two appendices are included in this dissertation: Appendix One provides a reference chart for the Tamil months and their corresponding dates, and Appendix Two presents an overview of selected Sanskrit textual sources relevant to my project.

CHAPTER TWO

LOCATING THE CAUSES OF *NĀGA DŌṢAM*

Before I outline the precise meanings of *nāga dōṣam* and examine its semantic range, I present the brief case study of a woman whom I will call Archana, who suffers from this condition. Accessible through the narratives of her parents, Archana's case provides a valuable introduction to some of the complex beliefs connected to *nāga dōṣam* and allows us to trace the trajectory of one family's ritual interventions to resolve their daughter's *dōṣam* and eliminate the obstacles it poses to successfully arranging her marriage. This specific ethnographic instance also suggests the increasingly complicated nature of arriving at diagnoses, undertaking ritual solutions, and – should *dōṣam* be effectively removed – arranging a wedding in an increasingly globalized world characterized by transnational lives, Green Cards, and tight American vacation schedules.

The Case of Archana

Archana's parents were visibly agitated when I approached them at MK Amman temple early one morning in 2006. They had arranged with a Brahmin priest to

consecrate a snake stone (*nāga pratiṣṭhā*) under a sacred tree in the temple's courtyard, but he had not yet arrived and the most auspicious ninety minutes of the day were already underway. In conversations with this couple over the next two years the long, complicated, and poignant story of Archana's *nāga dōṣam* and its spiraling effects took shape. The only daughter of a Brahmin family, Archana's astrologer diagnosed her with *nāga dōṣam* after she failed her Chartered Accountant exam at age twenty-one.

Archana and her parents immediately embarked on a series of ritual therapies to mitigate or eliminate the *dōṣam*'s malefic effects but, despite traveling to numerous temples and performing increasingly complex and expensive vows and rites, they were unable to arrange her marriage before it was time for her to leave India and begin her job with American Express in New Jersey three years ago. Now, with their daughter about to turn thirty, Archana's parents were panicked that her *dōṣam* might prevent her from ever marrying. In the intervening eight years they had visited temples spread throughout Karnataka,²⁷ Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu to seek relief from Archana's

²⁷ They traveled to the Kukke Sri Subramaniya Temple, located about 100 kilometers from Mangalore, to perform pūjās to relieve their daughter's horoscopic blemish. This temple is believed to commemorate the site where Subramaniya (Shiva's son, also called Murugan) offered *darśan* and protection to the serpent king Vasuki and other snakes who had taken refuge there

dōṣam, all the while exchanging hundreds of horoscopes with potential grooms identified through online matrimonial services, newspaper classifieds, caste association listings, and conventional word-of-mouth. When their daughter had returned to India for a month's holiday the previous year her parents anticipated that they would be able to introduce her to some of these prospective husbands, but, as her mother put it:

Although we had *many* possible alliances in hand where even the horoscopes matched well, they all somehow did not work out in the end. Not one of them materialized to come and view my daughter. One by one the groom's side was not coming. I phoned them, but either they did not reply or they made some excuse. So [laughs], despite everything, it is clear there is still a serious problem in my daughter's horoscope.

Fearing that they had nearly exhausted the gamut of remedial options available to counteract their daughter's *dōṣam*, Archana's parents arranged to have a Brahmin priest enliven a snake stone on her behalf in the hope that they would meet with some success in locating a few potential grooms before Archana's impending visit to India. When I last spoke with the couple in 2008, Archana had recently received her United States Green Card and her mother was considering applying for a year's leave of absence from her teaching position so that she could spend six months with Archana in New Jersey and

from Garuda. In recent years this temple has become associated with *sarpa dōṣam* rituals, including *nāga pratiṣṭhā* rites.

concentrate on locating a suitable groom for her there. She reported that her astrologer had always been of the opinion that consecrating a snake stone was unlikely to rectify the girl's *dōṣam* and had recently suggested that the position of Rahu in Archana's father's horoscope might be impacting her marital prospects as well, and recommended that they do nothing more until the shadow planet transited to a different, less powerful, position the following year.

Archana's *nāga dōṣam* was diagnosed when an astrologer examined her horoscope. While this method remains the most common path to determining what condition might be affecting an individual and causing her to experience delayed marriage, professional setbacks, financial difficulties, or infertility, the process of arriving at a diagnosis does not typically include identifying a specific cause for the afflicting *dōṣam*. Astrologers and ritual specialists offered detailed commentaries on the causes of *nāga dōṣam*, and drew intriguing connections between the increasing prevalence of *nāga dōṣam* in recent years and modern contexts, challenges, attitudes, and aspirations. Devotees, worshipers, and those affected by this malignant condition also evidenced interest in and speculated about *dōṣam*'s etiologies.

Over the course of my fieldwork, I met numerous individuals enmeshed in situations like that facing Archana and her family. In most cases these individuals had, much like Archana, been diagnosed with *nāga dōṣam* by an astrologer who determined that planetary arrangement in their horoscopes signaled the presence of this malefic condition. While inauspicious planetary configurations and “bad” horoscopes were consistently linked with *nāga dōṣam*, however, they were rarely considered the sole cause. It quickly became apparent to me that understandings of the sources of *nāga dōṣam* were undergoing a considerable shift, and that the repertoire of what “counts” as a cause for *nāga dōṣam* was in the process of expanding. Further, the etiologies that individuals proffered for this affliction were typically constructed in direct relationship to indigenous formulations about what characterizes modern times in Tamil Nadu, and *nāga dōṣam* itself was understood to be a modern problem stemming from a uniquely modern confluence of factors. Among the modern phenomena with which *nāga dōṣam* is linked are shifts as disparate as urbanization, migration away from ancestral homes, the breakup of the joint family, the effects of selfishness and non-traditional lifestyle choices, consumerism and materialism, disrespectful behavior toward one’s elders, nonperformance of rituals and religious duties, and female carelessness about purity

and menstrual taboos. In some narratives these changes are associated with the Kali Yuga, which may serve as one indigenous framework for categorizing and accounting for the new situations and realities that increasingly confront Tamils in these modern times.

This chapter argues that contemporary understandings of what *nāga dōṣam* is and what causes it have diverged significantly from more traditional interpretations. Whereas *nāga dōṣam* was traditionally considered a positively identifiable astrological condition that resulted from having killed a snake, today *nāga dōṣam* functions as an umbrella concept which encompasses other types of *dōṣam* and is linked to a greatly expanded repertoire of causes. This array of causes is indigenously marked and described as new, and is articulated in response to indigenous conceptions about what characterizes modern times.

In the sections that follow I tackle the complicated task of defining *nāga dōṣam* and then characterize the multiple, complementary ways in which ideas about this condition are articulated and interpreted. The remaining sections of the chapter identify and describe five categories of causes for *nāga dōṣam*, indigenously framed, and present a range of perspectives on and analyses of this expanded repertoire and its

relationship to the challenges and problems that are indigenously associated with modern times.

Defining *Nāga Dōṣam*

Nāga dōṣam (Ta. *nāka tōcam* and *nāka tōṣam*) is generally understood to be a negative condition that is expressed in an individual's horoscope, particularly through the positions of the shadow planets Rahu and Ketu. Cre-A's *Dictionary of Contemporary Tamil* defines *tōṣam* as a "malignant influence (believed to be the effect of the planetary position at the time of birth or from evil deed)" and offers *kuṛai* (fault, blemish) as a synonym (1992, 599). The *Tamil Lexicon* provides the following meanings for *tōṣam*: "1. fault; 2. sin, offence, transgression, heinous crime, guilt (*pāvam*); 3. defect, blemish, deficiency, lack (*kuṛai*)" (1982, 2119). *Nāka* is derived from the Sanskrit for snake or serpent and is usually rendered as *nākam* in Tamil (see Cre-A 1992, 613), though the more common Tamil term for snake is *pāmpu*. Taken together, these definitions suggest that a flaw or blemish related to snakes manifests in an individual's horoscope and results in particular defects in that individual's life. The relationships between this blemish and snakes are multiple – spanning the causes of *dōṣam*, the solutions for it,

and the mythologies underlying it – as well as dynamic and shifting, because *nāga dōṣam* as an astrological and ritual category is being revised and expanded in contemporary Tamil Nadu. In addition, the defects that are thought to result from *nāga dōṣam* are numerous and seemingly open-ended, though it is clear that among the abundant undesirable outcomes two are primary: late marriage and delayed conception.

Nāga dōṣam is only one among other varieties of *dōṣam*. One closely related *dōṣam* is *cevvāy dōṣam*, or Mars *dōṣam*, an inauspicious condition that occurs when Mars occupies the seventh or eighth house in an individual's horoscope or when Mars reigns over a horoscope. Though *cevvāy dōṣam* is most often spoken about as a horoscopic condition separate from *nāga dōṣam*, it is not always distinguished, and the two exhibit some overlapping negative outcomes and are ritually treated in many of the same ways. Indeed, my research demonstrates that *nāga dōṣam* functions as something of an umbrella term for a cluster of *dōṣams*; types of *dōṣam* which fall into this group include Rahu-Ketu *dōṣam*, *graha* (planet) *dōṣam*, *sarpa* (snake) *dōṣam*, and *kāla sarpa dōṣam* (variously translated as snake death *dōṣam*, snake time *dōṣam*, and black snake *dōṣam*). Additional categories of *dōṣam* which are conflated with or used interchangeably with *nāga dōṣam* are *kaḷattira dōṣam* (lit. wife *dōṣam*, faulted for

delayed marriage), *maṅgalya dōṣam* (lit. auspiciousness *dōṣam*, blamed for a husband's early death), and *puttira dōṣam* (also *putra dōṣam*; lit. son *dōṣam*, credited with difficulty producing offspring, especially male heirs).²⁸ There is substantial disagreement about whether each *dōṣam* in this constellation is a distinct, individual condition indicated by different planetary positions, expressed through different negative effects, and requiring different ritual interventions, or whether these are, in fact, identical malignancies which are simply referred to by a variety of names. This semantic overlap characterizes discussions about *dōṣam* in both Tamil-language booklets and in the oral tradition.

The disagreements about classification that typify the wealth of oral and textual information that I gathered suggest that, whatever might have distinguished these conditions from one another historically, taxonomic and other distinctions among them have now effectively collapsed, and the vast majority of those with whom I consulted for this study conflate them in their narratives. Taking *nāga dōṣam* as an inclusive class of *dōṣams* and treating it as an idiom with its own internal logic allows the practices and

²⁸ Shani, or Saturn, *dōṣam* was not a category that I encountered in Tamil Nadu, though I am aware that it shares many similarities with the constellation of *dōṣams* that I describe and am familiar with beliefs concerning Saturn's inauspicious influence that are popular in other parts of India. See Knipe (1995) for a survey of textual sources treating and popular practices surrounding Shani *dōṣam* in the East Godavari District of Andhra Pradesh.

narratives that I documented on the ground to set the parameters for what “counts” as snake blemish, rather than privileging the typology offered by a particular astrologer, priest, or specific lineage of ritual specialists.

Multiplicity and Semantic Overlap

Many of the interviews that I conducted during the course of my fieldwork focused on the causes of, problems associated with, and ritual remedies for *nāga dōṣam*. It is hardly surprising that this body of data does not exhibit across-the-board agreement about any of the issues related to *nāga dōṣam*. Scholars have long noted an Indian tendency toward and proclivity for multiplicity, and documented how worldviews and approaches that are seemingly in conflict with one another can coexist quite easily in Indian contexts, often thriving from their dynamic interactions.²⁹ Diana Eck associates the expectation of and value placed on singularity and uniqueness with Western habits of thought and traditions of monotheism (1994, 59), and notes that in the Indian context, “If something is important, it is important enough to be repeated, duplicated, and seen

²⁹ On context-sensitivity and Indian “ways of thinking” see A.K. Ramanujan 1989, on the usefulness of the “tool box approach” see Sheryl B. Daniel 1986, and on eclecticism and the merits and limits of a pluralism of interpretation see Wendy Doniger 1999.

from many angles. Manyness is valued; indeed, it is seen as essential” (60). Eck’s insights apply well to the multiple viewpoints I encountered on every aspect of *nāga dōṣam*; polyvalency characterized interpretations of what constitutes *dōṣam*, its causes and sources, and what ritual therapies might be most efficacious in treating it.

Although multiple perspectives on *nāga dōṣam* abounded in my fieldwork, they did not typically proceed along the more predictable or potentially simpler-to-explain lines, like caste group, level of literacy, or class status. In fact, my interviews demonstrated that Brahmin priests often disagreed with other Brahmin priests, non-Brahmin ritual specialists working at the same temple regularly differed among themselves, and devotees from similar backgrounds frequently corrected and contradicted one another about issues as central as possible causes of and remedies for *nāga dōṣam*. It was quickly clear that several vectors were at work in my research population, and that at different times these intersected with and cross-cut one another in ways that made it difficult to classify either my respondents or their comments, and also produced significant semantic overlap.

Possibly most striking were the occasions where interlocutors changed course in the middle of their narratives, seemed to counter things they had just said, or injected

complex “and” compounds into their discussions of an issue to admit multiple possible explanations or responses to an issue. These individuals demonstrated a remarkable unselfconsciousness about their radical embrace of a constellation of seemingly incompatible possibilities. These occasions provide revealing commentary on the open-ended character of *nāga dōṣam* as a contemporary social and religious idiom, the ongoing reinterpretation of appropriate ritual responses to its challenges, and the dynamic approach to religious tradition at this moment in Tamil Nadu.

The Causes of *Nāga Dōṣam*

Thus far in this dissertation I have generally described *nāga dōṣam* as a negative condition that is expressed in an individual’s horoscope, particularly through the positions of the shadow planets Rahu and Ketu. While this is certainly the most common conception of *nāga dōṣam*, and the one that is most often assumed in the Tamil-language articles and booklets on the subject that I read, this basic characterization functions alongside and interacts with a number of others. These formulations are rarely mutually exclusive; rather, the spectrum of causes for *nāga dōṣam* that I will outline in this section are most appropriately viewed as complementary

etiologies that offer nuance and operate in addition to the widespread belief that *nāga dōṣam* is attributable to the locations of Rahu and Ketu in an individual's birth chart. I found that this expanded repertoire of causes for *nāga dōṣam* is marked indigenously as “new” and is articulated in response to the challenges that people understand as characteristic of modern times.

In the sections that follow, I describe and analyze the five main causes of *dōṣam* that emerged in fieldwork interviews and through participant-observation. According to these indigenous formulations, the main causes of *nāga dōṣam* are astrological reasons, harms perpetrated against snakes, sins from previous lives, reasons associated with a snakelike mark on a woman's thigh, and a woman's carelessness with her menstrual cloths. My analysis of this indigenously framed range of causes bears directly on the repertoire of expiatory rituals that individuals perform to remedy their *nāga dōṣam* and sets the stage for the next chapter, in which I focus on these ritual therapies in great detail. Further, this analysis provides insight into the gendered nature of *nāga dōṣam* and the ways in which at least some understandings of both the causes of and remedies for this malignancy are indexed to caste in contemporary Tamil Nadu.

Stars, Signs, and Planets: Astrology and Nāga Dōṣam

It is clear that *nāga dōṣam* is inextricably related to Indian astrological conceptions and is most often attributed to the reigning aspects of an individual's horoscope (*jātakam*). These aspects are directly linked to an individual's exact birth time, in relation to which her birth chart is cast, and include three main elements. First among these is which of the twenty seven stars, also called lunar mansions or asterisms, that individual was born under (Skt. *nakṣatra*; Ta. *naṭcattiram*). The second of these determining elements is which of the twelve zodiacal signs was ascendant, or rising above the horizon, at the time of the individual's birth (Skt. *lagna*; Ta. *lakkiṇam*), and the final among them is the planetary configuration under which the person was born. Before I turn to local analyses of how these three components function in relation to *nāga dōṣam*, I will briefly outline when horoscopes are typically cast, when *dōṣam* might be disclosed, and what factors might complicate a straightforward diagnosis.

The elements of an individual horoscope – birth star, zodiacal sign, and planetary positions – are present from the moment of birth and (at least theoretically) can be interpreted at any time to determine whether an individual has *nāga dōṣam*, or other astrological flaws. Tamil parents from virtually all castes have their children's

horoscopes drawn up sometime in childhood, but exactly when they approach an astrologer to have them cast may range from within the first few days after birth up until the child's third birthday. Among those with whom I worked the birth chart remains the central source of authority about an individual's life course and the factors, both auspicious and inauspicious, that will be taken into account when it is time to match this horoscope with that of a potential spouse. I did, however, hear about the custom in some non-Brahmin communities where marriages are arranged relying on a boy's birth horoscope and a girl's menstrual horoscope (based on the timing of her first menstruation).³⁰ This practice raises a number of delicate issues, not least of which is the menstrual horoscope's amenability to deliberate revision, usually in an effort to render a girl's horoscope more favorable for marriage since it is virtually impossible to verify the exact time that a girl began menstruating (see also Kapadia 1995, 77-8 on "adjustment" of the menstrual horoscope).

³⁰ Though the practice of using menstrual horoscopes (rather than birth horoscopes) to determine the degree of astrological compatibility between a potential bride and groom is primarily a non-Brahmin one, some Brahmins do note the timing of a girl's first menstruation and use it to chart auspicious and inauspicious events in her future. They do not, however, use it in the process of matching horoscopes for marriage.

Although *nāga dōṣam* should be visible in an individual's horoscope from birth, most people reported that astrologers do not customarily reveal the presence of this malignant condition when they cast the birth chart. Indeed, not even a single astrologer I spoke with conceded that he ever had, or ever would, report to a parent that the horoscope he had just cast supported a *nāga dōṣam* diagnosis. The prevailing attitude about unsolicited diagnoses can be succinctly summarized as “don't ask, don't tell,” a policy that seemed to be influenced by the shared sense that bad news should not be delivered casually so far in advance of when the child might first begin to experience *dōṣam*'s symptoms. As one Brahmin priest put it:

At the time of birth the person's fate will be reflected in the horoscope. The horoscope is influenced by the birth time. *Nāga dōṣam* does not come after birth – it is decided once and for all at the time of birth. At the time of birth we note the time and cast the horoscope from that. At that time it [*dōṣam*] will be there. If you see an astrologer and ask about *studies,* they will tell you only about studies. If you ask about marriage, they will tell you only about marriage. And if you ask about getting a child, they will tell you about that. They will not openly say, “From the time of birth this child will face all problems.” They will not speak of *dōṣam* unless you mention the problems the child is experiencing. What we ask, that only the astrologer will tell.

Non-specialists also voiced their agreement with this practice of non-disclosure, and indicated that there would be no point in embarking on a course of remedial rituals for *nāga dōṣam* until the sufferer was approaching marital age.

Astrologers who linked *nāga dōṣam* to an individual's birth star and zodiacal sign sometimes spoke about these factors as if they were interchangeable. One astrologer explained, "At birth, according to the zodiacal sign, we should check [the horoscope, to see if a person has *nāga dōṣam*]. We should chart the zodiacal sign for the time at which the child is born. The zodiacal sign means life. It marks your fate." Another astrologer made nearly identical comments, but attributed the appearance of *nāga dōṣam* to the individual's birth star, rather than to the zodiacal sign. Yet another astrologer, who included planetary positions along with birth star and zodiacal sign, told me, "You are born, and you get what you get based on your birth time." His statement folds all these variables into the one, inescapable moment in which an individual emerges into the world and, in response to astrological dynamics beyond his or her reckoning, the individual's fate is written and sealed.

While it was primarily priests and astrologers who delved into the complex details of birth stars and zodiacal signs, lay people from all backgrounds were knowledgeable

about how planetary arrangements relate to *nāga dōṣam*. Specialists and non-specialists alike specifically referenced the unfavorable horoscopic positions of Rahu and Ketu as the primary driving force behind *nāga dōṣam*, and many of them posited correlations between particular negative outcomes and the precise squares in an individual's horoscope occupied by Rahu and Ketu. One Brahmin woman told me that she immediately inaugurated a course of remedial rituals when her astrologer advised that the relative positions of Rahu, Ketu, and the moon in her daughter's horoscope presaged an intercaste marriage; and one non-Brahmin family told me that they all started making offerings to the nine planets when their astrologer predicted that their father would suffer financial ruin because he was under Rahu's "gaze" for the next seven years. While there was significant variation and disagreement about which positions might yield which inauspicious effects and about whether the shadow planets could ever produce good results, there was consensus that if Rahu and Ketu are located in the precise places (*sthānam*) within the birth chart that are associated with marriage and offspring (the *kaḷattira sthānam* and *putra sthānam*, respectively), that individual would experience, at a minimum, late marriage and difficulty conceiving.

One phenomenon that came up repeatedly in print sources and in interviews was *kāla sarpa dōṣam* (or *kāla sarpa yōkam*), usually translated as “snake death blemish,” but sometimes rendered as either “black snake blemish” or “snake time blemish.” *Yōkam* means “union,” and in this planetary arrangement Rahu and Ketu literally “join together” and “hem in” all of the other planets between them in an individual’s birth chart. Some astrologers and priests, however, questioned whether this configuration has any basis in traditional astrological texts, or whether it is indeed even a “real” phenomenon.³¹ Indeed, several astrologers called *kāla sarpa dōṣam* a “trend” and alleged that less scrupulous members of their guild resort to this diagnosis to create fear among their clientele and earn money.

The English-language book *Kaal Sarpa Yoga: Why Such Fright?*, which I saw for sale at both religious goods stores and at fashionable bookshops in Chennai, describes this planetary configuration as the “containment of all planets in the Rahu-Ketu axis”

³¹ Although disagreements abound, the conceptual reach of this configuration has widened to include its application to current events. A blog posted on October 11, 2008 describes how all the planets are currently in a “kala sarpa yoga” arrangement (here *kala sarpa* is defined as “the serpent of time”), in which all of the other planets are between the nodes of Rahu and Ketu. This post relates “the current economic crisis and the impending change of leadership in our country” to these planetary positions, and analyzes the two candidates, McCain and Obama, in terms of these planetary dynamics (<http://vedicastrologycenter.net/blog/astrology-forecast/kala-sarpa-yoga-us-economy-and-election/>).

(Rao 2003, 10). The volume enumerates four categories of results arising from *kāla sarpa yōga*, namely, “1) Struggle in life leading to failure in achievement of goals consequently leading to frustration and pessimism; 2) Physical and mental weakness; 3) Delayed or/and unhappy marriage; 4) Obstruction in having children or lack of happiness from them,” and analyzes a number horoscopes (10). Interestingly, the book envisions itself as a corrective to increasingly common and frightening diagnoses of *kāla sarpa yōga*, or what the author calls a “low grade assemblage of pseudo-religious mumbo jumbo,” which are neither well-researched by astrologers nor clearly explained to their clients (9). Conversely, the Tamil-language volume *Kāla Carppa Yōkam*, portrays this condition as both endemic and threatening (Subramanian 1995). This book is steeped in karma theory, and repeatedly emphasizes that through the combination of success and affliction meted out by Rahu and Ketu an individual will reap what he or she has sown in the form of good and bad deeds committed in previous lives. The author explains that the horoscopic positions of Rahu and Ketu determine precisely how one will experience the merits and evils of his or her actions from previous births and, though he repeatedly asserts that this karma cannot be escaped, he also outlines various

parikārams (including worshipping at the Kalahasti and Thirunageshwaram temples) that an individual suffering from *dōṣam* can perform to mitigate it.

A Brahmin Sanskrit scholar who teaches at a traditional college in Chennai and who is also knowledgeable about astrological textual traditions offered this commentary about *kāla sarpa dōṣam*:

When Rahu is in the fifth house then they [astrologers] say “*nāga dōṣam*.” There is *kāla sarpa dōṣam* – in astrological terms there is no such thing. We don’t read these things in the texts [draws the boxes of a horoscope]. Rahu and Ketu will always be 180 degrees apart. If he is here [points], then he will be there [points to chart and indicates possible positions for Rahu and Ketu, always 180 degrees apart]. In between these 180 degrees if all the planets come [i.e. if they are all “hemmed in” by Rahu and Ketu] then it mean *kāla sarpa dōṣam*. The outside astrologers [astrologers outside his institution, who he regards as less reliably trained] say it is like this. We are not reading [the texts do not support this conclusion]. There is nothing like that [in the texts]. Unless it is like that [in texts], we cannot tell [i.e., cannot advise clients this way].

Because he takes the knowledge set out in astrological texts as his unassailable guide, this scholar-astrologer dismisses concepts which lack textual authority as inauthentic and feels that they do not merit treatment with remedial rituals. His conviction about such matters should not be taken as the last word, however; a similarly trained Brahmin priest who performs a full repertoire of *dōṣam*-removal rites at

Rameshwaram passionately described his fidelity to the wisdom laid out in the Vedas just a moment before emphatically declaring, “Some [*parikārams*] are in the texts and some are not in the texts. If we only perform rituals according to the texts, we cannot do anything.”

Harming Snakes and the Curse of Nāga Dōṣam

As widespread as the astrological causes of *nāga dōṣam* described above is the belief that *nāga dōṣam* is a specific type of karma that accrues to an individual who beats or kills a snake. This understanding often works in tandem with the astrological etiologies, as those with whom I spoke described scenarios where harming a snake caused a person (or her descendants) to be born under a birth star, zodiacal sign, and planetary positions that combine to produce *nāga dōṣam*.

Local analyses of this cause for *nāga dōṣam* emphasize that whether harming or killing the snake was intentional or accidental has no bearing on whether this malefic condition will affect an individual, or how severe its negative effects might be. Some examples involved farmers who killed snakes in their fields or who knocked down anthills wherein snakes were living, narrative elements that feature in myths connected with the

Naga Chaturthi festival, discussed in Chapter Four of this dissertation. Many of these narratives emphasize that as humans clear additional land for cultivation and habitation they are increasingly encroaching on territory that naturally belongs to snakes, and that by destroying snakes' dwelling places humans are inhibiting those snakes from mating, reproducing, and providing a safe domicile for their offspring. These disturbances and intrusions form part of a larger complex of human selfishness, urbanization, and other changes that characterize "modern times," (taken up in Chapter Six of this dissertation), and which can be linked to the recent rise in diagnoses of *nāga dōṣam*.

In our discussion about how dislodging snakes from their habitats might function as a potential cause of *nāga dōṣam*, a Chennai Sanskrit professor alluded to a myth from the epic *Mahābhārata* that is animated by similar themes. In this episode the fire god Agni, who wishes to devour the Khandava forest (and to seek revenge on the *nāga* Takshaka who dwells therein), presses Krishna and Arjuna to assist him with his incendiary project (*Mahābhārata* Gorakpur ed. *Ādi Parvan*, Chapters 221-22). This professor said, "We find the issue of 'habitat destruction' in the *Mahābhārata* as well. *Dōṣa* accrues to Arjuna when Takshaka's son [Asvasena] curses him after the Khandava forest fire. Takshaka's son waits until the *Mahābhārata* war, more than

nineteen years later, to attempt to kill Arjuna.”³² The tendency to mine the epics for moral guidelines and didactic examples was shared by many of the traditional Sanskrit scholars with whom I spoke, especially in terms of pairing mythological incidents with modern-day questions of ethical significance. For them, the textual tradition offers a rich interpretive framework for negotiating contemporary challenges, including *dōṣam*, and understanding them in light of the classical repertoire.

The motif of human action interfering with a snake’s breeding (and thus denying it the continuation of its lineage) surfaced frequently in narratives and provides important clues toward explaining why the offended *nāga* seeks its retribution by obstructing human fertility. Such correspondences suggest a quite literal interpretation of karma in which the perpetrator experiences the same fertility issues he or she has visited upon her reptilian counterpart. These karmic consequences can travel over an individual’s multiple rebirths, and/or affect up to seven generations of the person’s family. These notions – both that particular sinful deeds may result in very specific karmic outcomes, and that *dōṣam* may endure beyond temporal and cyclic boundaries – fit in with larger

³² See Appendix Two for a summary of and further context for this myth.

understandings of karma in Hindu traditions. One priest touched on a number of these

themes in the following narrative:

In the olden days when farmers worked in the fields, in villages and in fields many snakes would be seen. Those areas were inhabited by many snakes. We were farming in their place. We were farming where they lived. So many farmers happened to kill snakes, fearing that the snakes may kill them. The *dōṣam* caused by killing a snake is seen in their horoscopes. When his horoscope comes it is clearly seen that this family has *nāga dōṣam*. Even if he has a *caesarean* he will get *nāga dōṣam* [i.e. no attempt to manipulate his birth time will result in him being spared from *nāga dōṣam*]. Just by seeing the horoscope we can say, “He has *sarpa dōṣam*,” we can say, “This family has *sarpa dōṣam*.”

In some villages snakes may enter farmers’ houses. Unknowingly they enter, and they [the farmers] kill them, fearing that if they leave the snakes they will be bitten by them. Then as a curse [*cāpam*] the snake’s mother says to them, “May you be without a single descendant, because you killed my son.” Even if someone beats our son we will curse them. We don’t curse them on purpose; it is out of pain and grief that we curse them. It is because of our misery and out of our sadness that we curse them. Like that the snakes do, too. If a snake’s husband or wife is killed, or if its child is killed, that snake will also curse. That is called *sarpa cāpam*. That occurs in the second, seventh, or eighth place from the zodiacal sign, or also when Rahu joins with Chandra, or when Ketu is present in the second place from Chandra, or when Ketu is present in the seventh place from the Chandra. Rahu and Ketu are present in snake form. Eighty percent of the people who have the curse are born in the family with *sarpa dōṣam*. The result is that their children don’t get married. If the *sarpa dōṣam* is too strong

then they don't even have a lineage; they won't have a child at all. That child is without any heir. So they go with milk and eggs in remembrance of it and perform petitionary prayers [*pirārttaṇa*] and worship in a goddess temple.

I also heard a number of narratives about individuals, usually men, who misinterpreted a snake passing through their houses or lands as a dangerous and threatening intrusion rather than a divine visitation. Indeed, there are many stories that feature a protective father who almost killed a snake that entered his house while his family was eating or sleeping, only to be restrained from doing so at the last moment by his wife, who recognized the snake as a form of the goddess and who subsequently worshiped her with offerings of milk and eggs.³³

One husband related a long narrative about the numerous times a snake appeared before his wife in their home when he was away from home working. His wife evidenced no fear of her reptilian visitor, even though it would slither very close to where she sat on the floor preparing vegetables. Rather, because she believed the snake to be the goddess, she took to leaving a small dish of milk at the threshold as an offering. She kept these occurrences to herself until one day her husband happened to be at home when the snake entered. He says that he reacted violently, and seized a kitchen

³³ In his essay on women's tales, Ramanujan describes strikingly different perceptions of snakes in what he calls "woman-centered tales" and "man-centered tales" (1999, 445).

utensil with the intention of killing the snake. His wife, weeping, explained her relationship with the snake to her husband, and convinced him that it was the goddess in snake form. Soon after this incident, his wife began having dreams in which a beautiful woman, who she took to be the snake goddess, asked the woman to build a temple in her honor. At the same time, an anthill on their property started to grow rapidly. Her husband reserved judgment on these matters until his wife, who had until then been unable to conceive, revealed that the beautiful woman in her dream told her that she was pregnant.³⁴ When a doctor's visit confirmed this happy fact, the couple commissioned plans to build a small snake goddess temple on their property. The anthill remains the central object of worship at their temple today, and the couple's daughter, Nagalakshmi, makes elaborate milk and flower offerings there whenever she returns home to Chennai from London, where she works.

A female devotee who comes from decidedly less comfortable circumstances also described visitations from the snake goddess in her reptilian form, both to her home and in her dreams.

³⁴ Pratapachandra Ghosha's Asiatic Society paper notes that if a *nāga* appears in a dream, "the person is said to be soon blessed with numerous children" (1870, 220).

Devotee: On Fridays we buy eggs and milk and go to the temple and give them to her [the goddess]. We usually do this every other Friday. If I fail to do so, the snake will come in my dreams and I will feel uneasy. When my daughter was two years old I was nursing her and the snake came into our house. It came from the [nearby snake goddess] temple. It was night; ten o'clock. I had just served food for my husband, and while I was *feeding* my child it came in. At that time we had no [electrical] *power connection* in my house. It was very dark. I did not say, "There is a snake there," because my husband might beat it. I just said, "Look here, look here," very softly, and told my husband that Amma [the goddess] has come. That Friday we went to the temple and told her, "You should not appear in our home like this. We will come and feed you in the temple." I said that I would buy egg and milk and give to her. So, twice in a month I buy egg and milk and keep it at the anthill. I never buy *packet* milk, only the milk from the man who draws it from his cow.

ALA: Why not *packet* milk?

Devotee: From the beginning we are giving cow milk, so we continue to follow this custom. I go and buy the milk and pour it at the temple. Otherwise we cannot sleep in our house. The snake comes and goes and we'll hear its sound, "ssss, ssss!"

Also related to the theme of displacing snakes from particular places were the stories I heard about patron snakes that belong to individual plots of land and about "house snakes" (*maṇai pāmpu*) in charge of protecting the inhabitants of specific dwellings. These narratives fell into two broad categories: the first concerns snakes that are no longer free to roam their inherited lands when a new dwelling is constructed there

and humans take up residence, and the second focuses on harms that befall or neglect that is shown to individual protective house snakes.³⁵ One ritual specialist made this observation about a client he had diagnosed with *nāga dōṣam*, “In the previous birth he would have killed or harmed a snake. While building his house he might have killed some snakes that came out from the *ground* [i.e., plot of land]. These kinds of sins will return to him as *nāga dōṣam*.” A laborer, who had been hired by a would-be homeowner to drain water from a vacant lot and rid it of snakes so that construction could begin, told me that he refused to interfere with the snakes and ultimately quit this job. “I told him [the boss] many times that this is not proper work for me. I can run the pump, drain the water, and level the ground, but only a priest can make offerings and ask the snakes to depart without offending them. If I force them [the snakes] from their home so that he [the boss] can build one, will he come and save me if those snakes curse me or bite me?”

³⁵ Although I heard narratives in which individuals abandoned or neglected the worship of their house snake, I did not encounter any that referenced the harms that might befall families whose house snake deserted them, as Ghosha did (1870). The belief he records is especially significant because it explicitly links the presence of a house snake with fertility, particularly the continuation of a lineage; “Each Vāstu, or domicile, is believed to have a representative snake, called the *Vāstu-Sarpa*, which is regarded with great awe. If the Vāstu-Sarpa is seen to abandon a house, it is an unlucky omen, and the perpetuity of the house, the continuity of the race or family, is believed to be endangered” (206).

Indeed, according to the *Vāstu Śāstra*, the traditional texts on the science of Indian architecture, rites are required to consecrate the ground and drive away snakes, demons, and other spirits before any dwelling, for humans or for deities, may be constructed on a plot of land. *Vāstu* may refer both to the house and to the presiding deity of the residence or property. While as a deity *Vastu* is sometimes imaged in an anthropomorphic, male form (especially when he is inscribed on the ritual diagram, or *vāstu maṇḍala*, that corresponds to the parcel of land)³⁶ he is also imaged as a divine serpent, a multiform that fits well with his identity as Rahu's brother (Shulman 1978, 124 n. 94 citing Kramrisch 1946, 94; Vasudeva 2007, 5).

Traditional *vāstu* rites feature offerings to the snakes of the plot and to the cosmic snake which serves as the foundation of the earth, as well as mantras that summon and propitiate these snakes. A traditional Sanskrit scholar who teaches in Chennai told me that in these purification³⁷ and preparation rites a bull is invoked first, and the great serpent Adishesha is invoked next; "We pray to Adishesha, saying, 'Just

³⁶ For more on this homology and the specifics of these mappings see Beck 1976 and Stella Kramrisch 1946. See also Kramrisch (1981, 65-70) for a symbolic discussion of *vāstu*.

³⁷ Laurie Cozad briefly discusses the *Vāstu-prasāmana* ceremony (from the *Sāmavidhāna Brāhmaṇa*), the foundation-laying rite for a new dwelling, in which the *nāga* Vasuki is invoked to "purify" the earth and make it fit for human habitation" (2004, 14).

as you support the earth with your many hoods, please support this ground and this house for my sake and the sake of my family.”³⁸ He explained that a peg is nailed down at each of the four corners of the new home and that mantras are chanted to request that any resident snakes to retreat to their subterranean kingdom and let the new, human residents live here in peace. In addition to the golden plate that is etched with a map assigning divinities to sub-divided section of the plot, a golden *nāga* image is buried in the earth as part of the *vāstu* rites (Crooke 1918, 140; Shulman 1978, 124, citing Kramrisch 1946; Vasudeva 2007, 10-11). Offerings to guardian snakes is not, however, only an elite practice; many non-Brahmins include offerings of dry grains to *nāgas* in their contemporary performances of the milk-boiling ceremony (*pāl-kāyccu*), a widespread and simple housewarming ritual that does not require the services of a priest.

It is clear that these associations between protective snakes and particular plots of land that surfaced in oral narratives are very old. The mantras and offerings invoking and worshiping snakes in these consecration ceremonies have attracted the attention of

³⁸ Shulman also notes that the *vāstu* rite acknowledges that the earth rests on the great serpent, and alludes to the snake’s capacity to be reborn anew through the process of periodically shedding its skin; “The earth is fixed on the remnant, the eternally reborn – Ananta-Ādiśeṣa, the serpent who has no end, no death, since he is reborn out of the very act of aging ...,” (1978, 124).

several scholars.³⁹ In a paper read before the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1870, Pratapachandra Ghosha describes the performance of the Vedic *vāstu yāga* ceremony in which mantras addressed to serpents are recited as branches from four trees are nailed at the four corners of the ritual diagram that is mapped onto the plot; “Om, you serpents, fast runners, protectors of all animals, enter under this Vedi [sacrificial altar], and stay in this house, continually bestowing on me long life and strength.” Offerings are then made to the *nāgas* and, using string that is tied to the four corner stakes the ritual diagram is divided into successively smaller units, each of which has a presiding *nāga* invoked into it. Crooke also describes a *vāstu śānti* ritual, in which he describes a mound symbolizing an anthill,⁴⁰ “the abode of snakes,” that is constructed before this mantra is addressed to the snakes; “May the Nāgas or serpent gods go to the depths of the earth, and let the Lokapālas or benign guardians of the four quarters, who prolong life and strength, abide in this dwelling!” (1918, 140).⁴¹

³⁹ See also Menon on the custom of reserving snake groves on family properties in Kerala, where a snake or family of snakes attached to that land is worshiped as a household deity (1901).

⁴⁰ Interestingly, anthill mud, which is widely believed to have curative and protective properties, is also used in *vāstu* rites (Ghosha 1870, 210; Swaminathan Shivacharya, personal communication; T.V. Vasudeva, personal communication).

⁴¹ In the midst of a larger discussion focused on the notion that Tamil houses are “conceived” and “birthed” (which, by extension, means that houses have horoscopes and thus experience both

Similar to the ways that *nāga dōṣam* is recently expanding in Tamil Nadu, *vāstu* is also an example of a growing and increasingly visible tradition in contemporary India. Both *nāga dōṣam* and *vāstu* are host to shifting understandings of traditional textual and ceremonial practices and, as individuals and families attempt to negotiate the anxieties of contemporary Indian social life within something resembling traditional frameworks, they are sites for striking ritual innovations. Both *nāga dōṣam* and *vāstu* seem to be increasingly invoked and blamed when personal and familial difficulties arise; indeed a flaw called *vāstu dōṣam* calls for remedial measures such as changing the structure or layout of one's residence in order to restore peace and prosperity to the sufferer's life.⁴²

While textually prescribed iterations of *vāstu* rites (and the related *grhyapravēśam*, or house-entering, ceremony) continue to be performed for and by Brahmins (and, increasingly, for upwardly mobile individuals from other castes) in contemporary Tamil Nadu, new adaptations of these rituals are being shaped and conducted both by an existing and an emerging class of ritual specialists. Innovations in ritual practices surrounding *vāstu* and *nāga dōṣam* have in some cases been accompanied by

"good" and "bad" times; see Chapter Three of his *Fluid Signs*), E. Valentine Daniel reports that one of his informants told him the mound constructed during a *vāstu* rite represents a pregnant woman's stomach and connotes fertility for the dwelling's inhabitants (1984, 120).

⁴² See <http://www.vastushilpi.com/index.php?pg=10127>.

competing claims to textual and ritual authority among ritual specialists and interpreters, as well as the charge that interest in and attention to these traditions may merely constitute a passing “trend.”

Narratives about indigenous snakes with relationships to particular residences also highlight the changes wrought by modern times, and contrast the current ill treatment of these patron *nāgas* with the reverence they were treated with in “the old days.” One non-Brahmin man told me that as the relationships that extended families or castes have traditionally shared with native villages and ancestral lands weaken in modern times, especially when family homes that once housed joint families are closed up and people migrate to cities for employment and educational opportunities, house snakes are often forgotten or abandoned.⁴³ In addition to this nostalgia about the past, this gentleman also reflected on what he viewed as the gendered responsibility to provide for one’s patron snake. He described how a new daughter-in-law might ignore

⁴³ Menon describes several interesting cases concerning the responsibilities of humans who wish to shift their homes to the snakes which are bound to their particular plot of land. In the first example, a family that moved its residence continues to return to its former home to propitiate the snakes attached to that property; in another instance, the house snakes are specifically mentioned in the deed transferring property to a new purchaser; and in a final case, after the new owner of a property cut down the trees of its snake grove, members of his family began experiencing skin conditions, which an astrologer attributed to the anger of the displaced family snakes (1901).

her affinal family's house snake, and suggested that as women increasingly take on jobs outside the home they may not have the time or inclination to leave offerings for these guardian snakes.

A much younger man, who lives solidly in the present and generally does not demonstrate much patience with matters of religious belief, arrived at a similar conclusion by a much different route. Repeatedly faced with the inexplicable evaporation of his potential marriage alliances, at his sister's insistence, he finally consulted an astrologer and learned he had *nāga dōṣam*. After a significant delay he eventually conceded to follow the astrologer's advice and traveled to Kalahasti to pacify the astrological flaws evident in his horoscope. Upon his return from Kalahasti, this young man speculated, "Some people say that every house has a house snake. Maybe I have done some disservice to mine?"

A Madurai-based folklore scholar referenced Khushwant Singh's short story "Kala Nag" (1984) by way of explaining the mistreatment facing house snakes in India today. In this tale the Vaishnava Brahmin servant Gunga Ram daily offers saucers of milk to his employers' house snake, Kala Nag. Although the pious servant believes this practice will prevent the cobra from biting members of the family for whom he works, the

children of the house, who scoff at Gunga Ram's reverence for the snake, beat Kala Nag with bamboo sticks and bring his body to their science teacher at school. When their teacher opens the tin in which they have brought their specimen, the incensed and injured cobra emerges and attempts to escape. In his flight for the door Kala Nag encounters Gunga Ram, who has come to school carrying the snake's daily milk offering. As Gunga Ram bends in worship toward the wounded cobra, Kala Nag fatally bites his devotee, sinking his fangs into the *nāmam* (the U-shaped marking that identifies him as a worshiper of Vishnu) that graces Gunga Ram's forehead. This short story pivots on the dramatic tension between the children and their "new-fangled ideas" (14) and the illiterate piety of the Brahmin Gunga Ram, raising the specter that devotion may ultimately be both futile and fatal. As with the Sanskrit scholar discussed above who framed *nāga dōṣam* in relation to episodes from the *Mahābhārata*, for this scholar folktales and literature offer a meaningful repertoire within which to look for relevant models and moral meaning.

A Goundar farmer explained that fear is not a sufficient reason to kill a snake that enters a village home. He told me that when he woke early one morning he discovered a venomous snake curled near the feet of his sleeping mother-in-law. Although his wife

was terrified, he convinced her to leave milk and eggs near the entrance to their home as offerings to the snake. That night when he returned from his fields his brother-in-law had beaten the snake to death with a broom. “He did not realize that we are the intruders, not that snake. Now everything he touches turns to *waste,* and fights start wherever he goes.” In this farmer’s opinion, his brother-in-law’s disordered personal life and financial difficulties are attributable to the dead snake’s curse (*cāpam*), an assessment that coincides with that of the Chennai astrologer who described a consultation with an old friend who in his childhood thoughtlessly tortured and killed a baby snake:

He told me that harming that snake has resulted in a defect in his life. I asked him, “What is the defect?” He said that his babies do not live. At least three or four of his children have died. This is the result of killing that small kid, that snake. He asked me what *parikārams* are available. ... I asked him to go to Rameshwaram and perform a *parikāram* for Rahu and Ketu, and then to do a fire sacrifice there also. After completing this he will get a child.

The link in this astrologer’s narrative between his client having killed a baby snake and then suffering the deaths of his own babies picks up themes that were introduced briefly above, namely how specific acts that interfere with a snake’s reproduction (such as destroying a snake’s eggs or nest, disturbing snakes while they are mating, harassing a

pregnant snake, and demolishing an anthill, wherein snakes and their babies are thought to dwell) function as etiologies for *nāga dōṣam*. These sinful acts were most eloquently and elaborately articulated by a young Brahmin priest in Chennai who, having already completed six years of Sanskrit and priestly training, was working towards a Master's degree in Sanskrit while he served part-time at a small, historic Mylapore Shiva temple. This priest introduced me to the concept *sarpa imha*, which he said arises “when one harms the snake directly by stealing its gem [believed to be embedded in its hood], destroying its anthill, or separating it from its mate during copulation. *Dōṣam* also comes from destroying the snake's eggs and troubling its small ones.”

Most striking about this category of causes is how literally karma is interpreted; the sin of a person who impedes a snake's reproduction correlates to the identical sort of fertility issues for the perpetrator. Here the sense was that negatively impacting a snake's reproduction at any point along the continuum – from conception to newly-hatched babies – invites precisely the same kinds of problems to be visited on the individual through the curse of *nāga dōṣam*. While it may not be possible to avoid settling these karmic scores altogether, the young priest quoted above confidently assured me that they can be resolved; “The snake will not curse us without a reason. It

will only curse us if we sin against it and offend it. But if we have offended it, luckily there are *parikāram* that we can perform; in Sanskrit that is [called a] *prāyaścitta* [atonement rite].”

Karma That Travels: Sinful Acts from Previous Births

In addition to injuries perpetrated against snakes, a number of my interviewees referenced a more generalized class of sins, faults, and crimes (*pāvam*) that could result in *nāga dōṣam*. This third cause usually concerned previous acts (*pūrva karma*) that were committed in an individual’s former births (*pūrva janma*). While harming a snake sometimes figured in the broad spectrum of evil deeds an individual might have perpetrated in an earlier birth that now cause *nāga dōṣam* to manifest, those with whom I spoke also enumerated several other specific transgressions as well as simply invoked sin as an abstract, generic category. The specific examples of wicked acts that were offered include beating or dishonoring one’s parents, lying, cheating one’s lineage (by not perpetuating the line through offspring), inflicting some injury on one’s siblings, behaving disrespectfully in a temple or towards a deity, and failing to ritually propitiate one’s ancestors. Ritual specialists and devotees alike made it clear that intentionality –

whether an individual knowingly or unknowingly, purposely or accidentally, sinned – makes no difference in either whether *dōṣam* accrues or how severe the blemish will be. They also made it plain that whether the sinful act is personally carried out by the sufferer or by some distant ancestor, the *dōṣam* will not be more or less punishing. The sin and the *dōṣam* might manifest immediately or migrate over up to seven of the perpetrator's successive births, or as many as seven generations of his or her descendants, wreaking all manner of havoc as it travels.

On the whole, rationalizations for *nāga dōṣam* which appeal to either these specific sinful acts or sin as a nebulous category were offered by high-caste individuals. While the inclination to attribute *nāga dōṣam* to evil acts committed in previous births cannot be as reliably indexed to caste as the two causes that I will treat in the next section, it is notable that these categories most often surfaced in the larger context of Brahmin priests urging me to take the perspective and content of Sanskrit texts concerned with morality, righteous conduct, and ethics seriously in my pursuit of the causes of *nāga dōṣam*. The narrative of a priest serving at the Rahu temple at Thirunageshwaram is representative of these discourses; it also introduces a related

category (which was predominantly invoked by high-caste individuals): the role of the Kali Yuga.

Nāga dōṣam is created by sins against snakes. In the previous birth he may have killed a snake or committed many other bad acts. From the simplest life form to more advanced creatures, including plants and trees, every being has feelings. Simply because a tree cannot talk you cannot just cut it down – you will get the curse. If you kill or commit some other sin in some other way then the curse will fall on you. If we say this in the Kali Yuga no one listens. Our holy texts [*śāstras*] have been saying this for so many years, but now [in the Kali Yuga] is not the time for *dharma* [right conduct] to be followed. Why would anyone cut a tree?

The *yugas* are the four ages, or epochs, that the universe cycles through, and the Kali is the current and final among them. The Kali Yuga is considered the most degenerate of the four eras, when human behavior strays from the codes of *dharma* and the gods fail to receive appropriate worship. Significantly, this priest correlates the negative conditions afflicting humans and the present, corrupt age, which is characterized by disregard for the teachings of the sacred texts, environmental degradation, and the indulgence in sinful acts. His narrative, and others like it, cast the exigencies facing individuals in the framework of cosmic time, which signals that these trying times are not wholly the fault of the humans who are destined to suffer through

them. Importantly, some individuals invoked the category of the Kali Yuga in ways that signaled that it was one (among other) indigenous interpretive frameworks they were employing to negotiate the challenges posed by modern times, particularly the modern problems of late marriage and infertility.

One young woman articulated deep ambivalence about the idea that her *nāga dōṣam* was potentially due to no fault of her own. Well-educated and from a reasonably affluent Mudaliyar family, Vanita's advancing age was cause for concern among close relatives who wished to see her "well-settled" (i.e., married). I followed Vanita's story over the course of about three years and, by virtue of the closeness of our relationship, she confided in me on several occasions about her frustration with her *nāga dōṣam* diagnosis. She was disturbed by the fact that the first three astrologers her father consulted said there was no problem with her horoscope and did not even mention *nāga dōṣam* as a possible reason that no suitable matches had been identified for her, despite the many avenues her family had pursued, but that once the fourth astrologer suggested her birth chart indicated *nāga dōṣam* she was immediately required to begin a rigorous course of remedial measures. Vanita also expressed irritation about the ways in which *nāga dōṣam*, which disproportionately affects women, is overtly gendered, as well about

the economic realities of its ritual culture, since their cost put many ceremonies out of the reach of most poor people. What seemed to cause Vanita the most consternation, however, was the fact that if she really had this condition, it might be due to a sinful deed perpetrated long ago by some unknown ancestor far back in her lineage, for which she was now paying the price. As we rode along in the back of a van on our way to a temple south of Chennai to perform yet another *nāga dōṣam parikāram* for Vanita, she remarked to me in exasperation, “We never met the ancestors, so why should we suffer if they beat a snake?”

Although Vanita balked at the notion that she might be suffering or facing potentially foreclosed marital possibilities as a result of a sin committed by some distant, nameless forebear, for some individuals such an explanatory model might serve to alleviate their sense of personal responsibility, culpability, or guilt. Indeed, more generalized rationalizations for *dōṣam*, such as the sin of a remote ancestor or that the individual was simply born at the wrong time, under inauspicious astrological arrangements, might advance the therapeutic project and effect healing.⁴⁴ As one Brahmin priest explained, identifying the offending karma is not critical to removing the

⁴⁴ Flueckiger makes this point about the performance of healing for afflictions that result from the evil eye (2006).

obstacles it poses; the priority should be to perform rituals to rectify the blemish so that the critical duty to continue one's family lineage can be carried out. According to him, "In a previous birth or in their lineage there are some sins that have not yet burned up. ... These sins elicit fear only when the problems become serious, like the person cannot marry, or get pregnant, or faces some threatening illness. It is not important what the sin is; what is important is carrying on the lineage. For this reason, those with *dōṣam* must do a removal."

The anxiety concerning the continuation of the lineage was framed in other ways as well; some individuals suggested that *nāga dōṣam* might result from cheating the ancestors by failing to produce offspring, a causative relationship that initially struck me as something of a catch-22 since *nāga dōṣam* could be the precise *reason* that an individual was unable to conceive or maintain a viable pregnancy. Brahmin priests, however, assured me that there is no paradox inherent in attributing *dōṣam* to those who remain childless; they maintained that if a person consulted with knowledgeable astrologers and Brahmin temple priests, and performed the prescribed expiatory rituals with sincerity and faith, then they could not fail to produce progeny *if they tried to*. These priests claimed that the kind of people who "cheated" their lineage were the young

couples hailing from the city's *nouveau riche* sector, couples who are increasingly making what constitute, in their opinions, selfish decisions not to have children. Such decisions to delay or eschew childbearing, which are often perceived to be instigated by *nāga dōṣam*, are typically framed in terms of modern times and its attendant shifts in gender roles, family patterns, and social structures.

In addition to concerns about carrying on the lineage through progeny, preoccupations with the responsibility to ritually propitiate ancestors and lineage deities and to appropriately honor elders surfaced frequently in my interviews. The neglect of *śrāddha* rituals (a class of death ceremonies and ongoing offerings to deceased lineage members), the failure to ritually propitiate one's lineage deity (*kulateyvam*), and the mistreatment or disrespect of one's living elders were all offered as etiologies for *nāga dōṣam*.⁴⁵ A Brahmin temple priest explained that one's lineage deity occupies a unique position with respect to conditions like *dōṣam*, and so is particularly worth of regular worship; "Only the *kulateyvam* has the power to disable the negative effects or

⁴⁵ Similarly, Sax characterizes a Garhwali understanding of *doṣ* (which he glosses as "fault," "blemish," and "sanction") as "an automatic result of people's failure to complete their religious duties" (2002, 49).

accentuate the benefits of any given planet, but the *kulateyvam* will only intercede for the person who pleases it with appropriate offerings.”

While the non-performance of *śrāddha* rites was referenced solely by Brahmin priests (a fact that is, perhaps, unsurprising when considered in light of the direct threat that increasing disregard for ritual practices poses to their livelihoods), non-Brahmin rituals specialists and devotees alike mentioned the failure to worship the lineage deity and ancestors as rationales for *nāga dōṣam*. In fact, several non-Brahmin interviewees drew explicit connections between ritual lapses towards the ancestors and the lineage deity, such as the woman who told me, “*Nāga dōṣam* affects us if we don’t worship according to the proper manner. If we neglect the worship of our forefathers, then *dōṣam* comes on us. When we go to our husband’s house [in a patrilocal marriage arrangement] we have to take up the worship of his lineage deity, or else *dōṣam* will come. All of these beliefs [*aitikam*] exist in the world.”

The parallels that this woman draws between the worship of the lineage deity and of deceased relatives are illuminating because they hint at the particular kinds of ritual bonds that non-Brahmins construct with deceased relatives in Tamil Nadu. These ritual relationships are characterized by complex and expensive invitation ceremonies,

which rely on ritual drummers to call the deceased's spirit back into the world to possess a living family member. These possession sequences aim to satisfy any unfulfilled desires that might contribute to the spirit's restlessness and to persuade the deceased to take up residence in the family's domestic shrine as a household deity (*pūvāṭaikkārī*).

These invitation and installation rituals find no place in Tamil Brahmin communities, where most rites to propitiate the dead are performed at home, rather than in public space, do not require the services of ritual drummers, and are oriented toward the goal of sending the soul onward, toward a higher rebirth and eventually liberation, rather than inviting the spirit back into this world to offer protection to the living.

Both Brahmins and non-Brahmins declared that disrespect shown to one's parents – another problem that is characterized as “modern” – would contribute to or result in *nāga dōṣam*. This etiology is especially interesting because those who invoked it construed irreverent behavior toward one's parents as evidence that one is unworthy to have children of his or her own, a conclusion that they viewed as being borne out by the accrual of *nāga dōṣam*. After explaining to me that *dōṣam* would ensue from beating one's parents or failing to honor them in all the ways enjoined by *dharma*, one priest concluded with this vivid image, “Just as we believe that the *nāga* is a deity, we believe

that the mother and the father are even higher. *Nāga dōṣam* will fall on you if you beat any of these. After all, the snake goddess is your mother.”

Menstrual Cloths and Snake Marks

Whereas the three causes of *nāga dōṣam* that I have discussed thus far, namely astrological explanations, harms perpetrated against snakes, and a range of other sinful acts, surfaced across the whole spectrum of my interviews and conversations – with Brahmin and non-Brahmin priests, Brahmin and non-Brahmin astrologers, and Brahmin and non-Brahmin devotees – the final two etiologies were offered solely by non-Brahmin individuals. These interrelated causes are first, that *nāga dōṣam* falls on women who are careless with their menstrual cloths (*tīṭṭu tuṇi*, lit. *tīṭṭu* = impure/unclean, *tuṇi* = cloth), and second, that *nāga dōṣam* is linked to the appearance of a snakelike black mark on a girl's upper thigh. These two sources of *nāga dōṣam* were explicitly connected with modern phenomena and the changes that Tamils witness in modern times, particularly in terms of the perception that today's young women do not adhere – whether because they chose not to or because smaller urban dwellings make it virtually impossible to – purity codes and menstrual taboos.

The appearance of a snake mark on a girl's leg is, as might be expected, understood in multiple ways: some individuals understand the mark as a cause of or catalyst for *dōṣam*, while others characterize it as a physical manifestation or tangible indicator of what is usually an invisible, planetary condition. It is significant that in these understandings *nāga dōṣam* is not present at birth and is thus not reflected in an individual's horoscope; instead *nāga dōṣam* affects post-menarche girls as a result of their own carelessness, in their current births. Specifically, people explained that girls might leave their menstrual cloths to dry on a clothesline where a reptile or a bird could come into contact with them, either by the bird's shadow falling on the cloths as it flies overhead, or the snake or lizard laying on the cloths *in situ* or taking them to its hole to use as a nest. Interestingly, these narratives demonstrate slippage between certain kinds of birds, particularly the kite (*paruntu*) and the eagle (*karuṭan*), and specific types of reptiles, namely snakes and lizards (*palli*). These conflation are suggestive of the myths that describe the enmity between the *nāgas* and their half-brother, the eagle Garuda, that are discussed in Appendix Two of this dissertation.

Each of these non-Brahmin etiologies credits *nāga dōṣam* with the power to block a woman from getting married, but those explanations that featured the snakelike

black mark on a girl's thigh also include situations in which a girl manages to marry and her *nāga dōṣam* then causes her groom's premature death. According to one non-Brahmin priest, "If the girl has that [snake] sign on her thigh, and if the couple is having intercourse without doing the *parikāram*, then the husband will die. He will die in some way. Whether it is one day after marriage, one month, or one year – he will die for sure. If they do that *parikāram* they will lead the whole life. There are cases like that."

Several narratives contained dramatic scenarios where the snake mark on the girl's thigh was actually a real snake living in the girl's flesh, lurking close to her genitals and waiting to rise up and fatally "bite" the first male (presumably her husband) who attempted to penetrate her.⁴⁶ One ritual specialist elaborated a potential solution for this tragic fate, whereby the girl would simulate intercourse with the stem of a banana tree

⁴⁶ Set in 1899 on the southern tip of the Indian subcontinent, David Davidar's novel *The House of Blue Mangoes* links a snakelike mark on a woman's thigh with calamitous events, and demonstrates the extended reach of such horoscopic malignancies. Davidar describes the swirl of village rumors that emerges in the immediate aftermath of a young, unmarried girl's rape:

The girl who had been attacked had a fatal flaw in her birth horoscope as well as in her menstrual horoscope, it was whispered, the dreaded mula natchattiram [the lunar mansion that is ruled by Ketu] would explain her misfortune. After a while it was reported that it was not the mula natchattiram that had led to the girl's downfall but the even more feared naga dosham. A few women claimed to have seen a large cobra-shaped discoloration near the girl's groin, the mark signifying that an invisible snake lurked in the girl's genitalia to cause death to the first man to have sex with her. It was said that her parents had concealed the information for fear that the girl would never get married (2002, 32-33).

(*vāḷaittaṅṭu*), which the snake would mistake for the male organ and then bite. The *dōṣam* would thus be transferred to the stem, leaving the girl free to have sex with her partner without his incurring any malignant effects or risking death.

When the girl is grown up [euphemism for having begun to menstruate] if she puts the cloth in the bathroom or someplace, if a lizard comes and smells it or lays eggs on that cloth, then *dōṣam* will affect the girl. That girl will not get married. Whoever comes [as a potential groom] will be *cut* [the match will not be made successfully]. She will have a snake on her thigh; that is the sign of *nāga dōṣam*. If a girl gets married, when they have sex the snake goes and stands in front of them [i.e., the snake watches the couple having intercourse]. If one is a *talented person* he should put a banana stem on the bed and she should act as though she is having sex with it. The snake will think that the banana stem is the male [organ] and he will bite it – the *dōṣam* will go to that stem. The person should cut the banana tree and throw it into the sea and the *dōṣam* will go off.

I learned in other contexts about additional *dōṣam*-removal rituals where the banana stem stands in as a proxy. In one, which I witnessed on the banks of the Cauvery River at Trichy (Tiruchirappalli) in central Tamil Nadu on a searing summer day in *Āṭi* 2006, a young Goundar woman who had been diagnosed with *nāga dōṣam* performatively “married” a banana stem in an abbreviated ceremony that included tying a marriage necklace. In the rite’s culminating moment the stem was ritually cut, signifying the cancellation of the *dōṣam* that the marriage had transferred to her husband the banana

stem, and both the woman's marriage necklace and the banana stem were cast into the Cauvery's waters.⁴⁷

Since both the causes related to menstrual cloths and to snake marks are restricted to women, who constitute the preponderance of *dōṣam*'s sufferers, an analysis of these non-Brahmin articulations provides a window on the gendered nature of *nāga dōṣam*. As a category, *tīṭṭu* (impurity) tends to be inflected in distinctly gendered ways, especially in the context of menstruation and a woman's resulting state of pollution. This pollution also extends to other occasions when a woman might bleed, such as when she is post-partum. In both cases water is the antidote to this pollution, and a woman need only take a single purifying bath at the conclusion of her bleeding to be free of the *tīṭṭu*.

Tīṭṭu is not, however, always a gendered category. The *tīṭṭu* that arises from death affects both the deceased's male and female kin, and this pollution ebbs gradually, in stages, diminishing rather than disappearing. Some of the *tīṭṭu* of death recedes after cremation, and then it dwindles again after the thirteenth day ceremonies, those at the thirtieth day, until it is finally eliminated one year after the death. *Tīṭṭu* also

⁴⁷ Additionally, banana stem is commonly prepared as a vegetarian side dish in Tamil Nadu, and ladies I knew told me that eating it is beneficial for the bladder, uterus, prostate, and male reproductive organs.

came up repeatedly in my fieldwork in the context of tying *kāppu*, the protective turmeric-colored threads that are ritually tied around the wrists of vow-keepers and other festival participants. While descriptions of *tīttu* in relation to tying *kāppu* during *Āṭi* celebrations in honor of the goddess (discussed in Chapter Five) were not categorically gendered, because both men and women are required to be free from impurity (which can be generated by a variety of polluting activities including drinking alcohol and eating meat), *tīttu* was most often paired with contact with menstruating women or sexual contact with female fluids.

In the comments of one non-Brahmin ritual drummer we are able to see how understandings of *tīttu tuṇi* and the snakelike mark on a woman's thigh overlap and diverge, and also how although the woman is the initial cause and locus of *dōṣam*, its malignant effects can percolate out to her entire family.

When *nāga dōṣam* comes she will have a black mark on her thigh. You know how it comes? From her womb. When she gets *menses* she doesn't take proper care. She doesn't care about bathing and putting the cloth properly. When the lizard smells the *tīttu tuṇi* some bad things will happen; at the same time they will not have a good time [horoscopically]. So she gets the *dōṣam*. When there are five people in the family, the luck linked to one's zodiacal sign [*rāci palan*] will not be good for all five people. Even if one has a bad time the whole family will have a bad time. It affects others also.

I found that this idea, that *nāga dōṣam* can radiate out from one person to members of his or her immediate family, was the motivating factor for several individuals to seek ritual treatment for their malignant conditions. No one I spoke with expressed concern about the supposed ability of *nāga dōṣam* to migrate across as many as seven generations; people seemed much less distressed by the possibility of their *dōṣam* afflicting future generations than they did by the potential for bad effects to accrue to their parents, siblings, and children. One young man (who would only discuss his situation with my male fieldwork assistant for fear of the impropriety which might be construed from conversations with me, especially in the densely-populated colony where he lived and where it was well known that he was seeking a bride) admitted to deep skepticism about whether there even was such a thing as *nāga dōṣam*, as well as about whether he had it. He told my assistant that despite his uncertainties he had recently traveled to Kalahasti to perform a *nāga dōṣam pūjā* and cited the potentially contagious character of *dōṣam* as his impetus for visiting this powerful site for *dōṣam*-removals.

“The main reason I went is because they told me that because of *me* my family is affected. My *dōṣam* affects my family.”

A conversation that I had with several women from a range of non-Brahmin castes, who one day crowded into a small dwelling in a lower-class Chennai neighborhood to speak with me, demonstrates the breadth of perspectives about *nāga dōṣam* and also raises several related issues. They commented on the mutual imbrications of *nāga dōṣam* and dissatisfied spirits, as well as the causative relationship between failure to meet ritual obligations and *dōṣam*.

Female Devotee #1: Not everyone has *nāga dōṣam*, only a few will have it. If one's birth time is inauspicious, if someone dies in the house with unfulfilled desire, then *nāga dōṣam* and other *dōṣams* come. If we worship our lineage god continuously, we will never have a problem.

Female Devotee #2: *Nāga dōṣam* is there [points to her thigh] – it will be on their leg. If it is there the person will not get married. ...

Female Devotee #1: When the girl is grown up [menstruating] she should not keep the [menstrual] cloths here and there [gestures to indicate carelessness], and she should not come out all of a sudden [i.e. the menstruating girl should avoid contact with people during her period]. Then the shadow of the kite will fall. She should not see the kite [while the girl is menstruating the shadow of a kite flying overhead should not fall on her].

Discussions about the link between *nāga dōṣam* and the appearance of a snakelike black mark on a girl's upper thigh are also characterized by ambivalent attitudes toward female sexuality, in which sexual intercourse with a woman who has *dōṣam* may range from unproductive (in terms of producing healthy offspring), to unsatisfying, to potentially dangerous for her husband. These discussions also reflect the persistent notion that a wife may, as a result of flaws in her horoscope or by way of neglected or ineffectively performed rituals, either bring about or fail to prevent her husband's death. One astrologer's narrative about the aberrant sexual development and deviant sexual behaviors of a woman with such a snake mark reflect a number of these attitudes, and contained a noteworthy mythological allusion to the story of Pandu from the epic *Mahābhārata*.

ALA: What causes *nāga dōṣam*?

Astrologer: Your question is a chicken and egg question. On her right thigh the girl will have a climbing snake. If anyone marries that girl they will get a divorce, or the spouse will die. Even if she is wealthy and educated she won't get married – she will live and die as a virgin. There is connection between *nāga dōṣam* and attaining *age* [menarche]. One will normally *attain age* at thirteen or fourteen. If one remains until thirty without attaining age, what will it mean? They call it *nāga dōṣam* or *putra dōṣam* – the child will not be born; it will die as an *embryo,* or it will be born deformed. Even if the child is born it will die after a

few days. A woman's vagina is the anthill.⁴⁸ After marriage the husband should have sex with the wife; otherwise he won't get a child. Is she a Kunti or what? No, even Kunti had children! The egg won't be formed; the sperm count will be less. They won't have satisfaction in sex, or they will have abnormal cravings for sex. She won't be like a human being as far as sexual matters go. She will make him act like an animal. These are the results of *nāga dōṣam*.⁴⁹

Here the astrologer counts divorce and death, along with a host of reproductive, marital and sexual problems, among the negative outcomes of the *dōṣam* that is indicated by a girl having a snake mark on her right thigh. He also refers to Kunti, first wife to Pandu in the epic *Mahābhārata*, who had to resort to a charm bestowed by the sage Durvasas to beget children because her husband had been prevented by a curse from having progeny, much as those cursed with *nāga dōṣam* are doomed to failure in their attempts to produce viable offspring.

⁴⁸ This astrologer's remark explicitly connects the anthill to the vagina, in an equivalence that resonates with Smith and Narasimhachary's observation about worshipers pouring milk into the snake tunnels of anthills in bids for fertility. They argue that these infusions of milk into dark, hidden cavities mimic the sexual act of conception that snakes are so closely identified with (1991, 238).

⁴⁹ This charm granted Kunti the power to have a son by any god she chose to invoke. With Pandu's permission, she invoked Dharma, Vayu and Indra, and conceived by them Yudhisthira, Bhima and Arjuna, respectively. She was also the mother of Karna by the Sun deity, whom she invoked in her virginhood to test her charm (Apte 1957–1959, 582). Pandu's second wife, Madri, made use of the same charm and gave birth to Nakula and Sahadeva. Unmindful of his curse one day, Pandu embraced Madri and immediately fell immediately dead in her arms (Apte 1957–1959, 14-15).

“Caught” by Dōṣam and Demons

Closely related to the idea that a snake coming into contact with a woman’s menstrual cloths may lead to her experiencing – or being “caught” by *nāga dōṣam*, is the belief that *dōṣam* renders women susceptible to being “caught” by menacing spirits. The following etiology for *nāga dōṣam*, excerpted from an interview with a non-Brahmin priest serving a snake goddess and anthill temple in a wealthy Chennai neighborhood, reveals an additional gendered dimension of *nāga dōṣam*. This priest describes how girls may be “caught” by *nāga dōṣam* in a construction that alludes to how women may also be “caught” by menacing spirits, since *dōṣam* and demonic possession are both realities that females are significantly more susceptible to.

Priest: When the snake takes that *tīṭṭu tuṇi* then the girl gets *nāga dōṣam*. When the cobra takes the cloth and puts it in its hole it lays on it, like a nest. It lays on it, and that means *nāga dōṣam* will catch [*piṭṭi*] the girl.

ALA: So *nāga dōṣam* is not present from birth?

Priest: No. *Nāga dōṣam* comes from the [menstrual] cloth, from the cloth which girls wear. When the monthly period comes and the snake takes the cloth and lies on it, it [*nāga dōṣam*] will come.

This priest's use of the verb *pīṭi* (to catch) to describe how *nāga dōṣam* seizes an individual is significant because this verb surfaced throughout my fieldwork with reference to how demons (*pēy*) grab hold of and possess their victims. Vulnerability to demonic attack and malevolent possession was often linked with *nāga dōṣam* in my study and, like *dōṣam*, the majority of those who suffer from demonic possession are women. Specifically, being "caught" by a menacing spirit is considered one of the adverse effects that an individual who labors under Rahu's and/or Ketu's inauspicious influences might have to endure. These connections were made orally by ritual specialists and devotees, in Tamil-language print sources about *nāga dōṣam*, and in temple histories extolling certain sacred sites as powerful in removing the range of afflictions caused by *dōṣam*, which includes *pēy* possession.

Another striking similarity exists between *nāga dōṣam* and possession by demons and dissatisfied spirits: both of these gendered conditions have sexual dimensions and may lead to sexual problems (particularly when new wives refuse to engage in sexual intercourse with their husbands) and infertility. Because the overwhelming majority of these victims is female and the preponderance of demons is male, many of those with whom I discussed malevolent possession remarked on the

potentially sexual valences of these possession relationships. In the context of dialogues between ritual musicians and the possessing spirit during exorcism rituals designed to chase the demon and make it “run” away, *pēys* frequently divulge that their untimely deaths were due to suicides committed in the anguish of “love failure,” such as unrequited love or a rejected marriage proposal. Many reveal that they caught hold of girls who reminded them of the girls they were attracted to or wished to wed, and cite the girl’s appealing qualities like her long, oiled braid and the fragrant flowers she wore in her hair. In their interrogations of the *pēy*, the ritual drummers are bold in their suggestions of sexual design, and both their direct accusations and more coy insinuations elicit titillated laughter from the crowds who assemble at particular Tamil temples to witness these rituals. In her monograph on Tamil exorcism rites, Nabokov makes similar observations, noting that *pēys* are motivated by love (*aṇṇu*) and lust (*ācai* or *kāta*) (2000, 72). Relying on Wendy Doniger’s maxim that, “The origin of evil is inextricably associated with the appearance of sexual desire,” however, Nabokov further extends her portrayal of these lustful possessing spirits to include an evil disposition, a characterization that found no place in the descriptions of *pēys* that I heard. Rather, I encountered striking empathy for *pēys*, who were often sympathetically depicted as

victims whose unfavorable life circumstances and unfulfilled desires motivated them to catch hold of human beings.

Many male *pēys* prevent their female victims from engaging in normal sexual relationships with their husbands. The possessing spirit may also be responsible for the girl's barrenness or may not permit her to carry a pregnancy to term, outcomes that are also closely associated with *nāga dōṣam*. One ritual drummer told me, "The girl may say, 'Don't come near me. Don't touch me. I don't like it,' and the husband will ask, 'Shouldn't you have told me this before marriage?' But she will only tell him this after marriage, and sometimes even after she is 'carrying' [pregnant]. But the *pēy* won't let that *embryo* grow. The evil spirit won't let that *embryo* grow, and she will have an *abortion* [miscarriage] and the *pēy* won't let her husband near her."

In addition to blocking conception and causing miscarriages, the ritual musicians hinted that *pēys* may seek to vicariously satisfy their unfulfilled sexual desires through the bodies they possess. Nabokov draws similar conclusions, and suggests that the culminating moment of possession occurs when a demon "enters" its victim's body through a lock of hair and implies that this act is equivalent to sexual penetration (2000,

74).⁵⁰ My research has shown that this sexual element is so pervasive that even in the rare cases when a female *pēy* possesses a female victim, a sexual etiology may be pursued by the drummers as they question the *pēy*. In the case of a young woman who was possessed by a paternal aunt who had burned herself to death in response to her husband's cruelty, the lead drummer focused on the fact that the possessing aunt was inhibiting the girl's normal sexual relations with her new husband. "You had three children, but yet you make this girl have none," the drummer challenged. "Do you want to have sex with her husband instead?" "No, no, not like that!" "If that is the truth, say you are going out from her. Say you will go out from this girl!" he thundered.

In his detailed study of Sinhalese exorcisms from nearby Sri Lanka, Bruce Kapferer provides a detailed discussion of women's tendency to be more heavily involved in possession and exorcism, to be the subjects of rites of healing, and to be particularly vulnerable to demonic attack (1991, 92-110). Karin Kapadia, too, notes that

⁵⁰ Howard Eilberg-Schwartz and Doniger would not be surprised by the pervasive linking of sex with demons who reside on locks of hair; in their Introduction to *Off with Her Head! The Denial of Women's Identity in Myth, Religion, and Culture* they argue that the symbol of hair is tied up with sexuality because they call on the same bank of associations, all of which are thoroughly gendered: generativity, life, vitality, power, and desire (1995, 8).

“women are more disproportionately affected by malign (*pēy*) possession” (2000, 182).⁵¹

This marked gender imbalance also prompted several ritual specialists and devotees to hypothesize more widely about the differences in male and female nature and bodily constitutions. One common local analysis of the female propensity toward *pēy* possession cited the fact that women menstruate, and explained that the odor of menstrual blood is known to attract demons. Others suggested another olfactory catalyst for female possession, noting that the fragrant jasmine flowers that women wear in their hair also lure lustful demons.

In addition to these shared etiologies for *nāga dōṣam* and malevolent possession, the ritual repertoires for these two phenomena, which may be attributed to unfavorable planetary arrangements, also partially overlap. In particular, some of the specific temples and sacred sites associated with *dōṣam*-removals also boast reputations as powerful sites for diagnosing spirit possession and exorcizing demons.

⁵¹ Kapadia makes her argument about women’s tendency toward *pēy* possession, which my research clearly confirms, in tandem with the contentions that it was very unusual for women to become possessed at all, as well as rare for them to be present in the crowd watching rituals and possession (2000, 182). These latter assertions are, as succeeding chapters of this dissertation will amply demonstrate, not in line with my own observations of female possession, either in terms of their embodiment of particular deities in possession events or of their spectator roles and other forms of participation in public possession culture.

Mel Malaiyanur is one such example of a sacred site where a variety of removals, expulsions, and other remedial rituals are performed. This temple, which was discussed in the previous chapter, is dedicated to the goddess Ankalamman who is worshiped in two forms in the sanctum sanctorum: as an anthropomorphic, stone image and as an enormous anthill whose earth is distributed as *prasādam*. The popularity of this class of ritual practices at Ankalamman's temple is directly linked to the temple's founding myth, which highlights how it was only at Malaiyanur, and only through the interventions of the goddess, that Shiva was able to finally eliminate the *brahma-hatyā dōṣam* (the sin of killing a Brahmin) that accrued to him when he cut off one of Brahma's heads.

New banners which were strung up on the temple's premises in time for the ritually important new moon day in *Āṇi* [June-July] 2007 included *dōṣam*, along with all manner of black magic and sorcery, possessing and afflicting evil spirits, devils, demons, and ghosts, and family/marital problems as issues that could be resolved if the devotee merely concentrated on the goddess while impaling a lemon on one of the spikes of her trident, which stands in the cremation ground adjacent to the temple. The temple's *sthala purāṇam* also describes the site as uniquely efficacious in removing *dōṣam*, spells, evil spirits, bad luck, disease, and unfavorable planetary influences, and mentions

circling rites and smashing specific vegetables and fruits as components of appropriate expiatory rituals. Much like the repertoire of ritual therapies for *nāga dōṣam* that will be discussed in the next chapter, the ritual offerings at and popularity of this Tamil goddess temple are also expanding and growing in response to the afflictions of this contemporary moment.

Conclusions

I have discussed the five causes of *nāga dōṣam*, causes that are significantly shaped by the cross-cutting influences of caste and gender. According to indigenous formulations, the main causes of *nāga dōṣam* are astrological reasons, harms perpetrated against snakes, sins from previous lives, reasons associated with a snakelike mark on a woman's thigh, and a woman's carelessness with her menstrual cloths. Many of these etiologies and ideologies are embedded in narratives about change and the challenges posed by shifting contexts, and I argue that the repertoire of causes for and understandings of *nāga dōṣam* has expended in relationship to indigenous understandings of modern times and the uncertainties that they engender. Some of the symptoms of these modern times that are understood to lead to *dōṣam*

include selfishness, sin, and carelessness, as well as disrespect for one's elders, the effects of urbanization, and failure to meet one's ritual obligations.

In addition to analyzing the multiplicity that characterizes these causes and their local exegeses, I argue that the expanding repertoire of causes for and understandings of *nāga dōṣam* has enlarged the boundaries of what "counts" as this malignant condition in contemporary Tamil Nadu. The next chapter focuses on the expanding spectrum of ritual therapies that are performed to remove or diminish *nāga dōṣam*, and in it I make the corollary argument that the repertoire of remedial rituals for this malignant condition is in a similar process of expansion and is being crafted and recontextualized in response to the anxieties inspired by modern, changing Tamil social contexts. Like the range of complementary causes for *dōṣam* presented in this chapter, the repertoire of ritual treatments that I concentrate on next also demonstrates multiplicity, a striking tendency toward innovation, and is indigenously marked as "new."

CHAPTER THREE

RITUAL THERAPIES FOR *NĀGA DŌṢAM*: REMEDIES, SOLUTIONS, AND REMOVALS

Question: I am thirty-two years old. We have been searching for a bride for the last four years, but none of the matches become fixed. When will I get married? How will my future be? (S. Saravannan)

Answer: Your marriage is being delayed due to the presence of *nāga dōṣam* in your horoscope. Go to Kalahasti and perform a *sarpa dōṣam pūjā*. Then find a suitable bride. Chandra [the Moon] is ruling over your horoscope until September 2, 2007 so if you do this *sarpa dōṣam pūjā* quickly you can get married within this period. Good luck! (Tina Mani, September 8, 2006)

Question: My father was earning his income by selling sweets from a pushcart. My brother and I were educated using the income he got from that business. Suddenly, two years ago he became addicted to drinking and could not run his business. Now our family is deteriorating and I am staying in my uncle's home. Will I get a government job or will my brother and I have to work in the [garment] industry in Tirupur? According to our horoscopes the astrologer says that we are suffering because of the curse of our forefathers. What is the *parikāram* for this? When will our family do well? (M. Kokila and M. Gangadaran, Tirupur)

Answer: Don't lose heart. A good [horoscopic] period started for you last May. You have a special arrangement in your horoscope. Your brother has *sarpa dōṣam*, so on Fridays during the month of *Āṣī* you must go to the goddess temple and pour milk into the anthill. This offering will reduce his *sarpa dōṣam*. Because Rahu is ruling over him, in this period Rahu will also give adverse effects. Starting in *Cittirai* [April – May] of next

year your standard of life will improve. Both of you will have bright futures. (*Tina Mani*, July 29, 2005)

Ritual Remedies for *Nāga Dōṣam*

These submissions to a write-in astrology advice column seek specialist counsel about the ritual steps to undertake to counteract the particular inauspicious planetary configurations known to pose obstacles to marriage and impede financial success.

These letters and their responses highlight some of the potential causes for *dōṣam* that were discussed in the previous chapter (namely, unfavorable planetary arrangements and the curse of ancestors), and provide a sampling of its negative effects, including later marriage, financial ruin, and family difficulties. Importantly, they also suggest something of the range of ritual therapies that might be employed to treat *nāga dōṣam*; the astrologer recommends performing *pūjās* at Kalahasti, worshiping at a goddess temple, and offering milk at an anthill as ritual measures to counteract *dōṣam*, ritual responses that will be explored in this chapter. These are only a few of the therapies that figure in the repertoire of *dōṣam*-removal rituals in contemporary Tamil Nadu, a spectrum of practices and performances that is currently expanding in response to the

increasing prevalence of this uniquely modern problem and the challenges of modern social life.

This chapter focuses on *nāga dōṣam*'s ritual repertoire and argues that the ritual responses to the modern problems of late marriage and infertility are located at the local (and to a limited degree the regional) level. It is in local temple contexts -- where predominantly female devotees participate in reciprocal, ongoing relationships with goddesses who take responsibility for the protection of particular neighborhoods -- that these rituals are being creatively negotiated and performed. I argue that, similar to the expanded repertoire of causes for *dōṣam* treated in the previous chapter, these ritual practices are becoming more numerous and are being reframed in response to indigenous conceptions about modern times and their attendant challenges. I describe how Tamils participate in what I identify as a self-conscious identification of these local and regional temples as ritually powerful sites for performing new and recontextualized rituals to relieve *dōṣam*. Indeed, I argue that the new popularity of and attention focused on these sites, networks, and remedial rituals are themselves recent innovations.

In the *nāga dōṣam* tradition once the disruptive condition is identified and diagnosed, the focus shifts to the repertoire of ritual therapies considered efficacious for

treating it. I discovered that while astrologers and ritual specialists had the most to say about the underlying causes of *nāga dōṣam*, sufferers and their families were most interested in discussing the range of possible ritual solutions for this unfavorable condition. Significant disagreement exists, however, about whether *nāga dōṣam* can ultimately be “cured,” or whether this condition can only be mitigated and its effects diminished. Additionally, fate was often discussed as a complicating factor in the ritual relief of *nāga dōṣam*, and some ritual specialists asserted that much as one’s *nāga dōṣam* can never be completely eliminated, one’s fate cannot be “rewritten.”

Over the course of my research a core set of *nāga dōṣam*’s remedial rituals emerged, although an important feature of this set is that it is neither closed nor absolutely fixed. Rather, this repertoire exhibits significant innovation, flexibility, and a tendency to borrow from other ritual contexts, as well as an open-ended character that suggests that additional remedial rites may be integrated and incorporated over time. Much as I did in identifying the main causes for *nāga dōṣam*, I followed indigenous frameworks as I attempted to categorize the main ritual therapies for *dōṣam*. I paired the virtual menu of efficacious rituals offered by ritual specialists and astrologers with the enumerations of remedial measures in Tamil-language booklets on *dōṣam*, and then

used these indigenous models to guide me as I sifted through dozens of less schematized narratives focused on *dōṣam*-removal rituals. It is important to point out that these categories are neither water-tight nor discrete; they regularly overlap and blend into one another, and devotees often combine and amend them in unique ritual permutations.

Performed in response to the hallmark symptoms of *nāga dōṣam*, the particularly modern problems of late marriage and infertility, this core set of remedial rituals includes worshipping at an anthill or an established snake stone, especially by offering milk. Second, it encompasses a range of rituals that are classified as pacifying, atonement rites (*śānti*). This category of ritual therapies (which is sometimes conflated with removals, or *nivartti* rites) includes practices as simple as offering a cradle or tying a turmeric-rubbed string at a sacred tree, and as complex as expulsion rites to eject malevolent possessing spirits. Further, it includes the installation and enlivening (*pratiṣṭhā*) of a snake stone, and offering a silver (or gold) *nāga* image to a Brahmin as a ritual gift. The final two categories of ritual therapies that comprise this set are making offerings to Rahu and/or Ketu, especially at their respective abodes at Thirunageshwaram and Keezhapperumpallam, and worship at Kalahasti and

Rameshwaram, the regionally important sacred sites linked to the relief of *nāga dōṣam*.

Collectively, these remedial measures constitute an expanding ritual repertoire that encompasses personal vows and individual worship, public ritual performances led by priests, and pilgrimages to particular temples. The core set of rituals laid out here is no more exhaustive or complete than it is internally homogenous; each performance demonstrates variation and innovation just as each ritual is inflected differently in various class and caste contexts. The features of this repertoire, as well as elisions in and elaborations on it, will become clearer below, where I describe and analyze particular examples of these ritual performances, and it is altogether possible that additional remedial rituals will be incorporated into the ritual repertoire over time.

Remedial rituals are usually prescribed by an astrologer after he⁵² diagnoses *dōṣam* in an individual's horoscope, though sometimes ritual solutions (*parikārams*) also are recommended by temple priests and other ritual specialists. In some cases individuals enter into ongoing relationships with their astrologers or priests, whom they then visit for periodic assessments during their cycle of remedial rituals to determine whether the prescribed worship might need adjustment or refinement. In most

⁵² I employ the masculine pronoun deliberately, as all of the astrologers I encountered, interviewed, and know of in India are male.

instances, however, the devotee will assume that following the originally prescribed course of rituals is sufficient and that her *dōṣam* will have been removed or mitigated as a result of performing them. He or she will seek further consultation with the astrologer or priest only if it becomes clear that the *dōṣam* persists, such as in situations where potential marriage alliances continue to collapse, or repeated attempts to conceive prove unsuccessful.

Typically, ritual prescriptions begin with relatively simple and individualized worship, like offering milk at an anthill for a fixed period of time, and then proceed to more complex, and thus expensive, rituals, such as installing a *nāga* image under a sacred tree at a temple.⁵³ Many of these comparatively uncomplicated ritual therapies do not depend on the assistance of a ritual specialist, although priestly services are necessary for more intricate rites or those that require the recitation of mantras and/or some degree of textual proficiency. Generally speaking, less involved ritual therapies for *dōṣam* may be performed at any nearby temple where there is a sacred tree, a grouping of snake stones, a shrine for the nine planets, or an anthill. If these ritual therapies do not yield results, or an astrologer recommends a more serious level of treatment, then

⁵³ For a focused discussion of sacred trees in Tamil Nadu see Amirthalingam (1998; 1999).

the sufferer may be required to travel some distance to a temple with a powerful reputation for counteracting varieties of *dōṣam*, or retain a ritual specialist for a ritual performance dedicated to the removal of this horoscopic flaw.⁵⁴

These rituals are not, however, always pursued in such a cumulative manner; variables as multifarious as the approach of an inauspicious Tamil month or a much-awaited child's visit from abroad can hasten and intensify ritual action in the hope of securing the desired outcome in a timely manner. These variations notwithstanding, in the analysis that follows I proceed from less demanding ritual treatments to more involved undertakings, and from those that are performed locally to those which require travel to regionally important temples. I adopt a performance-based approach in my exploration of the therapies which comprise this repertoire and, taking a specific ritual performance as my starting point, offer reflections on its significance, discuss perceptions about its efficacy, and consider whether it seems to mirror or diverge from

⁵⁴ Some priests reported that performing *śānti* rites and other *dōṣam*-removals entails their assuming some measure of the *dōṣam*'s malefic effects, a scenario that they described as personally dangerous and therefore deserving of significant compensation. One ritual specialist offered this interpretation, "It is like I am hired to evict Rahu from his position. He is enjoying it there, causing so much trouble. Won't he exact some revenge against me, since I am the one who throws him from this place?" Knipe also mentions a class of ritualists who receive ritual gifts (*dānas*) laden with the malevolent effects of inauspicious planets (2003, 67). For a broader discussion of the transfer of inauspiciousness in ritual prestations see Raheja 1988.

other iterations of that same treatment performed in other contexts. Because these remedial rituals are in many cases recontextualizations of older, more traditional rites that have been repurposed in response to the anxieties engendered by the perceived changes wrought by modern times, it is likely that the *nāga dōṣam* ritual repertoire will continue to innovate and expand beyond the categories I outline here.

Can *Nāga Dōṣam* Ever Be “Cured?”

Before I discuss the specific categories of ritual performances that constitute the repertoire of therapies for *nāga dōṣam*, the indigenous terms for these remedial rituals and local analyses about whether they can ultimately “cure” *dōṣam* deserve a special note. The Tamil word *nivartti* (Skt. *nivāraṇa*) means “relief, redress, atonement, remedy” (Cre-A 1992, 629), and is synonymous with *parikāram*, a “solution to a problem” (685). *Parikāram* can also mean “destruction, abolition, cancelling, [and] removal” (*Tamil Lexicon* 1982, 2510). Because the measures to counteract *dōṣam* are commonly referred to by the terms *nivartti* and *parikāram*, it follows that a *parikāram* should be expected to unambiguously cancel *dōṣam* and a *nivartti* will incontrovertibly remove

dōṣam. The implication, then, is that *dōṣam* is a finite condition which can be rectified, destroyed, or “finished off” by performing a *parikāram* or combination of *parikārams*.

However, in practice, there is significant disagreement about whether *nāga dōṣam* can be definitively eliminated or whether the best an afflicted individual can hope for is for the condition to be mitigated or suppressed. A sampling of perspectives from my interviews illustrates the diversity of opinion I encountered. One astrologer asserted, “Pouring milk and putting egg and installing a snake stone – all of these *parikāram* – they are only for our personal satisfaction, to make our minds peaceful, but they do not truly eliminate *dōṣam*.” In his view, the performance of these remedial rituals offers psychological benefits, even if they cannot be expected to expunge *dōṣam* from an individual’s horoscope. This astrologer’s comments seem especially significant in light of the fact that he derives a significant portion of his income from consultations with *nāga dōṣam* sufferers, whom he regularly advises to do the very same *parikārams* that he described as unable to “truly eliminate *dōṣam*.”

These remarks stand in contrast to those of another astrologer, who stated (in English), “*Dōṣam* will be totally removed by doing the correct *parikāram*; it will totally go off.” He went on to explain that with proper astrological calculations a definitive

diagnosis could be reached and the appropriate expiatory rites could be positively determined. This astrologer assured me that if these rites were performed with sincerity and ritual precision the individual could expect a “total” cessation of suffering.

Most individuals with whom I spoke, however, took something akin to a middle path between these contentions and offered a more complex view of the extent to which *dōṣam* could be removed or suppressed, emphasizing that a number of ritual interventions over a long period of time might be necessary before results would be perceptible, even if an unmitigated “cure” is not ultimately possible. One Brahmin priest told me:

Sarpa [snake] *dōṣam* is not something that will just go off. When one does *many* pacifying rites for snakes [*sarpa śānti*] over the course of a lifetime it will be cleared. They should do lots of *pūjās* for snakes. They should make an image [of a *nāga*] out of stone. They have to do many, many, many *pūjās* for that image. Only then the *sarpa dōṣam* will be cleared.”

Another priest proposed this interpretation: “It is like how a doctor says you have to take medicines for twenty days to get cured – the *dōṣam* in one’s horoscope can be removed only by worshipping God over time. It is not for one or two days, but for many days one must do it.” Indeed, I was presented with a variety of analogies explaining the effects of performing *parikārams* on one’s *nāga dōṣam*, including several which

articulated the relationship between ritual and blemish in terms of banking categories.

One astrologer explained that an individual's *dōṣam* balance decreases or is "drawn down" through the repeated performance of *parikārams*, much as the balance in a debit account is affected by withdrawals. Similarly, a Brahmin priest at a temple whose crowds are largely comprised of sufferers who flock there for *dōṣam*-removal rituals, described the *pāva kaṇakku*, or "sin account," that one who is afflicted with *dōṣam* has to accept deposits of merits earned through *parikārams* to offset these sins.

The narratives of those who are afflicted by *dōṣam* reveal a similar range of perspectives and considerable ambivalence about the possibility of completely eliminating this malignant condition and neutralizing its negative outcomes. A man in his early thirties from the Mudaliyar caste undertook a cycle of *dōṣam*-removal rituals at the behest of his astrologer, but afterwards expressed doubt about whether performing the rites had led to any discernible improvement in his fortunes. He felt that his *dōṣam* was holding him back both from a marriage alliance and from success in his work as a machinist.

The astrologer said that with *nāga dōṣam* I will not get married and that I will not earn well in my job. He said that if I would go and do these *pūjās* my problems would be *somewhat* resolved, but I don't feel much change. They have seen a

girl for me [his family has met with a potential bride] but unless the marriage necklace is tied, I won't have faith that my *dōṣam* is rectified. The same way with my work: all of the boys I studied with have their own businesses now, but not me. I went to the astrologer because I wanted to have my own business. But even after spending money for these *pūjās* I don't see any result.

The family of a young woman whose horoscope did not unambiguously support a diagnosis of *nāga dōṣam*, but for whom marriage proposals repeatedly failed to materialize from among the numerous prospective grooms who met her, articulated a host of opinions about *nāga dōṣam parikārams*. Her uncle believed that if she carried out the prescribed rituals with sincerity and faith then the young woman was sure to escape any additional negative repercussions from her *dōṣam*. His wife, however, felt that it was "useless" to continue the increasingly costly course of *parikārams* with no evidence that it was helping, and confided her suspicion that they were being "cheated" by the astrologer. The girl's mother seemed resigned to finishing out the cycle of remedial rituals, but maintained that if it is her daughter's fate to suffer then the rites would most likely have little or no effect. Uncertainty about the degree to which ritual therapies may "cure" *dōṣam* and remove its adverse effects is evident in the narratives of many ritual specialists and devotees, demonstrating the multiplicity of interpretations that characterizes this evolving tradition in contemporary Tamil Nadu.

Fate and Head-Writing

An additional complicating factor that cropped up in a number of interviews where *dōṣam* was discussed in depth was the role of fate (*vīti*). While a hand-lettered Tamil signboard at one snake goddess temple declared, “You can defeat fate with your intelligence. If you have the auspicious sight [*darśan*] of the goddess of this sacred place you can defeat fate without any difficulty. If you do certain *parikārams* in this sacred place you can pacify your *dōṣam* and see tangible results right before your very eyes,” many of the oral narratives I recorded did not convey a similar confidence.

Interestingly, even the astrologers and priests who rely on *dōṣam*-removal rites (*dōṣa-parikārams*) to earn their living were not unequivocal about the efficacy of these rituals. Although these ritual specialists discoursed eloquently and at length about the likely causes of astrological malignancies and the most efficacious remedial actions for them, and performed these intricate rituals with seriousness and attention to detail, many of them also maintained that ultimately nothing can change one’s fate. As one priest put it, “*Sarpa dōṣam* is in one’s horoscope, maybe due to the previous birth’s actions. It depends on the horoscope. If it is fate then we cannot do anything about it.” His

assessment seems particularly ironic because although he alleges that fate ultimately trumps ritual action and retains the final word, this priest serves at the famous Sri Kalahasti temple in Andhra Pradesh, arguably the most powerful *dōṣam*-removal site, and daily leads hundreds of devotees through *dōṣa-parikāraṃs* on his assigned shifts.

Many of those with whom I spoke elaborated on the complex interactions between fate and ritual action, seeming to suggest that fate should not be understood as completely inexorable and that it might yield, if only slightly, in the face of merit accrued through the performance of atonement rites. One Brahmin priest, who earns his income as a freelance ritual specialist rather than by serving at any temple, told me that *pūjās* can reduce, but not remove, the effects of *dōṣam*. “If our fate is to fall down into a big ravine or valley and we do all the *pūjās* with faith, then we may only fall into a gully. But we cannot avoid it entirely. When a child is born on the earth, God makes a list of all that will happen to that child. In it all that will happen will be set forth. If good things or bad things will happen, it is all in the list.”⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Knipe reports that one of his research consultants offered a similar example concerning the effects of Shani (Saturn) *dōṣam*, “‘Suppose,’ he suggested, ‘Śani intends *to do harm* to me. I cross the street and am hit by a speeding lorry. I would be killed instantly if I paid no attention to Śani. But because I recite his names, wear his gemstone ring, regularly give him sesame and other things he likes, I am injured but not killed as my *doṣa*’” (1995, 228, emphasis in original).

Others discussed *talai eġutu*, the “head-writing” that is thought to be inscribed on an infant’s forehead at birth and which contains his or her destiny, as fixed and unalterable. A male devotee described head-writing, which he said is etched by the creator god Brahma,⁵⁶ this way:

Head-writing means fate. That is the belief that when you were created in this world by God, the entire story of your life, what is to happen, is already written and cannot be changed. That’s what head-writing is. It is the belief that all is predetermined, that you were born in such and such a place, on such and such a day, with a certain horoscope. Your head-writing shows how many births you will have and what will happen in each of them.

One astrologer, who spoke to me about these matters in English, posed rhetorical questions about the efficacy of ritual action in view of an individual’s already-written fate, and ultimately concluded that while *pūjā* may reduce the distress one is

Knipe includes this example in a section focused on the following maxim, “Suffering occasioned by Śani cannot be avoided, but it can be reduced by a knowledge of proper remedial actions and their systematic performance” (227). Knipe notes that Obeyesekere’s findings on *grahadoṣa* (planet *dōṣa*) from Sri Lanka confirm that negative effects may be minimized or warded off, but not definitively cured (227, citing Obeyesekere 1984, 46).

⁵⁶ Interestingly, Narayan discusses destiny as written on a person’s head at birth by a female entity, Vidhi Mata, or Mother Fate (1997, 133).

fated to endure, removal rituals cannot fully resolve the negative consequences of karma and destiny.⁵⁷

That is why, even if you do all the *nāga dōṣam nivartti*, etc., you may not be able to get out of it. And as far as the *parikāram* is concerned, there is a big question: will all the sins be over? That is the big question. What is the answer? People believe that if you do the *parikāram* it is fully over. It is not; that is impossible. It is only suppressed. See, every action of yours for every second of your life is governed by fate. So if you are supposed to suffer then that means you have to suffer. If you are supposed to prosper, even if you don't want to, you'll prosper. If that is the case, that your *talaiviti* [lit. head-fate] determines everything, then why should you do this *pūjā*? If you won't get the *dōṣam* removed, then why the hell do the *pūjā*? It is only for purification of the soul. While you are doing the *pūjā* the bad effect will be reduced as much as possible. ... But the effect can only be decreased; it cannot be erased.”

These perspectives reveal both the ambiguity characterizing and the anxiety surrounding proper ritual procedures for *nāga dōṣam*, as well as the uncertainty that many devotees and ritual specialists evidence about what might be reasonable to expect in terms of ritual results. Keeping these varied viewpoints on the issue of whether *nāga dōṣam* can ever truly be “cured” in mind, we now shift our attention to the repertoire of ritual therapies that are performed to relieve *nāga dōṣam*.

⁵⁷ Both Susan S. Wadley (1983) and Kirin Narayan (1997) raise similar issues about how vows may exercise cross-cutting effects on fate and karma.

Worshipping Snake Stones and Anthills

The ubiquitous and increasingly popular worship of snake stones (*nāga cilai* or *nāgakkaḷ*) in contemporary Tamil Nadu is often the ritual of first resort in countering *nāga dōṣam*. Most snake images are installed under sacred trees (especially neem, peepal, and banyan trees)⁵⁸ in the open-air courtyards of temples and receive their worship in these leafy environs, although snake stones are also located at the sides of roads, near anthills, and at subsidiary shrines (*caṇṇiṭi*) on temple premises. They can be found in the grandest of Tamil temples, as they are in significant numbers under the entwined neem and peepal trees that occupy the center of a stone plaza directly beneath one of the soaring temple towers of Madurai's Meenakshi Sundareswarar temple, and at the humblest of wayside shrines, as a handful of them are in a lane just steps from my old apartment in the vibrant and densely religious Mylapore neighborhood in Chennai. No matter in which of these disparate settings snake stones are found, ritual interaction with and offerings made to them are fairly standard. In an effort to illustrate what might be considered a typical set of ritual encounters with established snake stones, I will sketch

⁵⁸ Neem, Ta. *vēmpa-maram*, botanical name *Azadirachta indica*; peepal, Ta. *araca-maram*, botanical name *Ficus religiosa*; banyan, Ta. *āla-maram*, botanical name *Ficus bengalensis*.

a portrait of their worship at Mundakakkanni Amman temple (hereafter MK Amman), the popular Mylapore goddess temple that I introduced in Chapter One and which served as my primary research site, and where I witnessed hundreds of women worshipping snake stones over the course of my fieldwork.

Fridays are especially busy at MK Amman, particularly so in the early mornings, when the area surrounding the installation of snake stones is so packed with worshipers that it is nearly impossible to find unoccupied spots to arrange the offerings that women carry in baskets to the temple. Many women come to MK Amman expressly to worship the grouping of snake stones under the peepal tree, and most of those with whom I spoke contended that they were unbothered about whether they had more than cursory *darśan* of the *svayambhū* (self-manifest) goddess image in the inner sanctum. These women believed that since *uyir* (life force) has been kindled in the snake stones, they are equivalent to the *ammaṅ* in the sanctum. As was described in Chapter One, the snake stones and the *svayambhū* stone image in the sanctum sanctorum are not the only forms the goddess takes at MK Amman; she also manifests as an anthill (*purru*), which is understood to be secreted in the roots of the disintegrating banyan tree at the rear of the temple's woven thatch enclosure.

Although female devotees told me that they regarded the goddess in the sanctum to be identical to the snake stones in terms of their *śakti* (feminine power), they articulated one difference which distinguished these forms from one another. These worshipers described the stone *nāgāttammaṇ* under the tree as significantly more accessible to them than the goddess's *svayambhū* image; at the open-air shrine they have direct physical access to the *nāga* images and can perform their rituals with their own hands, making and redistributing their offerings themselves. Here, no ritual specialist acts as an intermediary between the stone snake goddesses and the women, in contrast to the phalanx of the male priests, bare-chested and clad in red sarongs, officiating in the sanctum. At the snake stone installation, women stretch and bend, embodying both devotion and ritual desire as they artfully fashion oil lamps from inside-out lemons, draw tiny ritual diagrams, arrange bananas, and decorate the *nāga* images with redolent jasmine garlands, vermilion and turmeric powders, and colorful flower blossoms.

The most prominent offering is the milk that so many women bring to bathe and feed the images with, as snake goddesses – whether they are in sculpted stone form, the anthropomorphic form of a goddess image, the natural form of an anthill, or the

divine reptilian form believed to reside within anthills – are believed to prefer milk offerings. Milk is used to ritually bathe (*abhiṣekam*) their stone forms, and is also perceived to nourish the snake goddesses. The milk itself is understood as an offering while the act of pouring it, carefully, evenly, and in a visually satisfying manner, is considered a performance of devotion. As one astrologer informed me, “The main remedy for *nāga dōṣam* is to buy milk [*pāl*], go to the temple, and perform *pāl abhiṣekam* [ritual bathing with milk]. If we have an illness then we take *tablets,* but if we have *dōṣam* then we do *pāl abhiṣekam*.” A sign that used to hang near one of the sacred trees at MK Amman enjoined devotees to offer fresh cow’s milk exclusively, but the sign fell down in 2005 and has not been replaced, and most worshipers I observed brought “packet milk,” plastic sachets of pasteurized milk that are commercially available in almost any shop, including the rickety wooden ones that flank the temple’s entrance.

The signboard propped about halfway between the grouping of snake stones and the sanctum sanctorum at MK Amman briefs devotees about the *parikāram* (ritual solutions) that can be performed at this temple. One paragraph addresses problems faced particularly by women:

The best method to get a solution is to pour milk on Tuesdays and Fridays over the snake stones that are here under the tree. If the horoscope shows Rahu-Ketu *dōṣam*, Mars *dōṣam*, or *kāla sarpa dōṣam*, or if the horoscope has Rahu, Ketu, or Mars reigning, then to remove [*nivartti*] the *dōṣam* those who suffer from these conditions should – particularly during *rāhu kālam* [the ninety minute period of each day rendered inauspicious due to Rahu’s influence] on Tuesdays [3:00 – 4:30 P.M.] or Fridays [10:30 A.M. – noon] – light lemon lamps for the goddess and perform worship with offerings of red or yellow cloth.

Whether attributable to the sign’s instructions, the recent media attention this temple has attracted in religious and news magazines, or the tales of cures, miracles, marriages, and pregnancies that circulate among the neighborhood’s women, the ritual practices centered on the snake stones here are unmistakably growing in popularity. On ritually auspicious occasions and on ordinary Fridays such enormous quantities of milk are poured over the snake stones that walking on the temple’s milk-slicked stone floors is a treacherous exercise, guaranteed to minimally result in pant bottoms and sari hems soaked in milk, if not a near-fall, and the entire grouping of images must be hosed down with water and drained when the temple closes at lunchtime.

A closely allied, and equally common, manner of honoring snake goddesses is worship at, and of, anthills. As was discussed in detail in the first chapter, the anthill is variously understood as a *svayambhū* manifestation of the goddess, a residence for

snakes, and a temple that the divine snake inhabits. As such, it is worshiped in similar ways that the stone snake images are worshiped: oil lamps are lit in front of it, it is anointed with turmeric and vermilion powders, and flower garlands are laid across its rounded profile. As with the snake stones, milk is the primary offering at anthills, but with one significant difference: since pouring liquids would cause damage to its structure and over time would cause it to crumble, this form of the goddess is not ritually bathed in milk in the same way that the stone images are. Instead, many devotees pour their milk offerings into little bowls fashioned from halved coconut shells and set these bowls into the loose soil at the anthill's base. In these cases, the snakes who reside in the anthill's recesses are believed to venture out and drink the offered milk directly from these bowls. Other devotees do pour milk over portions of the anthill or symbolically dribble or sprinkle some milk over it; one female worshiper went to great lengths to get permission from officials at her local snake goddess temple to pour her milk offerings directly on the anthill because her priest had advised that her petitionary prayer (*pirārttanaī*) would be ineffectual unless she managed to do so.

In addition to milk, offering eggs at anthills is common, and, in most cases, indexed to caste. Worshipers usually remove the rounded tip of the eggshell to facilitate

the snake's ability to eat it, and then prop the egg at the foot of the anthill or at one of its open tunnels. As eggs are non-vegetarian items, Brahmins do not typically offer them, and some Brahmins discussed their discomfort with carrying out their own worship at a site where so many egg offerings are routinely displayed. Other Brahmins, however, took the attitude that eggs are indeed appropriate offerings for snake goddesses, since it is well-attested that these divine reptiles feed on them, but that eggs would not be suitable items for vegetarian Brahmins to offer. Eggs seem to be more accessible to devotees from disparate class backgrounds than is milk; because eggs are relatively more affordable,⁵⁹ middle-class devotees would often bring a couple of eggs to supplement their milk offerings, whereas poorer devotees would arrive with just a single egg in hand and offer it at one of the anthill's open passages.

Selvi, a twenty-five-year-old woman who had been diagnosed with an acute case of *nāga dōṣam* by her family astrologer, was advised to visit any temple with an anthill and perform worship there in an effort to decrease her *dōṣam*. The astrologer instructed

⁵⁹ During the period I was carrying out my fieldwork in Chennai the price of eggs rose from one-and-a-half rupees per egg to two-and-a-half or three rupees per egg. Many individuals from poorer classes expressed dismay about these fluctuations because they counted on the inclusion of nutritious eggs in their diets, especially for their children, and said that it would be difficult to continue to bring eggs to the temple as offerings if they remained this expensive.

Selvi to visit the temple every Tuesday evening (except when she was menstruating), and to pray to the snake goddess to have her *dōṣam* “forgiven” while she circumambulated the anthill three times. On the occasions when I accompanied her on her walk to her chosen temple, Selvi carried a small stainless steel vessel filled with milk and a basket with some flowers and an egg or two. She carefully arranged her offerings at the base of the sloping anthill to the side of the temple’s sanctum before commencing her circumambulations, and she always concluded her worship by dropping a few coins into the temple donation box. Though her family’s ability to offer suitable dowry was unquestionable, their social standing in their high non-Brahmin community was favorable, and Selvi had been educated the “right” amount such that she could be positioned as both “worldly” and “homely,” the families of numerous interested grooms had inexplicably ceased inquiring about her after an initial look at her horoscope. Despite her dutiful worship at the anthill temple every Tuesday evening, her family’s mounting worries about her marital prospects compelled them to return to their astrologer, who recommended that they travel to Kalahasti on Selvi’s birth star day and have a *dōṣam*-removal *pūjā* performed there. Selvi’s case illustrates how various expiatory rituals from the *nāga dōṣam* ritual repertoire are “mixed and matched” in

combinations designed in response to individual needs and circumstances, as well as class and caste backgrounds. Specifics about the removal *pūjās* conducted at Kalahasti, arguably the ritual response in this repertoire that most fully demonstrates the particular kinds of ritual innovation and “invention of tradition” that I argue increasingly characterize *nāga dōṣam* rituals in contemporary Tamil Nadu, will be offered in a subsequent section, but before I focus on this worship complex I briefly outline some examples that belong to another category of atonement and pacifying rituals for *nāga dōṣam*.

***Sarpa Śānti* Rites: Cradles, Cords, and Expulsions**

As a category *śānti* (Ta. *cānti*) rites, sometimes called *prāyaścitta* rites in Sanskritic and/or Brahminical contexts, have alleviation, pacification and atonement as their goals. These expiatory rites are performed to reduce the anger of a malefic planet that occupies an unfavorable horoscopic position and are intended to ward off the evil effects that result from such inauspicious arrangements. *Sarpa śānti* rites, then, are designed to atone for an offense committed against a snake, usually killing it, and to placate Rahu and Ketu, planets that assume ill-fated locations in an individual’s

horoscope as a consequence of any among the range of sins and misdeeds that were discussed in the previous chapter. Several rituals fall under the *sarpa śānti* rubric. These practices may be as simple as a woman tying a yellow cord (*mañcaḥ kayīru*) around the trunk of a sacred tree (usually the neem tree, which is considered female and thus associated with the goddess), or around an established snake stone installed under such a tree or at a roadside shrine. These yellow cords are identified with the *tāli*, a woman's marriage necklace, which stands as a potent symbol of auspiciousness and has strong links to fertility.⁶⁰

Another simple practice involves a woman tying a rustic wooden cradle (*toṭṭil*) up in a sacred tree, an offering that reflects her desire for children. These cradles are of two types: the purchased kind are fashioned from rough scrap wood, painted yellow, and have a bright blue figure of the infant Krishna crawling inside them, while the homemade kind are simply a colorful scrap of cloth with a rock suspended in its crook to represent the baby the woman anticipates cradling there once she has received the goddess's

⁶⁰ For more on the symbolism and implications of the *tāli*, see Flueckiger 2007 and Holly Baker Reynolds 1978 and 1991.

blessing.⁶¹ These simple acts typically function as elements of a vow (*vēṇṭuta*), under the terms of which a woman signals her wish (usually for fertility) by tying a yellow cord or hanging a cradle with the understanding that if her request is fulfilled she will propitiate the goddess with a specific thanksgiving offering, but they may also stand alone as isolated *sarpa śānti* offerings, performed without the prescription of an astrologer. As one woman, who I encountered as she was tying a cradle onto a crooked branch already burdened by the weight of dozens of cradles, told me, “We tie the cord and the cradle to do *śānti* for our sins. When I was not *carrying* after so many months I came to the temple and did *sarpa śānti*. Every lady knows to do this.”

These simpler practices are joined by significantly more complex *sarpa śānti* rituals, such as the elaborate *kaḷippu* (expulsion, ejection) rituals that I observed in the cremation ground at the Mel Malaiyanur Ankalamman temple.⁶² The ritual specialists who led these rites described them as efficacious for chasing off a variety of malignant spirits (such as *pēy*), removing sorcery (*ceyviṇai*) and black magic (*pillicūṇiyam*), and

⁶¹ See Stork (1992) for a brief discussion of these cradle offerings at an anthill temple in the South Arcot District of Tamil Nadu, based on her observations there in 1982.

⁶² Nabokov also documents the performance of these rites at Malaiyanur, though her treatment of the *kaḷippu* offers no examples where *dōṣam* figures as one cause of the ritual patient’s suffering (2000, especially 55–85)

relieving *nāga dōṣam*. As was discussed in Chapter Two, a range of oral narratives and Tamil-language print sources elaborate the relationships among *dōṣam*, malignant possession, and sorcery, and suggest that women are rendered especially vulnerable to black magic and demonic possession by virtue of inauspicious planetary arrangements in their horoscopes. In particular, Rahu and Ketu were singled out as hostile planets whose unfavorable horoscopic positions put women at risk of falling under the “command” (*ēval*) of mantras and spells directed against them by sorcerers, and in danger of possession by the untimely dead and other spirits which seek to block their conception and otherwise deny them conjugal and marital satisfaction.⁶³ Those with whom I discussed this constellation of afflictions, which has an overlapping repertoire of ritual therapies, unanimously cited Mel Malaiyanur as the temple *par excellence* where these conditions could be countered, their adverse effects alleviated, and, ultimately, cured.

The Tamil-language booklet *History and Manner of Worship of Mēl Malaiyaṇūr Srī Aṅkāḷammaṇ* confirms that the difficulties arising from *nāga dōṣam*, evil spirits, and sorcery are all consequences of inauspicious planetary alignments. This text describes

⁶³ For more on the destructive power of *ēval*, see Nabokov 2000, especially 66-69.

kaḷippu as a ritual that – once it is enjoined by the goddess’s *aruḷ vāḱku* (lit. spoken grace; in my fieldwork contexts prophecy or oracles spoken by possessed individuals) – can be performed to free a person who has been caught by evil spirits, to eliminate *nāga dōṣam*, and to heal assorted diseases (n.d., 54). In order to remove *dōṣam*, spirits, and illness, a dough figure (*uruvam*) must be fashioned from raw rice flour and then burned in a fire where three streets intersect.⁶⁴ The booklet notes that the custom whereby ritual specialists who have been authorized by the goddess chase demons, remove *dōṣam*, and eradicate disease has existed since the time of the ancestors (65) before it goes on to detail some additional *śānti* rituals:

Every month on new moon day when the devotees come [to the Mel Malaiyanur temple] many good things are happening. People who are caught by evil spirits, who suffer from illness, bad luck, *nāga dōṣam*, black magic, sorcery, or who are under the command of a Katteri [a spirit reputed to scoop fetuses from their mother’s wombs] will have all these problems removed when Ankalamman’s *taricaṇam* [*darśan*] falls on them, just like the dew vanishes in the presence of sunshine. ... When medicines fail to cure sorcery, black magic, being under a sorcerer’s command, and being caught by an evil spirit or *Cēṭṭai* [goddess of misfortune, Lakshmi’s elder sister], the person should circle the anthill three times and then go to the cremation ground at midnight and circle a lemon around his head and smash it, and also dash *tumaṭṭikāy*, *ūmattaṅkāy* [types of gourds

⁶⁴ See Flueckiger on the category of the crossroads, or *caurāstā*, in Indian contexts (2006, 14-15).

used to avert the evil eye], a pumpkin, and a coconut, and destroy them. Then these evils will go away. Many people come [to Mel Malaiyanur] to perform this worship on new moon day (67).

Rituals such as those described above are indeed performed in great numbers at Mel Malaiyanur on new moon (*amāvāca*) days; they are the most numerous and characteristic of the plethora of rituals I observed in the thriving supernatural marketplace that is the temple's extensive lands and cremation ground and where a wide variety of ritual-cum-commercial transactions take place among a striking array of demons, deities, spirits, ritual experts, and clairvoyants. Although I visited Mel Malaiyanur on a full moon day in 2004 as part of my pre-dissertation fieldwork with the aim of assessing the temple's ritual scene, it was not until 2005 that, responding to the urging of goddess devotees in Chennai, I started frequenting the temple on the ritually paramount new moon day. I made the three-and-a-half hour journey from Chennai to Mel Malaiyanur on the special, direct bus services offered on new moon days throughout 2006 and 2007, and returned on intervening, ordinary days to conduct extended interviews with ritual specialists who were too busy on new moon days to do much more than talk to me in the brief gaps between piercings, *aru/ vāḱku* sessions, exorcisms, and rituals to make spirits run away (*pēy oṭuttal*). I also conducted dozens of follow-up

interviews with ritual participants in Chennai, as many of the hundreds of thousands of devotees who flock to Malaiyanur on new moon day travel there from their homes in the state's capital.

Toward the purpose of illustrating how a complex *kalippu* rite functions in the class of *sarpa śānti* rituals and the relationships between malevolent possession and *dōṣam*, here I will describe and analyze one specific ethnographic instance, performed for a young woman named Tamilarasi on the new moon night of *Āṇi* in 2007 in the cremation ground adjoining Ankalamman's temple.

Tamilarasi's father struck up a conversation with me while the arrangements for his daughter's *kalippu* were still underway. By way of opening, he gestured at the withdrawn, diffident-looking girl nearby and said, "She is studying *plus two* [the two years of study following tenth grade, equivalent to American eleventh and twelfth grades], you know. Three years ago she saw the corpse of a man who had committed suicide lying on the railway tracks and his spirit [*āvi*] caught [*piṭi*] her. ... Now he is a demon [*pēy*] on her.⁶⁵ She has *dōṣam* in her horoscope and a snake on her leg." As

⁶⁵ The wandering and dissatisfied spirits of the untimely dead are, by virtue of their premature deaths and abruptly foreclosed life possibilities, uniquely poised to afflict the living through

negotiations between the ritual drummers (*pampaikkāraṅ*) and the *aravāṅi* (male-to-female transsexual)⁶⁶ in charge of Tamarasi's *kalippu* proceeded, her father continued to express incredulity about the fact that his well-educated daughter, who he believed was "coming up" well in life, could be possessed by a *pēy*. The junior drummers fashioned an effigy (*pomma*) from dough and placed it on a leaf in front of the senior-most ritual musician, who quickly scratched a *chakra* (ritual diagram) into the dirt and directed Tamarasi to begin walking in circles around it.⁶⁷ This effigy provides an

malignant possession. For more on Tamil beliefs about the untimely dead and their propensity toward possession, see Meyer (1986, 207-210) and Nabokov (2000, 100).

⁶⁶ My translation of the circumstances surrounding the birth of Aravan (Skt. Iravan), the son of Arjuna and the *nāga* princess Ulupi (*Mahābhārata* Gorakpur ed., Chapter 213), is summarized in Appendix Two of this dissertation. Before he is sacrificed on the eve of the *Mahābhārata* war to ensure the Pandavas' success, Aravan expresses his desire to be married. In the absence of a willing bride, Krishna steps forward in the guise of a woman and spends the night with Aravan. A festival commemorating these mythical events is celebrated by the transgender community in Tamil Nadu during the month of *Cittirai*; on this festival occasion they celebrate the wedding of Krishna and Aravan and then, the next morning, mourn Aravan's death amid wails and the breaking of many glass bangles. The male-to-female transgender community in Tamil Nadu has adopted the name *aravāṅi* to denote their relationship to Aravan and to mark the ways in which many of them performatively embody Aravan in the context of this summer festival. Many *aravāṅis* travel to the Ankalamman temple at Mel Malaiyanur temple on new moon days where they act as advisors, brokers, and freelance ritual experts for the thousands who congregate there for cures, healing, and blessings. Alf Hildebeitel has written extensively on Aravan; see Hildebeitel 1995; Hildebeitel 1998 on the transsexual Ali community's view that Krishna is an Ali *avatāra*; Hildebeitel 1988 (Chapter 15) on the relationship of Aravan to the Draupadi cult; and Hildebeitel 1999 on Aravan's role in the Tamil Kuttantavar cult.

⁶⁷ Nabokov reports that in these contexts the *cakkaram* is drawn to prevent the demon from escaping (2000, 156).

alternate body for the possessing spirit to inhabit from the afflicted human body, though, as is described below, this is not the only cipher for the *pēy* that this *kalippu* ceremony employs.

Initially Tamilarasi displayed defiance and laughed derisively at the ritual specialists who addressed her. While the *aravāṇi* responded to her insolence with genuine anger and insulted her, the senior ritual drummer counseled her in a soothing, low voice, and instructed her to take the process seriously and give the ritual a chance to work. He offered an analogy, telling Tamilarasi that just as one consults a doctor when she is sick, so her parents have brought her to consult him because she is suffering. The healing process of the *kalippu* is motivated by the desire to expel the possessing spirit of the untimely dead, the man who had committed suicide on the railway tracks and had caught Tamilarasi when she chanced upon his corpse. The ritual specialists concurred that her *dōṣam* had rendered her vulnerable to being caught and that now that she had finally sought treatment, the evil spirit could be ejected from her body; but first, crucially, the possessing spirit would have to reveal his identity and agree to run away.

The musicians began to play their instruments (the *pampai*, twin-headed drums that are played in a set of two and considered essential to calling a deity to possess, the *cilampu*, brass anklet-shaped maracas that evoke those worn by Kannagi in the Tamil epic *Cilappatikāram*, the *uṭukkai*, a small, tapered drum, and the *maṇi*, a brass bell whose clapper is beat against the bell's side to keep time) and the leader began to sing as he turned Tamarasi in place in an effort to make her lose her balance and provide the spirit an opportunity to "come on" her. The leader sang beautifully, alternating between songs praising the goddess Ankalamman and entreating her to possess someone and help them drive the malignant spirit out. After some time Tamarasi began to tremble, sway, and stumble, signs that the ritual musicians interpreted as the descent of her possessing spirit. The lead musician questioned the girl – gently at first, then more insistently – but when the spirit of the dead man refused to respond to his queries, the *aravāṇi* took over, commanding the *pēy* to speak as he pulled Tamarasi's hair and whipped her with a thin clutch of reed switches. The young woman dissolved into sobs and, eventually, the deceased spirit began to answer through his living host.

He identified himself as Shankar and quickly filled out some of his biographical details, divulging that he attacked Tamarasi because she resembled a girl he had

unsuccessfully pursued.⁶⁸ Under fierce interrogation and threatened with renewed beatings, Shankar indicated that he would come “off” his victim and not return, and specified the precise lock of Tamarasi’s hair that he was “on.” Here the pace of the ritual action picked up speed: the lead ritual musician looped this lock of hair and tied it in a knot, while his assistants lined up with the necessary accoutrements to complete the removal ceremony. Five clay pots filled with turmeric water were dumped over the possessed woman’s head, and she was required to smash each of them against the dark earth of the cremation ground. Next, Tamarasi was given five coconuts and told to break them, and piles of medicinal herbs and twigs were placed at her feet and set alight. Then a green pumpkin with a chunk of camphor burning at its crown was circled around her multiple times and hurled against the ground. Numerous small limes were torn in half and circled in opposite directions around her body as their juices were squeezed out, dripping down over her.

Tamarasi was then given a handful of sharp thorns, which she was told to stick into the soft body of the effigy, and was instructed to set the thorn-studded figure on fire.

⁶⁸ As was described in the previous chapter, there is almost always some sexual dimension to these possession events. See Nabokov for a discussion of lust and the sexual dynamics that catalyze and animate *pēy* possession (2000, 72-74).

As it sent up oily smoke around her and the drumbeats rose to a crescendo, the lead musician roughly cut the knotted lock from her head, thus removing the *pēy* from her body. He then nailed the clump of hair into a nearby tamarind tree and set the lock ablaze, effectively cremating the second of the demon's ciphers. The *aravāṇi* then sacrificed a chicken, thereby offering Shankar a "life" in exchange for Tamilarasi's, which this expulsion rite summarily denied him. Finally, an unglazed terracotta pot filled with flaming neem chips (*tīccaṭṭi*) was thrust into Tamilarasi's hands and the now-free young woman quickly circumambulated the cremation ground as a thanksgiving vow to the goddess whose *śakti* was credited with ejecting the possessing spirit and compelling him to "run away."

Some of these substances, such as the smoke from the medicinal herbs, the turmeric water, and the lemon juice, are intended to purify the demon's victim, while others, including the clay pots and the coconuts, signify the *pēy* himself and are thus shattered to break his connection to this young woman. The pumpkin is commonly associated with rites to remove, ward off, or avert the evil eye and other inauspicious influences, and the effigy provides a corporeal image of the possessing spirit that can be

irrevocably damaged, thus disabling him from possessing another unwitting victim, through the application of thorns.

Tamilarasi's *nāga dōṣam*, indicated in her horoscope and by the snakelike mark on her thigh, rendered her vulnerable to being caught by the disgruntled spirit of the man who had committed suicide on the railway tracks. Known to be efficacious both for removing *dōṣam* and for expelling spirits, the *kalippu* ritual also consigned this young woman to the goddess's care and protection so that the menacing spirit cannot return. It is significant that the Mel Malaiyanur temple, in whose inner sanctum stands an enormous anthill that is worshiped as a manifestation of the goddess Ankalamman, is renowned as the paradigmatic site for these elaborate *kalippu* rites, because in this place the worship of a powerful and popular goddess coalesces with a specialized class of ritual therapies designed to remove *dōṣam*, possessing spirits, diseases, and other afflictions. The increasing number of women who travel to Malaiyanur on new moon days for the purpose of undertaking this complex and expensive ritual therapy signals the growing demand for ritual solutions to anxieties surrounding the wide range of negative consequences that stem from *dōṣam* and inauspicious planetary configurations. The swelling crowds at this temple also reveal how, as a circuit of

dōṣam-removal sites and a repertoire of *dōṣam* ritual therapies emerges and takes shape, devotees will travel there in increasing numbers, carrying the escalating anxieties of this modern moment with them to partake in the site's power and efficacious rituals. As one mother's answer to my query about how they could afford the steep fee for a *kalippu* ritual similar to Tamilarasi's reveals, leaving malignant possession and *dōṣam* untreated do not seem to be options. She said, "What choice do we have? As a family, we have taken a loan. If we do not expel this spirit and remove this *dōṣam* her whole life will be blocked."

Amaravati's Nāga Pratiṣṭhā

Whereas the first section of this chapter discussed worship at established snake stones as one ritual therapy for *dōṣam*, this section analyzes *nāga pratiṣṭhā*, the ceremony to install and enliven a new *nāga* image. As I explained at the beginning of this dissertation, these stone sculptures are offered by a devotee, usually at the recommendation of an astrologer or another ritual specialist, in a bid to reduce or erase *nāga dōṣam* or weaken the influence of negative planetary positions in that individual's horoscope. Here I describe the case of a specific individual, a young woman named

Amaravati, whose family sponsored an installation and enlivening rite at a Mylapore temple associated with MK Amman in 2005. Her case resonates with Archana's, presented at the opening of Chapter Two, in that it reveals another family's set of motivations for undertaking the *nāga pratiṣṭhā* rite, but it diverges from Archana's in that it reflects very different caste assumptions and dynamics.

Although Amaravati comes from an upper-middle class non-Brahmin family, when I first met her she was dressed in outfit so tattered and worn that on any other occasion she would have considered it unsuitable for wearing outside the house. On this day, however, the pretty college student knew that upon her return home she would have to burn all the clothing she had been wearing, and she did not want to sacrifice newer garments. Amaravati had come to the shady courtyard of this almost-forgotten Mylapore temple on a humid *Āṭi* morning to have a *nāga pratiṣṭhā* rite performed on her behalf, in the hope that this offering would pacify the negative planetary influences that appeared to be impeding the arrangement of her marriage.

Her mother initially spoke with officials at MK Amman temple about installing their snake stone there, but agreed to have her *nāga* established under sacred trees at a nearby temple that falls under MK's administrative control after MK's officials informed

her that they did not have sufficient room to accommodate any additional stone images.

Amaravati's mother, who only knew of MK Amman by reputation but had never

worshiped there, was satisfied with this arrangement, and she dispatched her apartment

watchman to purchase a stone that fit the specifications the temple official supplied for

their particular situation. Because she was relatively new to the ritual world of

parikārams and *dōṣam*-removal rites, Amaravati's mother was relying on an informal

network of advisors: she was consulting with the astrologer who had diagnosed her

daughter's *nāga dōṣam* and sent them to Kalahasti some months ago, the Brahmin

neighbor who recommended the *nāga pratiṣṭhā* rite after yet another batch of grooms'

horoscopes failed to match with her daughter's planetary arrangements, and the servant

maid and apartment watchman who assured her that MK Amman was a powerful temple

known to "cure" *nāga dōṣam*.

Her watchman approached a stone dealer within the city, who took their order for

a snake stone depicting two intertwined *nāgas* and conveyed it to a family of sculptors in

Mahabalipuram, a village located about fifty kilometers from Chennai whose dominant

trade is traditional stone-carving. For Amaravati's *pratiṣṭhā*, a stone slab with two

intertwined *nāgas* was required, for, as one stone carver told me, "The *pinṇal nāga*

[braided snake] is appropriate for the woman whose *dōṣam* causes her marriage to come late. One snake is female and one is male, and when they are intertwined it denotes a couple, like a married lady and her husband.” These artisans are knowledgeable about how the snake stones’ different styles correspond to distinct types of *dōṣam*, and are capable of advising customers about which stone to order for their particular problem.⁶⁹ Sculptors told me, for example, that snake stones portraying a single, coiled *nāga* are considered apt for those who desire offspring, and that they often suggest the customer select additional iconographic details – like a *lingam*, a small image of Ganesha, or a figure of Krishna dancing on the snake’s coils – that is compatible with their family deity or personal preferences. On Amaravati’s image a small *lingam* graced the space in the center of the pair of intertwined, “braided” *nāgas*, which reach up in a double helix formation. One carver offered this perspective on this particular configuration: “When a *lingam* is present in between the coils it means that the male and the female *nāgas* are doing *pūjā* over that *lingam*, and the person will get the additional blessings of Lord Shiva.”

⁶⁹ Vogel provides a brief description of a *nāga pratiṣṭhā* and discusses different styles of snake stones (1926, 270-73).

When their snake stone was ready, Amaravati's mother brought it to the temple and met the non-Brahmin priest who would be performing their *nāga pratiṣṭhā*. He explained that 1,800 rupees would be enough to purchase all the ritual items necessary for the *pūjā* and to pay his fees. Including the snake stone, this amount brought the total cost for their ritual up to 3,000 rupees, or about \$75 in 2005. The ritual specialist recommended that they truncate the preparatory rituals for the snake stone, which should spend twenty four days immersed in grains and another twenty four immersed in water to purify it in advance of its installation, and an auspicious date just ten days away was set for the ceremony.

On the day of the *nāga pratiṣṭhā* rite, Amaravati's mother started to menstruate, and so she did not attend her daughter's rite. By the time the young woman arrived at the temple the pale, new stone had been set into freshly poured concrete at the base of three holy trees (a neem, a peepal, and a fig tree), and a brick altar had been constructed for the ritual fire. The priest told me that he had placed nine gems and some coins beneath the stone before cementing it in place, offerings to sanctify the earth and to propitiate the *nāgas*, which are thought to dwell in their own subterranean realm. After kindling the sacred fire, the priest sat opposite Amaravati and handed her a

succession of small cups filled with various dried grains, herbs, twigs, and nuts, which he referred to as “medicines,” instructing her to circle each offering around her body several times before throwing it into the flames.

When Amaravati had consigned all of her offerings to the sacrificial fire, the ritual action shifted to the new *nāga* stone. With Amaravati standing nearby, the priest ritually bathed the stone with a series of substances, including water, milk, honey, ghee, rosewater, and various oils, and then stooped to decorate the *nāga* with flower garlands and colored powders. After dressing the *nāga* with a red cloth and arranging offerings of bananas, coconuts, betel leaves, and areca nuts in front of the snake stone, the priest chanted some mantras and circled the camphor flame around the snake stone, thus enlivening it or, in his words, “giving it breath and life.” The priest packed up some of the offerings for Amaravati to take home as *prasādam*, and they agreed that he would assume responsibility for the forty-eight days of continuous worship that any newly established *nāga* stone requires.

In many respects, the events that motivated Amaravati’s family to sponsor this *nāga pratiṣṭhā* and the course they followed to arrange it are quite typical. Their ritual undertaking builds on an earlier *parikāram*, namely their visit to and performance of

rituals at Kalahasti, which demonstrates how devotees tend to combine and layer ritual solutions in individualized permutations in an effort to secure desired outcomes.

Amaravati's mother told me later that a subsidiary aim of the *nāga pratiṣṭhā* rite was to pray that her husband would receive a promotion but not be transferred outside of Chennai for his work. While the priest who performed the ceremony told me that the explicit purpose of a *nāga pratiṣṭhā* is to diminish an individual's *nāga dōṣam* and pray for their marriage and fertility, he conceded that it was acceptable to entertain a secondary ritual aim. Amaravati's parents expressed different perspectives about the ritual; where her father disavowed any faith that the rite would help his daughter's marriage arrangements to progress and said that he regards such practices as "man-made superstitions," Amaravati's mother said, "By sponsoring this ritual another deity was born into the world. Surely now that we have worshiped her the snake goddess will reward us by answering our prayers; don't you think so?"

Silver *Nāgas* as Ritual Gifts

Another type of ritual therapy for *nāga dōṣam* that surfaced in my fieldwork is the practice of worshiping a small silver (or gold) *nāga* image and then offering it as a ritual

gift to a Brahmin. In most cases these images are purchased from a jeweler and worshiped jointly by the individual who is suffering from *nāga dōṣam*'s ill effects and the Brahmin priest who that individual has retained for the purposes of this *pūjā*.⁷⁰ Typically the devotee and the priest will cooperatively perform *abhiṣekam* of the diminutive image, bathing it with a succession of liquids and substances, while the priest chants mantras, and then the image will be presented to that priest as part of the compensation for his ritual services.

Priests and astrologers emphasized that the metal – silver or gold – should be selected based on the devotee's financial means, and that ways in which the image is worshiped should also be indexed to the individual's financial ability. These specialists were keen to point out that a less expensive image and cycle of worship would not be less efficacious, but that because relatively more affluent devotees had more money available to spend, they ought to do so. One priest explained, "Gold is very expensive, so most people choose a silver *nāga* for this *parikāram*. They should perform milk *abhiṣekam* for a minimum of seven days, but forty eight days is *best.* If they can afford

⁷⁰ Bala Ratnam mentions a Keralite custom where, if an eclipse falls on a Brahmin's date of birth, that Brahmin presents a gold or silver image of a serpent that has been consecrated for worship to another Brahmin in an effort to pacify Rahu's anger (1946, 638-39).

it, they should also arrange a fire sacrifice. But they must do everything according to their *means,* because although we can hide our wealth from one another, we cannot hide it from God.”

Ritual prestations figure prominently in a larger and ancient tradition of hospitality, charity, and gifting that is catalyzed by the idea that the giver receives merit in the act of offering and that, in some cases, inauspicious elements are deflected or transferred in the act of gifting (see Raheja 1988). Although I read about gifting a silver *nāga* image to a Brahmin in Tamil-language booklets about *nāga dōṣam parikārams* intended to appeal to devotees from a wide variety of caste backgrounds, the only devotees who I know to have performed this ritual solution are themselves either Brahmins or Mudaliyars, one of the so-called Sanskritized castes. Further, all of these individuals are men, even if some of them undertook this ritual performance on behalf of a female family member. According to an unpublished essay provided to me by a Brahmin temple priest, however, women also conduct this *pūjā*: “The well-known *sarpa dōṣa*, which causes women to have enormous difficulties in bearing children, is one of the malefic influences associated with Rahu in traditional astrology and in folk belief. This *dōṣa* is most prevalent in South India, where astrologers also refer to it as *nāga*

dōṣa, and instruct women to worship a snake image made of gold or silver and then donate it to someone after completing their worship.” This priest told me that he had overseen this ritual for several women over the years, but that he thought the current “trend” had shifted toward *nāga pratiṣṭhā* rather than worshipping and gifting *nāga* images made from precious metals.

One Brahmin man narrated how after he and his wife had experienced many difficulties conceiving and carrying their baby to term, his family priest recommended that he worship a silver *nāga* image and then offer it to another Brahmin priest. This gentleman explained that since he could not spare the requisite forty-eight days for the silver image to be immersed in grains and then water, he dipped the *nāga* in grains for a moment and then water for a moment as a “token” before he began his worship.

After dipping that *nāga* in raw rice and then water, I made my *saṅkalpa* [statement of intent], saying my name, my family lineage, my astrological particulars, and all the details about my vow to perform *pūjās* for that image for the next forty eight days. As I was going on pilgrimage to Haridwar and Rishikesh during that period, I carried the image with me in a small box wrapped in antelope skin, which is both sacred and pure. I continued to perform the *pūjā* every one of those forty-eight days, and as an added *bonus* I could perform Ganga *abhiṣekam* for that image on the days I was in North India. At the end of the forty-eight days my wife and I traveled to Rameshwaram, where we arranged

a *nāga pratiṣṭhā* to pray that our *nāga dōṣam* be eliminated in that sacred place, and we offered that silver *nāga* image to the priest there as part of our ritual gift.

For this devotee and his wife, worshiping and gifting a silver *nāga* constituted one part of a larger cycle of *parikārams* for the *nāga dōṣam* that they believed was negatively impacting their ability to conceive and maintain a pregnancy. Many other devotees, however, perform this ritual solution independent of other ritual therapies, such as the Brahmin man who related this narrative: “My elder brother is a medical doctor. His first baby died as soon as it was born, and the priest said its death was related to *nāga dōṣam*. So they offered black gram and a silver *nāga* image to a Brahmin, and when the next baby was born healthy they named him Nagaraja.”

Although I encountered relatively fewer worshipers who had performed *pūjās* using a small *nāga* image that they later gifted to a Brahmin than I did devotees who had undertaken other ritual therapies for *nāga dōṣam* discussed in this chapter, this ritual found a place in virtually all of the Tamil-language booklets concerning *nāga dōṣam* and its remedial measures. One text suggests that worshiping and gifting a silver *nāga* image is efficacious not only for *nāga dōṣam*, but may yield an abundance of additional blessings (Vidyadaran 2003). To that end, the text advocates retaining a second image

that the devotee can worship at home; “If one has an image of a snake made in pure gold or silver and worships it during *rāhu kālam* by doing *pāl abhiṣekam*, then that person will be relieved of *nāga dōṣam* and receive numerous other benefits. After erasing the *dōṣam* one should give this snake to a Brahmin, and if one wants to continue this *pūjā* it is good to make another snake and keep that one for daily worship in the home” (46-47). The additional component to this ritual proposed here suggests how amenable this repertoire of ritual therapies is now only to recontextualizing particular ceremonies, but also to annexing and assimilating more explicitly “new” elements and innovations.

Propitiating the Shadow Planets

Making offerings to Rahu and Ketu, the two shadow planets among the nine planets, or *navagrahas*, is another category of remedial actions that individuals suffering from *dōṣam* perform. Many Hindu temples in South India have shrines dedicated to the *navagrahas*, where anthropomorphic, two- or three-foot high black stone statues of each planet is installed on a square platform. Most devotees who pray at these temples also worship the *navagrahas*, often by circumambulating the entire grouping several times, so

all ritual attention paid to Rahu and Ketu should not be interpreted as an indicator of *dōṣam*.

Those who have been diagnosed with *nāga dōṣam* and/or in whose horoscopes Rahu and Ketu occupy unfavorable positions are often instructed to make offerings to and pray to these shadow planets. Because images of Rahu and Ketu are rarely found outside *navagraha* installations, most devotees will direct their worship and prayers to these two individual images at any temple which has a *navagraha* shrine. Rahu and Ketu are most often represented as half human and half snake: Rahu typically has a snake body with a human head (or, more accurately, a demon head) and rides on a goat, while Ketu has a five-hooded snake head and a human-demon body, and his vehicle is either a lion or a vulture.

Chanting mantras and lighting oil lamps in front of their images are among the worship practices frequently prescribed for those who are afflicted by the malefic gazes of these planets. Like other Hindu deities, both Rahu and Ketu are believed to have a fondness for particular kinds of offerings, and so worshipers are typically counseled about these preferences by priests or astrologers, or learn of them in the many booklets detailing *parikārams* for Rahu and Ketu's negative influences, and use these items in

their propitiations. Rahu is associated with the colors black and blue, and worshipers offer pieces of cloth in these colors as well as the specific type of grain (*uḷuntu*, or black gram), flower (shoeflowers), and grass (*arukam pul*) that are thought to be his favorites. Ketu receives offerings of red or multicolored cloth, a different kind of grain (*kōḷ*, or horse gram), lilies, and another kind of grass (*darbha*, Ta. *tarppai*). While Rahu is typically worshiped on Tuesdays during *rāhu kālam*, Ketu is most often honored on Saturdays within another inauspicious ninety minute period called *yama kaṇṭam*.

In recent years, a new complex of worship has sprung up around Rahu, and many devotees with whom I spoke related these practices to *dōṣam* in the general sense, rather than as specific *dōṣam*-removal rituals, per se. Women are the main practitioners of these *pūjās*, which are performed in front of images of Rahu and of goddesses, especially Durga, during *rāhu kālam* on Tuesday afternoons at South Indian temples. One of the priests at Thirunageshwaram explained the relationship between Rahu and Durga like this:

Durga is the partner goddess for Rahu. Those who cannot perform a *parikāram* for Rahu may light the lamp for Durga and perform *pūjā* with oleander flowers. The belief is that Rahu's curse will then be rectified. This is why unmarried girls and women without babies light the lamp for Durga on Tuesdays. The reason is Rahu. But nobody knows this fact. They only know that they get good results if

they put the lamp near Durga; they don't know that the reason is that she is the partner goddess for Rahu, working with him like the minister works with the king.

Where *rāhu kālam* has traditionally been understood as an inappropriate time for worship (and other auspicious activities), these newly emerging rituals are animated by the desire to propitiate this troublesome planet during the ninety minutes of his greatest influence. In these *pūjās* the worshiper typically draws a small design in rice flour, onto which she places her offerings. Minimally, these include one or more oil lamps and some flowers. Where small clay oil lamps and those sculpted from flour (*māviḷakku*) used to be most common, these have been superseded by lamps fashioned from halved lemons which have been turned inside out and filled with oil. These *pūjās* are increasingly visible and popular in contemporary South India, especially at non-Brahmin goddess temples, and constitute one among several of the ritual innovations associated with *dōṣam* and negative planetary influences.

In addition to these relatively simple practices intended to honor Rahu and Ketu and request their blessings, many devotees also undertake pilgrimages to one of the regionally important sacred sites associated with these shadow planets. For Rahu this site is the Naganathaswamy temple at Thirunageshwaram, while Ketu's shrine is the

Naganathaswamy temple at Keezhapperumpallam. Both of these temples are located near Kumbakonam in central southeast Tamil Nadu and form part of a network of nine temples in this region, each of which is dedicated to one of the *navagrahas*, and which are often visited on a pilgrimage circuit. Given the increasing prevalence of *nāga dōṣam* in recent years, travel to Rahu's and Ketu's abodes, which lie beyond the local circuits of snake goddess and anthill temples described in many of the examples above, has become more common. These temples form part of a regional network which also includes Kalahasti and Rameshwaram, sites which are treated below.

Thirunageshwaram and Keezhapperumpallam are sung about by the poets of the *Tēvāram*, the sacred Shaiva hymns which are continuously recited during each temple's festival celebrations, and associated with the "churning of the ocean" myth. While Shiva is the main deity and his *liṅgam* form occupies the sanctum sanctorum at each of these temples, Thirunageshwaram has a separate and sizable shrine dedicated to Rahu and Keezhapperumpallam has a similar shrine for Ketu.

Thirunageshwaram's *sthala purāṇam* describes a range of undesirable consequences that result from Rahu *dōṣam*, which include delayed marriage and difficulty conceiving, and describes itself as the only temple with an independent shrine in which Rahu is

installed along with his two snake wives, Nagavalli and Nagakanni (Cēkkiḷārtācaṅ 2005,

8). Temple priests here ritually attend to Rahu's image multiple times per day, and worship at the shadow planet's shrine enjoys a strong reputation for the power to remove *dōṣam*. As one priest at Thirunageshwaram confidently declared, "All *dōṣam* related to Rahu – Rahu *dōṣam*, *kāla sarpa dōṣam*, *kaḷattira dōṣam*, *putra dōṣam*, *kalyāṇa tāmatam dōṣam* [delayed marriage *dōṣam*] – are rectified by worshipping here."

Devotees who travel to Thirunageshwaram come primarily to witness the ritual bathing of Rahu's image with milk (*pāl abhiṣekam*), which is performed several times each day and in an especially elaborate manner on Sundays. The special feature of this ceremony – which is described in the *sthala purāṇam* and was referenced by every worshiper and priest with whom I spoke at the temple – is that the milk is believed to turn blue as it travels down Rahu's black stone image. During each of these *pāl abhiṣekam* ceremonies that I was present for, devotees remarked aloud to one another that they could discern the change in the milk as it coursed down Rahu's body. After the ritual, one priest asked me if I was able to detect the change in the milk's color, and offered this comment, "When the milk leaves the vessel it is white, but while it is in contact with Rahu's body it is blue. The blue color of the milk demonstrates Rahu's poisonous

nature. When it drips off of his body it becomes white again.” Another temple priest related this phenomenon to the “churning of the ocean” myth, and explained that it was at Thirunageshwaram that Rahu requested Shiva to restore his body after Vishnu-as-Mohini beheaded him when he deceitfully drank the nectar.

Priest: Rahu prayed to my Lord [Shiva] and did *pūjā* here to get his curse rectified [*cāpa nivartti*]. Shiva granted him a full form [*tirumēṇi*] and established him as Mangala Rahu [Auspicious Rahu]. When *pāl abhiṣekam* is done the milk turns blue in color. It signifies the bubbling poison.

ALA: Why does the milk turn blue?

Priest: Since he [Rahu] got his whole body in Thirunageshwaram he promised Shiva that he will not bite anybody in or around this place – this is the traditional belief [*aitikam*]. So far nobody ever died of snakebite here, neither from a cobra nor any other snake. Just as a person turns blue when bitten by a snake, here the milk turns blue; this is according to the traditional belief. It is very special.

ALA: Mostly why do people come here?

Priest: Mostly people come for husband and wife problems, for problems in getting married, and those who are married but who are without children for a long time also come. The traditional belief says that they come here to get all of these problems rectified, and especially for getting children. Because of their horoscope they may not get married early, or they may see snakes in their dreams frequently. For anything related to these matters they come here for solutions.

In addition to having *darśan* of Rahu's image and observing the *pāl abhiṣekam* ritual, devotees who are suffering from *dōṣam* and Rahu's harmful effects may elect to sponsor a fire sacrifice or a *nāga pratiṣṭhā* rite at the temple. Although Thirunageshwaram's priests told me that sacrificial rituals are conducted less frequently, they described scenarios where devotees bring a *nāga* stone on their journey to Rahu's sacred site and retain a priest there to enliven it as exceedingly common. Indeed, hundreds of *nāga* stones lean up against the temple's outer wall and line the perimeter of the inner circumambulation pathway. Overwhelmingly, these offerings are from devotees seeking relief from *dōṣam*'s primary afflictions: late marriage and infertility. Exhibiting a wide diversity of iconographic styles, this enormous array of snake stones represents scores of individual stories, sufferings, prayers, and financial commitments. Many of these stones have been wrapped in yellow cords, on which hang chunks of turmeric root, tied by individuals who offer them as a symbol of their desire to tie a marriage necklace of their own. Similarly, the branches of every tree in the temple's courtyard are impossibly burdened with cradles, hung there by devotees who yearn for offspring.

Located at a distance of about sixty kilometers from Thirunageshwaram is Ketu's sacred site at Keezhapperumpallam. In architectural terms, the temple at Keezhapperumpallam is less impressive than Rahu's holy abode, and there is no special feature associated with Ketu's worship equivalent to the blue milk phenomenon at Thirunageshwaram. The temple is, however, widely acknowledged to be a powerful site for removing *dōṣam* and for mitigating Ketu's malefic influences. In particular, worship at Keezhapperumpallam is linked to successful marriages and the boon of children, and many snake stones have been installed under the intertwined peepal and neem trees at the edge of the temple tank opposite the temple. Curative and *dōṣam*-removing powers are attributed to the water of this tank, which is called *nāga tīrtham*, and priests told me that bathing in its waters is especially beneficial to women who endure repeated miscarriages due to Ketu's malevolent influences.

One of Keezhapperumpallam's temple priests recounted a version of the "churning of the ocean" myth to me with an episode about Vasuki Naga and the establishment of this sacred site nestled within this larger frame story; the summary I provide here synthesizes his oral narrative and some of the supporting details provided by the temple's *sthala purāṇam* (Akaramutalvaṇ 1998).

During the churning the ocean Vasuki became exhausted from his exertions and spit out a mixture of saliva and poison. This mixture turned the milky ocean blue. Vishnu stepped forward and attempted to consume the poison, but was unable to bear its heat. He also turned blue from contact with the poison. Confused and terrified, the gods and demons ran here and there, in opposite directions. The gods approached Shiva, who swallowed the poison. Parvati used her *śakti* to prevent the poison from advancing beyond Shiva's throat, and so he is called Neelakantar, the blue-throated one.

Although they were relieved that the threatening poison had been neutralized, the gods and the demons blamed Vasuki Naga for creating it. They grabbed him by his tail and threw him as far away as they possibly could. Vasuki Naga landed, nearly dead, in a bamboo forest here, and slowly life coursed back from his tail towards his head. He began performing penance to Shiva in an attempt to atone for causing the Lord to ingest his poison.

Meanwhile, Vishnu was distributing the nectar that had emerged from the milky ocean. Because he knew Vasuki was occupied with his devotions to Shiva and not in line to receive a share, one demon disguised himself as Vasuki Naga and drank a small amount of nectar. Alerted to this deceit by Surya and Chandra, Vishnu beheaded this demon, thus creating two half-bodies which remained alive by virtue of having consumed the nectar. These two portions of the demon entreated Shiva to restore their bodies and, in his mercy, Shiva granted them planetary status as Rahu and Ketu, the last two of the nine planets.

Knowing that Vasuki had no part in the duplicity, Shiva agreed to be present in *liṅgam* form in a shrine near the bamboo grove where his devotee had been performing penance, and to install Ketu [who was formed from one half of the demon's body] in a nearby shrine. As a result of Shiva's grace, Vasuki offers

blessings from the bamboo grove outside of the Keezhapperumpallam temple, and Ketu sits inside the temple in an independent shrine. Because of the boons they secured from Shiva, Vasuki and Ketu are authorized to dispense remedies for *dōṣam* and resolve the planetary problems that cause difficulties for devotees who come to worship them.

The temple's central myth locates itself vis-à-vis the authority of the well-known "churning of the ocean" narrative and thus provides a clear etiology for the site's association with the resolution of *dōṣam* and inauspicious planetary effects. It also establishes the bamboo grove as an important sacred site, which worshipers visit in association with their prayers and petitions to Vasuki and Ketu. Another priest at the temple told me that temple priests condense this myth and narrate it to all of the devotees who retain them for *dōṣam*-removal *pūjās*; "They all want immediate solutions and think that just by visiting this temple they will get cured. But it is my feeling that they should worship with knowledge, and follow the example of Vasuki Naga, who wished to have his *viṣam* [poison], his *dōṣam*, forgiven. He nearly died in this place, but instead his curse was erased."

***Dōṣam*-Removal at a Distance: Kalahasti and Rameshwaram**

Whereas Thirunageshwaram and Keezhapperumpallam are regionally important sites that are typically visited in tandem, the temples at Kalahasti and Rameshwaram that are discussed in this section are not proximate and are visited singly. Kalahasti and Rameshwaram are strongly Brahminic temples, dedicated to major male deities, and thus are different in nature and character from the local snake goddess and anthill temples discussed in examples above. Another major difference between these temples and the informal local temple circuits is that where local goddesses can typically be reached on foot and propitiated inexpensively with milk and egg offerings, undertaking a pilgrimage to sites on the regional *nāga dōṣam* circuit requires relatively more planning, time, expense, and ritual intervention from religious specialists.

Among the temples credited with special powers to rectify *nāga dōṣam*, the Sri Kalahasti temple in southern Andhra Pradesh is the most well-known, and most often visited. Located approximately one hundred kilometers from Chennai and forty kilometers from the famous Venkateshwara temple at Tirupati, the Kalahasti temple is identified as the Kailash of South India and celebrated as one of the *pañca bhūta sthala*, the network of sacred sites associated with the five elements. At Kalahasti Shiva is

manifest as a *vāyu*, or wind, *liṅgam*, whose presence is indicated by the constant flickering of oil lamps installed in the *liṅgam*'s windowless chamber. An embossed metal shield (*kavacam*) depicting the nine planets and the twenty- seven constellations (*nakṣatrams*) adorns the *svayambhū* stone *liṅgam* in the temple's sanctum sanctorum and is worshiped by devotees seeking the removal of malefic planetary influences.

Two important myths are linked with the Kalahasti temple, and with the unique features of this *svayambhū* stone *liṅgam*. Elements from the first narrative, which features the devotion (*bhakti*) shown to Shiva by an assemblage of creatures, also lend Kalahasti its name. I recorded several oral versions of this myth and encountered others in Tamil- and English-language *sthala purāṇam* and articles in *bhakti* magazines; this condensed account follows the basic contours of the most common version. A spider (*srī*) was in the habit of demonstrating his *bhakti* toward Shiva by weaving intricate, decorative webs to form a canopy over Shiva's *liṅgam*. One day, just as the spider put the finishing touches on his creation, the flame from a nearby oil lamp suddenly ignited the web. His efforts to protect the *liṅgam* from the spreading flames cost the spider its life but Shiva appeared and, in recognition of the selfless devotion his *bhakta*, or devotee, displayed, granted liberation to the spider. In another *yuga*, or world age, a

snake (*kāla*) exhibited his *bhakti* by decorating the *liṅgam* with the rare gems it had carried there from the underground world of the *nāgas*. When another devotee, this time an elephant (*hasti*), came to do his *pūjā* to the Shiva *liṅgam*, he would brush away the jewels and replace them with fresh vilva leaves and flowers. Their competition eventually escalated into a confrontation, in which both the snake and the elephant lost their lives. Shiva granted salvation to each of these creatures as well, and today his *liṅgam* bears the imprint of the spider and of the elephant's tusk, and is shaded by the hoods of the snake. The temple's name, Sri Kalahasti, commemorates Shiva's consummate devotees – the spider, (*srī*), snake (*kāla*), and the elephant (*hasti*).

Kalahasti's stone *liṅgam* is also distinguished by what appear to be cuts or scars on its surface, marks which are associated with the temple's other central myth, which highlights the extraordinary devotion displayed by a human *bhakta*. Though unschooled in the holy texts and the procedures governing *pūjā*, the hunter Tinnan, one among the sixty-three poet-saints called Nayanar, worshiped Shiva with an unparalleled intimacy.⁷¹

He bathed the *liṅgam* with water he carried from the river in his mouth, decorated it with

⁷¹ See Hudson for an analysis of the myths concerning Tinnan's relationship with Shiva at Kalahasti, and an explication of love (*aṅṅu*) as the *bhakti* mode and mood through which Tinnan framed his interactions with Shiva (1989).

flowers he wore in his hair, and offered the choicest chunks of meat which he chewed first to confirm their tastiness. When a Brahmin teacher witnessed these ministrations he was incensed and deemed the offerings desecrating and sacrilegious, but Shiva held up Tinnan as an exemplar to challenge the teacher's assumptions about the nature of appropriate devotion. One day, to test Tinnan, Shiva caused his eye to bleed in his *bhakta's* presence, and Tinnan responded by immediately gouging out his own eye and using it to staunch Shiva's bleeding. Tinnan's relief at healing his lord lasted only a moment, because Shiva's other eye then started to ooze blood. Using his foot to mark the god's bleeding eye so that he could find it once he had effectively blinded himself, Tinnan extracted his other eye and inserted it into Shiva's wound. Shiva rechristened Tinnan as "Kannappa" to reflect how the hunter had sacrificed his eyes (*kaṇ*) to heal his lord, and Shiva's *liṅgam* is said to still bear the scars of these events.

The Sri Kalahasti temple is today most renowned for its Rahu-Ketu *pūjās*,⁷² whose power to remove *dōṣam* is derived from the belief that Rahu and Ketu once worshiped Shiva at this holy site. Whereas these Rahu-Ketu *pūjās* were previously

⁷² As is the case elsewhere, at Kalahasti the *pūjās* to resolve planetary malignancies are referred to by a variety of monikers, including Rahu-Ketu *pūjās*, *sarpa dōṣam pūjās*, *kāla sarpa dōṣam pūjās*, *nāga dōṣam pūjās*, *sānti pūjās*, *nakṣatra dōṣam pūjās*, and *navagraha pūjās*.

conducted only once a week at Kalahasti, they are now performed daily and on an almost continuous basis. Worshipers and priests explained that the overwhelming majority of devotees come there to pray for marriage and offspring, but they also described the temple as efficacious for educational success, job advancement, healing, and the resolution of family and other problems. Temple priests took a gendered view on this repertoire of petitions, identifying marriage and fertility as “women’s difficulties and associating desires for better jobs and higher education with male worshipers.

Although the temple itself has a long history, a range of oral narratives and print sources attest that these rituals are of quite recent vintage. The Tamil translation of the temple’s Telugu *sthala purāṇam* says, “Nowadays those who want to get a solution for *sarpa dōṣam* and to have good health are performing petitionary prayers. To be cleansed of Rahu *dōṣam* and to get Saturn’s blessings groups and individuals throng to this holy place and pay stipulated fees to offer worship ...” (Seshaiah n.d., Celariracan trans., 91). The English version puts it a little differently; “Of recent origin is the worship being conducted at Sri Kalahasti temple for people seeking protection against *Sarpadosha* (death/harm due to a serpent) and for people for whom there is delay in getting married” (Seshaiah n.d., Krishnamurthy trans., 59). Tamil booklets about *nāga*

dōṣam and Tamil-language articles about Kalahasti published in contemporary *bhakti* magazines also note the recent genesis of this particular genre of *pūjās* at the temple. One such booklet, published in 2002, states, “In recent years they perform *sarpa śānti* in Kalahasti. ... These rituals were not present even a few years ago and are all of recent origin” (Hanumattācaṅ 2002, 59).

Because of this willingness to admit to and even foreground the recentness of these *pūjās* at Kalahasti, these rituals do not constitute a good example of Eric Hobsbawm’s model of “invented tradition,” which he defines as “a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, *which automatically implies continuity with the past*” (1983, 1; emphasis mine). The fact that the newness of the ritual tradition associated with *nāga dōṣam* at Kalahasti is acknowledged and highlighted stands in contrast to the approach taken at some temples, such as at MK Amman and Mel Malaiyanur, treated above. At these and other temples *nāga dōṣam* rituals and traditions are often cloaked in the garb of ancientness and long-standing tradition in an effort to lend them authority and authenticity, and to facilitate their acceptance by worshipers. The invocation of tradition and portrayal of

continuity with the past in some innovative *nāga dōṣam* ritual performances (such as the tree marriage ceremony that will be discussed in Chapter Six of this dissertation) demonstrates that although the invention of tradition model does not account for what we see in this context, in some other cases it does fit well. Here, at Kalahasti, another model seems to be operative, where ritual innovation and invented tradition are discussed in terms of the need to address the uniquely modern problems of delayed marriage and infertility that are so pressing at this particular contemporary moment. Further, Kalahasti claims that one of its mythical events – in which Rahu and Ketu took refuge in Shiva at this sacred site – renders this temple uniquely poised to meet the evolving needs of contemporary times and expunge *dōṣam* through ritual practice.

A temple priest linked the growing interest in these *pūjās* to the increasing prevalence of sin in the modern world, and to people's desire to avail themselves of quick-fix solutions for their suffering. Like others with whom I spoke, he framed his discussion of escalating sinful behavior with the Kali Yuga, which is one indigenous category for classifying changes perceived as negative or threatening, and the precarious nature of modern social life.

When we started these *pūjās* the number of people who came was smaller. It developed gradually and today many people are coming. ... People are sinning more and more. For remedies they come here. This sin increases in every *yuga* [world age], and in the Kali Yuga [the current and most degenerate age] people want *quick service.* They want an immediate remedy for their suffering and Kalahasti has provided this *service.*

Kalahasti's seventy-two-year-old hereditary head priest, however, expressed some ambivalence about the fact that the temple is now primarily associated with these *dōṣam*-removal *pūjās*, rather than its deities and miracles and the pedigree of its saints, teachers, and priests.

Yes, there is *dōṣam* in the world and it can be eliminated here. But most astrologers are not experts. Just to get money they repeatedly tell clients, "Oh, the time is not good for you [horoscopically]. You go to Kalahasti and do a *parikāram*." The value of this place is greater than merely as a place to perform *parikārams* for *dōṣam*. [The goddess] Jnanambika gave teachings to the seer Bharadwaja here. We [priests] are descendants from Bharadwaja's lineage and so those traditional teachings continue with us. That hereditary line continues to me, and now my son. These teaching apply to all things, not just to this *kāla sarpa dōṣam*.

Apart from this elderly head priest, none of the other priests at Kalahasti articulated concern that the temple's unique heritage was being obscured by the soaring interest in *dōṣam*-removal *pūjās*. These priests attributed the skyrocketing number of worshipers at the temple to word-of-mouth, and described how devotees whose *dōṣam*

is successfully removed and whose wishes are fulfilled after worshiping at Kalahasti then go on to spread its fame in their villages and communities. One of them put it this way:

It has developed slowly, but now many people are coming here for these *pūjās*. The beauty of it is that whoever comes here receives some benefit. That is the grace of God and the specialty of this holy place. After you worship here, good things will happen when you go home. When you are benefited you will say to others, “Just visit the place once.” It happens like this, and more and more people will come.

Another priest told me that the temple averages more than 9,000 worshipers per day, and that the temple sells an average of 35,000 tickets for its Rahu-Ketu *pūjās* per month. He described the composition of Kalahasti’s worshipers this way: “The state of Andhra Pradesh controls the temple, but it is mostly Tamil people who come here, because the temple is near the border. Many Tamils come here, but Andhra people only recently came to know what we are doing here. People from Kerala, Karnataka, and North India also come, but ninety percent of the devotees are Tamils.”

The Rahu-Ketu *pūjās* performed at Kalahasti are available in three tiers. For each tier, the devotee purchases a bag filled with all the necessary *pūjā* materials, which include one black and one red piece of cloth, lilies, lotuses, vilva leaves, lemons, coconuts, betel leaves and areca nuts, vermilion and turmeric powders, and two packets

of gram. Two silver-plated *nāga* images, which represent Rahu and Ketu, are also included and the flowers, cloth pieces, and other items are offered to these figures. The first level of *pūjā*, which costs 250 rupees and is thus the option the majority of devotees select, is simply called the *Rāhu-Kētu Pūjā* and is performed in a group setting in a pavilion on the temple premises. Individual “stations” are set up that enable up to one hundred devotees to perform the *pūjā* simultaneously under the guidance of a priest who uses a microphone to provide step-by-step instructions. Although the name of this *pūjā* only references Rahu and Ketu and does not explicitly connect it with *dōṣam*, as part of the statement of intent that inaugurates the ritual the priest asks each devotee to chant names of different types of *dōṣam* that will be rectified through its performance (including *sarpa dōṣam*, *kaḷattira dōṣam*, and *kāla sarpa dōṣam*) and to conclude by stating, “This rite of atonement is performed to remove *sarpa dōṣam*.” Throughout the ritual the priest chants mantras which the devotees, who sit on neat rows, then repeat, because, as one priest explained, “If you only say it in your heart no one will listen. But if you say it aloud you will get the grace of God very quickly. Only the crying child will get the mother’s milk.”

The second tier is the *Rāhu-Kētu Sarpa Dōṣa Pūjā*, which costs 500 rupees and is performed in a much smaller group in a separate, subsidiary shrine within the temple itself. The third level is the 1,000-rupee *Special Rāhu-Kētu Sarpa Dōṣa Pūjā*, which is performed privately in the sanctum sanctorum for a single devotee and his or her family.

At the end of all of these *pūjās* the devotee is expected to have *darśan* of the main deities in the sanctum sanctorum and to drop their silver Rahu and Ketu images in the large offering box provided for this purpose. These images are periodically melted down and the silver is used to make ornaments for the deities and for other temple projects, such as the 1,700 kilogram silver doors adorned with images of Rahu and Ketu that were crafted from melted silver in 2005 and installed at the entrance to the inner sanctum.

Priests and devotees were eager to impress on me their beliefs that the countermeasures performed for *dōṣam* at Kalahasti are uniquely efficacious. A number of them mentioned that while in Tamil Nadu Rahu has a temple at Thirunageshwaram and Ketu has a temple at Keezhapperumpallam (both of which are discussed in the following section), the only site sacred for both Rahu and Ketu is Kalahasti. One priest explained negative planetary influence in terms of a “frequency” that has adverse mental

and psychological effects on those who are subjected to them, and discussed

Kalahasti's ability to "jam" harmful frequencies while the devotee performs rituals here.

In addition to claiming that Kalahasti is immune to these negative frequencies, he

described the site as endowed with special physical characteristics that assist in clearing

the bad effects of these frequencies for *dōṣam*'s sufferers who pray here.

This place, Kalahasti, can remove the evil effects of the *dōṣam* caused by Rahu and Ketu. To put it simply, we have cell phone *frequency,* and the same way we have planetary *frequency.* If, due to the sins and merits of your previous births, a planet's *frequency* is not kind when you are born, that is, if you are born when the planets are not in good positions, then you will endure difficulties according to the movement of those planets. ... If Rahu and Ketu's positions are not good, the first thing that is affected is your brain. Your brain will not produce clear thoughts. You will not be able to make clear decisions. You may think that the decision you make is correct, but it will be wrong. That is because your brain is affected by the influences of the planets. When it is like that everything will result in failure. ... The main thing that is affected is marriage; the marriage will be delayed. Even if it takes place the *issue* [offspring] will be postponed. It is because these planets are not good. And what is the remedy? It is to do *pūjā* in a place which is unaffected by the negative influences of the planets. Kalahasti is like a *jammer;* it blocks the negative influences and gives you the *chance* to reverse the bad effects given by these planetary positions in your birth chart. When you meditate on God in your heart your mind will become clearer. The air, water, and soil present here in Kalahasti will help. When you return home from praying here you will make clear decisions and become successful.

As this priest and others with whom I spoke emphasized, the majority of worshipers who perform these tiered Rahu-Ketu *pūjās* wish for marriages and offspring. I also met many devotees whose desires focused on gaining a better foothold in the growing economy through educational opportunities and job advancement, as well as worshipers whose requests blended several of these categories. In Chennai, a Brahmin mother of two described how she was not interested in astrology or concerned about her children's horoscopes until her son contracted typhoid and jaundice when he was preparing for the IIT (Indian Institute of Technology) entrance exams. Speaking in English, she explained how her family visited Kalahasti first for her son's educational success, and then shortly thereafter for her daughter's, and how she and her husband have returned there on multiple occasions to perform rituals for their children's marriage prospects.

The astrologer said that we should go to Kalahasti because Rahu and Ketu were troubling him. We did the *pūjā* there – that is my son himself did the *pūjā* – during *rāhu kālam*. That was very helpful and my son came out [of the exams] with flying colors, I should say. ... He was admitted into IIT and completed his M.Tech dual degree in five years. So everything was fine and I really believed in this, that the Rahu-Ketu *parikāram* at Kalahasti is a “must.” And my daughter, she cleared all her papers in the first year for CA, Chartered Accountant. Just in the final year there was one paper that she wasn't able to clear. I thought

probably she didn't prepare well, there was too much of distraction, I thought. But then when again she didn't clear I thought better I look into her horoscope, also. So when I looked into it they [astrologers] said even she has a similar problem [i.e., *nāga dōṣam*] and they suggested me to go to Kalahasti. ... That October we went to temple, [and] that November she cleared the paper. She herself did the *pūjā*. November itself she cleared the paper and she got the good job. So I believe that Kalahasti is the place which is needed by my children, for their problems. So we kept going and even for marriage also we went to Kalahasti and we did some special *pūjā* for marriage. But still, that [arranging either of her children's marriages] hasn't worked out so far.

One nineteen-year-old medical student, who had traveled with her family from Hyderabad to perform the 1,000-rupee private *pūjā*, told me she had been repeatedly diagnosed with *nāga dōṣam* by gurus, astrologers, and priests. She explained that she was terrified of snakes, suffered from "low memory" and difficulty concentrating on her studies, and generally experienced negative effects and complications in her life due to the positions of Rahu and Ketu in her horoscope. She described the purpose of the ritual this way: "In *pūjā* form, by offering their favorite colors of cloth and coconuts, we tell Rahu and Ketu, 'Don't come into our lives and don't disturb us.'" This woman explained that by performing this *pūjā* she would get the "support" necessary to become socially well-adjusted, successfully complete her competitive course of study, and lead a happy life.

There were many worshipers whose ritual aims fell outside the explicit purview of Kalahasti's *pūjās*, but whose priests or astrologers had named this temple as the appropriate place to bring their petitions. I encountered an extended family from the Asari artisan caste that traveled to Kalahasti to perform a *śānti pūjā* for the soul of a recently deceased family member. Their family priest recommended that they conduct this ritual at Kalahasti at the conclusion of the three-month death rite for this man, who had suffered from *dōṣam* during his life and had worshiped at Kalahasti many times to petition for its relief. In the presence of the deceased's widow and two young children, his sister-in-law told me,

According to his [their family priest's] instructions we took a bath here in the river and left our old clothes in the water. We paid 250 rupees to get all the materials to do the *śānti pūjā* in the temple. We knew his [the deceased's] time was not good [horoscopically] and that he had *dōṣam*, but we did so many *pūjās* to remove that. But he lay in his *cot* for four months and then died during *rāhu kālam*. So we have come here to ask God to be a support for us.

While this family was the only one that I met whose visit was connected with a death rite, it raises the possibility that as Kalahasti's reputation for efficacy spreads the repertoire of rituals it is associated with may also continue to expand. Another potential byproduct of Kalahasti's increasing popularity and association with rituals to neutralize

dōṣam and unfavorable planetary influences is that other temples will imitate its distinctive *pūjās* and offer similar repertoires of ritual remedies. At least one temple in southwestern Tamil Nadu is already moving in this direction, and is now touting itself as “the southern Kalahasti.” A 2007 Tamil newspaper article describes this temple as a powerful site for the removal of *dōṣam* wherein Rahu and Ketu are installed along with their consorts in a single shrine. It also states that relief from all forms of *dōṣam* and from Rahu’s and Ketu’s malignant influences can be obtained as a result of worship here, and that obstacles preventing a devotee’s marriage from taking place can be removed (*Tinattanti Vellimalar*, June 15, 2007, 4). The article describes how a committed devotee of the Kalahasti temple established this temple, which is “equal” to the original Kalahasti in power, but offers no mythological or other reason why this site should have particular power to rectify *dōṣam*. The tendency to replicate and multiply sacred sites in Indian traditions is always an indicator of power and a marker of status, and frequently is a sign that there is sufficient interest in that site for another instantiation of it to be both popular and profitable.

Although Kalahasti’s reputation as a place where *dōṣam* can be unambiguously removed and wishes can be fulfilled is strong, there are, of course, some individuals who

do not experience the positive outcomes for which they prayed. One example is the thirty-eight-year-old priest who has served at Kalahasti for the last fifteen years. He told me that despite daily leading devotees through rites designed to remove the obstacles preventing their marriages and reciting the powers of this sacred site, he personally suffers from delayed marriage due to Rahu's unfavorable position in his horoscope. This priest assumed his planetary configurations to be an outgrowth of the actions he had ostensibly committed in previous births, and said, "There is a partner born for each of us somewhere, but for me that will come *late.* You may think, 'Because of you so many have gotten married after coming here; why not you?' It is true that I have helped many to get married. I have pressured God so much that some of them have gotten married the very same day. But my horoscope is not like that." Given that his own planets seemed to be impervious to the power of this sacred site, we discussed other ritual therapies, like *nāga pratiṣṭhā*, he might consider and temples beyond Kalahasti that he might visit to perform *dōṣam*-removal *pūjās*. He seemed most interested in a pilgrimage to Rameshwaram, in the far southeast of Tamil Nadu, where he had heard that knowledgeable priests conduct expiatory fire sacrifices for *nāga dōṣam* sufferers.

The Sri Kalahasti temple is the site *par excellence* for *dōṣam*-removal *pūjās* and ritual relief from the negative effects of Rahu and Ketu in contemporary Tamil Nadu; over the course of my fieldwork it was the most widely discussed and frequently touted pilgrimage site associated with *dōṣam*. As the Kalahasti priest who was experiencing delayed marriage was aware, however, Rameshwaram is another key site associated with ritual solutions for *nāga dōṣam*,⁷³ as are Thirunageshwaram and Keezhapperumpallam, temples I discuss in the following section which focuses on worship of and offerings made to Rahu and Ketu.

While Kalahasti attracts devotees from all castes and from a wide spectrum of socio-economic backgrounds, I did not speak with or hear of any non-Brahmins who visited Rameshwaram to perform *dōṣam*-removal rites. It is important to note that while all four of these temples – Kalahasti, Rameshwaram, Thirunageshwaram and Keezhapperumpallam – are served by Brahmin priests, I encountered significant numbers of non-Brahmins engaged in *dōṣam*-related rituals at all of these temples except for Rameshwaram. My observations notwithstanding, in response to my query,

⁷³ In the context of the chapter of her dissertation that provides an ethnographic treatment of a fertility clinic in Madurai, Goslinga notes that one-third of the Hindu women she spoke who were under treatment there had also visited Rameshwaram for *nāga dōṣam pūjās* (2006, 147).

“Who comes to do these *pūjās*?” one Brahmin priest I interviewed in Rameshwaram

replied this way:

Many people, all Hindu. There is no caste [*jāti*] for this. Fifteen years ago mostly Brahmins came to do *nāga dōṣam* rituals with me, but now people from a mixture of castes come. This is due to the influence of books and television. Many, many people are consulting astrologers, and astrologers are telling people to come to do rituals at this temple. Mostly the astrologers are responsible for telling people to come to Rameshwaram to get cured from *dōṣam*.

Rameshwaram, one of India’s four sacred sites in the Char Dham (lit. four abodes) pilgrimage system, is associated with particular events from the epic *Rāmāyaṇa*, and is especially known as the place where Rama worshiped Shiva to be relieved of the *brahma-hatyā dōṣam* (the sin of Brahminicide) that he earned by killing Sita’s captor, the demon-king Ravana. Numerous rest houses and vegetarian eateries that cater to the town’s bustling pilgrim traffic are scattered throughout the streets that surround the impressive Ramanathaswamy temple, which houses the subcontinent’s southernmost among the twelve *jyotirlingams*, or *lingams* of light.

I first heard about Rameshwaram’s power as a place to perform expiatory rites for *dōṣam* in conversations with Brahmins in Chennai. One Brahmin woman in her fifties told me that her parents brought her younger sister there to perform a *nāga pratiṣṭhā*

rite, which involves the installation and enlivening of a stone snake image, when *nāga dōṣam* was identified as the reason her sister's potential marriage alliances were repeatedly faltering. Another Brahmin woman in her twenties told me that her parents sponsored a fire sacrifice at Rameshwaram to rid her elder sister of *nāga dōṣam* before they commenced the search for her groom. A middle-aged Brahmin woman who works as a journalist in Chennai described how while they were on their honeymoon in Rameshwaram, she and her husband sponsored an elaborate ritual bathing (*abhiṣekam*) ceremony for a stone *nāga* image as additional insurance against the *nāga dōṣam* that had been detected in her horoscope before their marriage. A Brahmin friend explained that although neither he nor his wife had any discernible *dōṣam* in their horoscopes, after three stillbirths they were advised to have a *nāga pratiṣṭhā* performed on their behalves at Rameshwaram. They did so, and followed this rite with a number of additional rituals performed in temples in Chennai and elsewhere in India, and eventually gave birth to a healthy baby girl.

Less than a week after Sonia Gandhi inaugurated the new Chennai – Rameshwaram train service in 2007, I traveled there to observe the *dōṣam*-removal rituals I had heard so much about, and to interview temple priests, ritual specialists, and

worshippers. Before having *darśan* at the main Ramanathaswamy temple, most pilgrims make a circuit of the temple's twenty-two *tīrthas*, wells containing sacred water, where a temple attendant purifies them with a small bucketful of water drawn from each one. All of the priests and ritual specialists with whom I spoke told me a version of the myth about how when Rama approached the sage Agastya to ask how to remove the *brahma-hatyā dōṣam* he incurred by killing Ravana, Agastya recommended installing and worshipping a *liṅgam* at Rameshwaram. Rama dispatched Hanuman to Kailash to worship Shiva and get a *liṅgam*, but when the Hanuman did not return by the appointed time, Agastya instructed Rama to worship one of the *liṅgams* that Sita had been playfully fashioning out of sand instead. Pleased with this worship, Shiva and his consort Uma appeared and declared that hereafter whoever prayed to this *liṅgam* would be freed of *dōṣam* and blessed with progeny. When Hanuman returned with two *liṅgams* obtained in Kailash and saw that the *pūjā* has already been completed he was mightily disappointed, but Rama told him to remove Sita's sand *liṅgam* and to install the ones he had carried there. Although Hanuman encircled the sand *liṅgam* with his mighty tail he could not uproot it, so they installed the two *liṅgams* Hanuman had carried from Kailash along with Sita's sand *liṅgam* and all of them continue to receive worship today.

Despite the centrality of this temple myth and its connection to removing Rama's *brahma-hatyā dōṣam*, none of the *parikārams* to counter *dōṣam* and request progeny that are performed at Rameshwaram today are carried out at Rameshwaram's famous Ramanathaswamy temple. That these *dōṣam*-removal rituals are conducted away from the temple constitutes a major difference from Kalahasti, where, as was described above, *dōṣam pūjās* take place in various locations within the temple complex itself. At Rameshwaram these rituals are performed at places ranging from the seaside, to the presiding ritual specialist's home, to under sacred trees at subsidiary shrines and temples. Devotees are then encouraged to worship at the Ramanathaswamy temple after their removal rituals are complete. Another significant difference between Kalahasti and Rameshwaram concerns the types of *dōṣam*-related *pūjās* performed at each place. While Kalahasti offers a standardized *pūjā* that is available in three tiers, the spectrum of *dōṣam* rituals conducted at Rameshwaram includes expiatory fire sacrifices, worshipping powerful stones associated with the *Rāmāyaṇa*, *nāga pratiṣṭhā* rites, and the ritual bathing and subsequent gifting of snake images crafted from precious metals like silver and gold.

One Brahmin priest in Rameshwaram, who works as a freelance ritual specialist and officiates at a range of rituals and ceremonies arranged according to the needs of his clients, enumerated several special features that make Rameshwaram a powerful site for reversing the effects of curses pronounced by disgruntled ancestors, resolving *nāga dōṣam*, and balancing negative planetary influences. He described how *dōṣam* accrues to individuals who do not perform ongoing ceremonies (*śrāddha*) honoring their ancestors, and said that it is typically an ancestor's curse (*pitṛ cāpam*) that prevents a couple from producing viable offspring. He discussed the *tila hōmam*, a sacrificial rite in which black sesame seeds are offered into a sacred fire, as the most effective expiatory rite for this curse and the sufferer's resulting childlessness.

This priest's description matches the account of the *tila hōmam* contained in the *Śānti Kusumākara*, a ritual manual that deals with expiatory rites (*śānti karmas*), resolving inauspicious planetary alignments, and neutralizing the negative consequences of sins committed in one's previous and current births. In addition, this text mentions taking twelve baths at Rameshwaram as equivalent to performing the *tila hōmam*, a ritual solution that this freelance ritual specialist also discussed. He told me that since Rameshwaram is distinguished by the fact that the Bay of Bengal (which he

classified as female) meets the Indian Ocean (which he identified as male) here, once a woman performs rituals to eliminate the *dōṣam* that has rendered her childless, she should bathe in these waters to remove any diseases of the uterus and facilitate a future pregnancy. In a section about ritual remedies for childlessness, a Tamil-language booklet about various *dōṣams* and their solutions concurs; “The remedy for this [childlessness] is that the person should go to Rameshwaram, take a holy bath in the sea, and visit the temple (Vidyadaran 2003, 50-51).

In our discussion about Rameshwaram, an astrologer told me that nine natural stones, believed to represent the nine planets, are immersed in the ocean near the shore at Rameshwaram. He said that they are visible when the tide recedes and worshipers can walk out on the exposed spit of land and perform *pūjā* to these stones in a bid to neutralize unfavorable planetary influences, especially the interventions of Rahu and Ketu. He linked these stones with events from the *Rāmāyaṇa*, saying,

They are not statues; they are rocks. They were created by Lord Rama. You know Rama? Well, he came to Rameshwaram, and he made the representation of the nine planets there. He did all the rituals because he had suffered a lot, because of his wife. You know that *Rāmāyaṇa*? So, in order to get rid of his *dōṣam* he worshiped these planets. Now daily all the rituals are done there for *nāga dōṣam*, *sarpa dōṣam*, for those who are not having children, and all.

Discussions of these stones and their power to avert the malignant effects of Rahu and Ketu surfaced in other interviews as well as in Tamil-language print sources, though there were some variations about whether Rama established these stones to mitigate his *brahma-hatyā dōṣam* after killing Ravana, to propitiate the nine planets before he traveled to Lanka, or whether it was his faithful *bhakta* Hanuman who installed them on Rama's behalf. These discrepancies notwithstanding, the presence of these stones at Rameshwaram is a significant element undergirding the site's reputation as powerful for mitigating *dōṣam* and negative planetary influences.

Nāga pratiṣṭhā, the installation and enlivening rites for stone snake images, are performed in three main places in Rameshwaram. The first is within walking distance from the Ramanathaswamy temple, under an enormous, spreading peepal tree that faces the ocean just a few hundred feet away. Hundreds of snake stones surround the tree's gnarled base, representing the full gamut of iconographic styles. While many of them bear the marks of recent worship, including colored powders, cloth offerings, and flower blossoms, others have toppled over or are jumbled together, seemingly forgotten. Dozens of wooden and cloth cradles hang above these stones, marking the petitions of many devotees seeking progeny. The second main site is nearby, along the stone steps

that lead down to the ocean. Pilgrims gather to take their ritual “dips” here, and priests sit cross-legged on the stone steps and perform *nāga pratiṣṭhā* ceremonies. The stones are left, decorated and enlivened, at various levels on the steps, where the sea can lap against them and even immerse them as it rises and falls with the tides. There is the sense that the stones are offered to the ocean itself, which is considered sacred as a water source and often identified with the Ganga in all its locations, but especially so here because of its association with events from the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

The third main place that stone *nāga* images are installed in Rameshwaram is beneath an expansive peepal tree on the premises of a temple called the Rama Tirtham temple. Tiered cement bases have been constructed around the tree here, and hundreds of snake stones are mounted there in neat rows. The devotees on whose behalves these rituals were performed have carved their names, native places, and dates into the wet cement near their respective stones, and the cement platforms are periodically extended to accommodate new images. One of the temple priests here told me that this site is renowned for granting children because it is where Sita and Rama performed the *putra kāmēṣṭi yāga*, the fire sacrifice designed to secure progeny. According to him,

After completing the *putra kāmēṣṭi yāga*, Rama and Sita had two sons, Kusha and Lava. In the Treta Yuga [the second world age] they did this; now, also, it continues. When people cannot have a child or cannot get married they come here and perform *nāga pratiṣṭhā*. ... Priests who are learned in the holy texts perform these after keeping the stone in water for some period and in grains for some period. ... If the devotee has this *pratiṣṭhā* performed here they get great results, because this place is endowed with special powers.

Significantly, as was the case with the *tila hōmam* described above, the *putra kāmēṣṭi yāga* is also described in the *Śānti Kusumākara*. The priest I spoke with at the Rama Tirtham temple confirmed what the ritual manual says about the fact that this sacrificial offering can be performed anywhere, but he disputed the idea that its efficacy could be matched if it were performed anywhere besides Rameshwaram; “For example, people from Madurai may perform this *yāga* at home, but out of 100 percent they will get only 1 percent benefit. But if they perform it here at Rameshwaram they will get 150 percent benefit because of the specialness of the place.” Here, the site’s power is derived from the distinctive combination of an ancient, original ritual tradition, which is performed by knowledgeable priests who preside over rites that mimic the ones carried out by Rama and Sita when they desired progeny.

Kalahasti and Rameshwaram were the most commonly discussed pilgrimage sites associated with rituals performed with the aim of diminishing or eliminating an

individual's *nāga dōṣam*. Although these sites differ in the repertoire of *dōṣam*-removal rituals they offer, where these various ceremonies are performed, the mythic events that lend each holy place its authority and power, and even the types of worshipers they attract, both share a reputation as *dōṣa-nivartti sthalas* where *parikārams* can be performed to neutralize the negative effects of particular planetary arrangements and horoscopic blemishes that block individuals from successfully marrying and producing offspring.

Conclusions

Building on the argument outlined in the previous chapter that the meanings of and repertoire of causes for *nāga dōṣam* are expanding in response to indigenous formulations about what characterizes modern times, this chapter has focused on a similarly expanding repertoire of ritual therapies for this condition. I argue that this core set of remedial rites constitutes a ritual response to the modern problems of late marriage and infertility, and provides a meaningful, therapeutic framework for negotiating the dilemmas inspired by rapidly shifting social and economic contexts in contemporary South India. I have presented these ritual therapies in five, indigenously defined,

categories of practices, and described how they constitute a flexible and growing repertoire characterized by the innovation, revision, and recontextualization of older, traditional ceremonies and rites.

I argue that Tamil devotees, astrologers, and ritual specialists participate in a self-conscious identification of circuits of local and regional temple networks that are enjoying growing reputations as ritually powerful for relieving *dōṣam*. There these individuals perform innovative rituals aimed at relieving this condition, facilitating successful marriages and pregnancies, and thus fostering more traditionally acceptable gender roles (particularly wifhood and motherhood) and life cycle progressions. The new popularity of these recontextualized rituals, along with that of particular local sites and regional networks associated with *nāga dōṣam*, all constitute recent innovations that have emerged in response to indigenous conceptions of and anxieties about modern times. While some of the sites and ritual performances emphasize their antiquity in an effort to cast themselves as authoritative traditions, others, like Kalahasti and its repertoire of *nāga dōṣam* ritual therapies are explicit about the recent character of their evolving traditions. These ritual performances often show up in unique, individualized permutations, and are combined and layered in ways that ritual specialists and/or

devotees perceive as most efficacious or best-suited to the particular needs of the situation at hand.

Although snake goddesses are worshiped extensively in connection with efforts to diminish or eliminate *nāga dōṣam*, there are other popular, vibrant, and important worship traditions focused on snake goddesses in contemporary Tamil Nadu. The most dramatic and public among these is the *Āṭi* festival season, on which the next chapter concentrates, an intensifying and ritually heightened period which is also developing in dialogue with the changing social, economic, and religious landscapes of this modern moment. Indeed, I argue that the *Āṭi* festival is currently experiencing a new popularity by virtue of its association with *nāga dōṣam* and the snake (and other local) goddesses considered efficacious in mitigating this malignant condition. Like the expanding repertoire of ritual therapies associated with *nāga dōṣam*, the *Āṭi* festival is also a “growing” tradition that has emerged as a site for ritual innovation and creativity.

CHAPTER FOUR

WORSHIPING *NĀGAS* IN THE MONTH OF *ĀṬI*

This chapter concentrates on the most vibrant and public forms of snake goddess worship in contemporary Tamil Nadu, which occur in festival contexts during the month of *Āṭi* (July – August). The goddess is the absolute focus of ritual life during this month, particularly at local goddess temples: drum beats signal almost-constant ritual events, women rise before dawn to cook and offer special foods in temple spaces, neighborhoods are mobilized to raise funds for, plan, and execute their goddess temple’s festival celebration, streets are dominated by huge light displays depicting the goddess’s many forms, and seemingly everyone is in the midst of some vow, fast, or religious activity.

Whereas the previous chapter discussed instances in which individuals propitiate snake goddesses (*nāgāttammaṅ*) and worship *nāgas* more generally with the specific goal of removing or mitigating their *nāga dōṣam*, this chapter shifts our attention to worship at the local, neighborhood (*ūr*) and temple institutional level. I focus on the elaborate expressions of snake goddess devotion (*bhakti*; *Ta. pakti*) and propitiations

that I witnessed in Chennai and Tamil Nadu during the *Āṭi* festivals (*tiruvīlā*) of 2005, 2006, 2007, and 2008. Many devotees do, in fact, bring appeals and petitions before snake goddesses during the *Āṭi tiruvīlā*, such as entreaties for healing, fertility, and general familial prosperity. However, the ritual desires of *Āṭi* festival celebrants are most often diffuse and multiple, and may frequently remain unarticulated. Participants described their involvement in *Āṭi* rituals – even in physically demanding, expensive, and potentially painful vows – against personal backdrops of devotion and service to the goddess in ways reminiscent of David L. Haberman’s characterization of the Ban-Yatra as a “goalless journey” whose sole purpose might be only to open up “a new perspective” (1994, viii). This devotion, which animates the reciprocal relationships in which worshipers participate with the goddess throughout the year, is publicly performed in *Āṭi* rituals aimed at defining, reconstituting, and protecting the goddess’s local area, or *ūr*.

Although worship during the *Āṭi* festival is not confined to snake goddesses, the religious idiom of *nāga* worship is both prominent and pervasive throughout this month

and *Āṭi* is the season *par excellence* for *nāgāttammaṇ* worship.⁷⁴ Some of *Āṭi*'s festival celebrations feature explicit connections to *nāgas*, such as the important Naga Chaturthi (lit. Snake's Fourth) *pūjā*, a festival observed in honor of snakes which falls on the fourth day after the new moon, while others have newer associations with *nāgas*. On the whole, however, *Āṭi* is framed and marked as a special festival season devoted to the worship of and celebration of the goddess in Tamil Nadu, and ritual performances dedicated to snake goddesses that are carried out during this period thus form part of *Āṭi*'s "broader ceremonial field" (Clark-Decès 2005, 100).

The *Āṭi* festival has significantly expanded, lengthened, and developed in recent years, and has experienced a surge in popularity as well as patronage from a widening body of upper-caste and Brahmin devotees (a matter that is treated in fuller detail in Chapter Six of this dissertation). I argue that the new popularity the *Āṭi* festival now enjoys and the new and/or expanded rituals celebrated at many snake goddess and other non-Brahminic goddess temples are largely attributable to the fact that these temples have recently attracted attention as powerful sites for *nāga dōṣam* ritual

⁷⁴ In a brief line, Santhi confirms the close association between *nāga* worship and *Āṭi* (1991, 90), and links these practices to the fact that seeds are planted during *Āṭi* and *nāgas* are invoked for agricultural fertility (85). Aravaanan also notes the special connection of serpent worship to *Āṭi* (1977, 94).

therapies.⁷⁵ Some devotees who brought to these temples the questions and concerns associated with these modern blemishes were approaching this class of goddesses for the first time. In many cases these worshipers were inspired by the developing reputations of these goddesses and sites, which have spread through informal word-of-mouth and through magazine articles and other media attention.

I argue that these local networks of snake goddess and anthill temples – whether already established or just emerging – are responding to and extending the growing interest that new populations of devotees are showing to them by hosting innovative *Āṭi* festival celebrations. Indeed, *Āṭi* has emerged as a context where devotees express and perform both newly found and long-standing devotion to this increasingly prominent class of goddesses, and is a context in which *nāga* traditions are most visibly innovating in response to modern anxieties and aspirations. Finally, I argue that it is by focusing on

⁷⁵ It is important to clarify that I am not suggesting *nāga dōṣam* is the sole reason for the expansion and increasing popularity of the *Āṭi* festival in Chennai. There are a number of reasons for the development and popularity of this festival season, including those that are baldly commercial, those attributable to additional disposable income and middle-classness, the emphasis placed on ritual display, the continuing erosion of caste mores in urban contexts, and the phenomenon which is indigenously identified as increasing *bhakti* in contemporary South India. I am, however, suggesting that *Āṭi* is one site where we can see ritual practice responding to new forms of religious devotion born of anxiety about social change; in *Āṭi* we see the performance of devotion to a class of goddesses who have been “repurposed” to respond to the anxieties of shifting social contexts and whose perceived efficacy is being celebrated with new ritual forms.

these vibrant and public festival performances that we are best able to identify the specific sites of ritual change, innovation, and development in this growing tradition.

This chapter is divided into two main sections; the first section discusses the contours of the month of *Āṭi*: including the activities and practices that occur or are abjured, and why Tamils mark the month off as distinct, unique, and special. In order to situate the worship of snake goddesses during *Āṭi* within the broader repertoire of this festival's ritual expressions, the second section describes and analyzes four of the central ritual performances that occur during *Āṭi*. *Nāgaṣ*, *nāgāttammaṅṅ*, and fertility concerns occupy center stage in each of these *Āṭi* festivals, all of which exhibit tendencies toward innovation and respond to contemporary ritual concerns of fertility and late marriage. These festival ritual performances can be interpreted as alternative ritual responses to the concerns of delayed marriage and infertility, and thus constitute a complementary repertoire to *nāga dōṣam*'s spectrum of ritual therapies. This treatment of *Āṭi*'s ritual repertoire provides the foundation for my discussion and analysis of the expanding *Āṭi* festival at two snake goddess temples in Chennai – the first at the Naga Mariyamman Anthill temple and the second at Merciful Snake Goddess temple, a small

snake goddess temple just yards from MK Amman that participates in close ritual relationships this popular goddess temple – that will form the basis of the next chapter.

The Contours and Cadence of *Āṭi*

Spanning the sultry Tamil month which runs from mid-July to mid-August, *Āṭi* is a ritually heightened period characterized by a plethora of festive occasions and considered the most appropriate month in which to undertake *vēṇṭatal* (vows to particular deities) and *pirārttaṇai* (petitionary prayers).⁷⁶ *Āṭi* is not, however, described as an auspicious month; marriages are typically neither arranged nor performed during *Āṭi*, nor are other new endeavors begun, such as moving one's residence.⁷⁷ The commencement of *Āṭi* also coincides with the beginning of *dakṣiṇāyana* (Ta. *taṭciṇāyaṇam*), the six month period (from *Āṭi* to *Mārkaḷi*, or mid-July to mid-January)

⁷⁶ Tamil months are solar, though many Tamil festivals fall in relation to the lunar month and its units (i.e., *tithis*, discussed below). For more on the specifics of the Tamil calendar and its significance for domestic worship and the festival cycle see Logan 1980. On the festivals which punctuate the month of *Āṭi*, see Logan (1980, 175-214) and Hancock (1990, 212-19; 1999, 133-36).

⁷⁷ It is worth noting, however, that I never heard Tamils describe *Āṭi* as “inauspicious,” as Logan characterizes this month and the larger *dakṣiṇāyana* half of the year (1980, 174-75), a difference that may mark a shift in perception that has occurred in the twenty-five-year period between when she carried out her research in Madurai and I conducted my fieldwork in Chennai and elsewhere in Tamil Nadu.

during which the sun progresses southward toward the Tropic of Cancer and is understood to be nighttime for the gods. Relatively less auspicious than its complement, *uttarāyaṇa*, the sun's six month progression northward toward the Tropic of Capricorn (from *Tai* to *Āṇi*, or mid-January to mid-July) that is considered daytime for the gods, *dakṣiṇāyana* is regarded as an unfavorable time to die because heaven is believed to be inaccessible during this period, forcing the soul to take immediate rebirth. On the whole, *dakṣiṇāyana* is considered an effective and appropriate period to make offerings to one's ancestors, with the new moon (*amāvācī*) day of *Āṭi* acknowledged as exceptionally auspicious for these ritual activities.⁷⁸

In an effort to represent *Āṭi*'s ritual rhythms visually, I provide an *Āṭi* calendar that is based on the festival as I observed its celebration in 2006. Because Tamil months begin in the middle of Gregorian months, I have provided the *Āṭi* date first and followed it

⁷⁸ A wide spectrum of death rites and ritual practices dedicated to the deceased are performed throughout Tamil Nadu during *Āṭi*. I participated in several domestic ceremonies honoring deceased relatives, and observed other rituals to propitiate and feed departed ancestors that were performed in public space, namely at water tanks attached to Brahminical temples, on new moon day. I also witnessed non-Brahmin iterations of these ceremonies performed on *Ati Perukku* at the banks of the Cauvery River. Finally, I recorded numerous non-Brahmin invitation rituals that aim to call deceased relatives back into the world and install them as household deities (*pūvāṭaikkāri*), and which share similar ritual grammars with those Nabokov (2000) documents for deceased kin and lineage deities.

with the Gregorian calendar date in parentheses (e.g., *Āṭī* 1 = July 17). The standard ritual events that comprise the three-day goddess festival that occurs every Friday – Sunday are reproduced each week, and other ritual performances are marked where they occurred and I observed them that year. I acknowledge that this system produces something of an artificial picture, because ritual events like the domestic worship of deceased family members – which I have assigned to *Āṭī* 26, or July 11 because I was a participant-observer at one of these ceremonies on that day – actually occur throughout the month in other homes. The same is true of cooking *porikal*, which occurs at temples on every Friday of the month, as well as many Sundays and other occasions. A further difficulty is introduced because many of *Āṭī*'s *pūjās* and festival events do not fall on the same day of the month every year; rather, they shift slightly due to calendric, astrological, and astronomic cycles and irregularities. Although my calendar cannot reflect all of these variations, its purpose is to illustrate the month's cadence and flow, and to convey the back-to-back character of the festival's vows, fasts, and ritual performances. It may be useful to refer back to this calendar as the ritual elements and festivals noted on it are treated in more depth in this and the following chapters.

The month's most important ritual performances are the three-day festivals, or *tiruvijā*, which take place over the course of each weekend of *Āṭi*; these festivals are briefly outlined below and their full repertoire is described in richer detail in the context of the two temple case studies I present in the following chapter of this dissertation. Other significant ritual occasions include Ati Puram (the day on which the *pūram* star is rising and particular goddesses are honored), Ati Perukku (a festival characterized by worship of and at water sources), Varalakshmi Vratam (a women's *pūjā* that entreats the goddess Lakshmi to bestow prosperity), Garuda Panchami (worship of Garuda, the mythical eagle associated with Vishnu), and Naga Chaturthi, described above. As they are in every month, new moon (*amāvāca*) and full moon (*paurṇami*) are also considered auspicious. From this wider ritual repertoire, I have selected Ati Puram, Ati Perukku, Naga Chaturthi, and Garuda Panchami for detailed description and analysis because of their resonances for snake goddess worship and relationship to *nāga dōṣam*.

Figure 1: ĀṭI/CALENDAR

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Āṭi 1 (July 17) Cooking <i>poṅkal</i>	Āṭi 2 (18)	Āṭi 3 (19)	Āṭi 4 (20) KARTTIKAI (Murugan's birth star)	Āṭi 5 (21) Build ritual vessel (<i>karakam</i>); tie protective wristlets (<i>kāppu</i>); procession	Āṭi 6 (22) Milk Pot Procession (and other processions)	Āṭi 7 (23) Food offerings: porridge (<i>kūḷ</i>), feast (<i>kumpam</i>); procession; goddess is dismissed; <i>karakam</i> is immersed
<u>Three-Day Goddess Festival:</u> (Daily: ritual drumming, worship, possession, and oracular speech; Friday: <i>karakam and kāppu</i> , Saturday: processions; Sunday: <i>kūḷ, kumpam</i> , procession, immersion of <i>karakam</i>)						
Āṭi 8 (24) NEW MOON	Āṭi 9 (25)	Āṭi 10 (26)	Āṭi 11 (27)	Āṭi 12 (28) ATI PURAM (goddess <i>pūjā</i>) Possession by spirit of deceased	Āṭi 13(29) NAGA CHATURTHI (<i>nāga pūjā</i>) Processions	Āṭi 14 (30) GARUDA PANCHAMI (Garuda <i>pūjā</i>) Cooking <i>poṅkal</i>
<u>Three-Day Goddess Festival: as above</u>						
Āṭi 15 (31)	Āṭi 16 (August 1)	Āṭi 17 (2)	Āṭi 18 (3) ATI PERUKKU (<i>pūjā</i> at water sources)	Āṭi 19 (4) VARALAKSHMI VRATHAM (Lakshmi <i>pūjā</i>)	Āṭi 20 (5) Public worship of deceased family members	Āṭi 21 (6) Offer <i>kūḷ</i> at homes
<u>Three-Day Goddess Festival: as above</u>						
Āṭi 22 (7)	Āṭi 23 (8) FULL MOON Goddess Draupadi Festival	Āṭi 24 (9) Renewal of sacred thread for Brahmin males	Āṭi 25 (10)	Āṭi 26 (11) Domestic worship of deceased family members	Āṭi 27 (12) Worship of deceased family members Flower Shower <i>Pūjā</i> for goddess	Āṭi 28 (13) Installation and enlivening of snake stone (<i>nāga pratiṣṭhā</i>) Firewalking Ritual
<u>Three-Day Goddess Festival: as above</u>						
Āṭi 29 (14)	Āṭi 30 (15)	Āṭi 31 (16) GOKUL ASHTAMI (<i>pūjā</i> for Krishna)	Āvaṇi 1 (17) KRISHNA JAYANTHI (<i>pūjā</i> for Krishna)	Āvaṇi 2 (18) "Fifth Friday of Āṭi" Possession by spirit of deceased	Āvaṇi 3 (19)	Āvaṇi 4 (20)
<u>Three-Day Goddess Festival: as above</u>						

The first day of *Āṭi* is auspicious and ritually important, and female worshipers outnumber their male counterparts at goddess temples on this occasion even more vastly than they do on ordinary days. The following description, based on field notes recorded on the first day of *Āṭi* in 2006, evokes the scene and captures some of the ritual activities I observed at Mundakakkanni Amman (hereafter MK Amman) temple in Mylapore:

When I arrived just before 6 A.M. more than eighty women had already assembled in the street opposite the entrance to MK Amman temple and were squatting to cook *poṅkal* (a boiled rice and lentil mixture) over individual cow dung fires. The temple officials are not allowing women to cook *poṅkal* inside the temple in what was previously the *poṅkal* pavilion this year because of all the clean-up their hundreds of fires require, and because it quickly becomes impossible to move (or breathe) in the area behind the sanctum near the banyan tree, anthill, and *nāga* image. Once their *poṅkal* is ready the women scoop a dollop of semi-solid ghee (clarified butter) onto their heavy metal ladles and, holding them close to the flames, fry a few cashew nuts in them. They then garnish their *poṅkal* with the melted ghee and fried cashews and take their places in the impossibly long line to enter the temple's inner sanctum, where they place their *poṅkal* pots near the goddess's image to infuse the cooked food with her blessings and *śakti*. Even at that early hour the street was already filled with waves of thick smoke sent up from the many fires and was crowded with bustling devotees. New yellow metal barriers have been erected at the nearest intersections to block larger vehicles from passing, but two-wheelers are still able weave around these obstacles if they are willing to brave the thicket of

pedestrians. The rickety, makeshift tables and stalls offering a variety of worship supplies – flower blossoms, flower garlands, cow dung cakes, milk packets, eggs, coconuts, terracotta lamps, oil, matches, lemons, cotton wicks, bananas, camphor chunks, turmeric and vermilion powders, sandalwood paste, and incense sticks – have been pushed back further from the entrance to facilitate traffic flow, and a new area for devotees to deposit their shoes has been established. The interior of the temple is absolutely bursting with worshipers engaged in a variety of activities: standing in coiled lines, purchasing flimsy, colored tickets that allow them access to the inner sanctum, pushing at the metal railings for a glimpse of the decorated and adorned goddess, chanting in front of the bejeweled festival image of the goddess locked in a subsidiary shrine, circumambulating the sanctum, performing *arīgapradakṣiṇa* (full-body rolling circumambulation), unpacking woven plastic baskets full of offerings brought from home, lighting oil lamps, pouring milk over snake stones, and worshiping at the anthill in the roots of the banyan tree behind the sanctum. The number of devotees here is astounding – far more than I saw in 2004 or 2005 – and the temple committee is clearly more organized in their implementation of measures to handle the expected crowds.

Throughout the year, Tuesdays and Fridays (and, to a lesser extent, Sundays) are considered the most appropriate days for goddess worship and in *Āṭī* these days are host to particularly numerous and dramatic ritual performances and practices. Indeed the Fridays of *Āṭī*, and especially the odd-numbered Fridays (the first, third, fifth, and so on), are the month's ritual days *par excellence* which launch weekend-long festival celebrations at local goddess temples. Each and every weekend (Friday – Sunday) of

Āṭi many such festivals are staged at various goddess temples, and frequently devotees will participate in several of these intensive, three-day ritual sequences. Some Chennai goddess devotees will attend the *Āṭi tiruvilā* at their local urban goddess temple and also travel to their native village to celebrate the festival there, as I did with two different families in 2005 and 2006.

These Friday – Sunday festivals, which are celebrated at virtually all local goddess temples, follow a particular ritual grammar and share a common body of ritual elements.⁷⁹ They are inaugurated by the tying of a protective ritual thread (*kāppu*) around the wrists of festival participants on Friday and feature the construction of an elaborate ritual vessel (*karakam*) which is performatively identified with the goddess. Other ritual activities include possession, dialogues with the goddess, and speaking prophecy (*aru! vākkū*), as well as processions of the *karakam* and devotees, and the ritual preparation of particular foods (*kūl*, or porridge, and *kumpam*, a mixed feast) that are subsequently offered to the goddess. These festivals end on Sunday evening when festival celebrants remove their *kāppu*, the *karakam* is processed to and immersed in a

⁷⁹ Some of this grammar carries over in diaspora; Paul Younger describes the celebration of a three-day festival honoring Mariyamman in Guyana which features many of the same ritual elements, including the building of *karakam*, ritual drumming, possession and procession (2002, 136-43).

body of water, and the goddess – whose permission was requested on Friday to perform the festival – is ritually dismissed.

***Āṭi*'s Special Features**

In Tamil-language print sources, in casual conversations, and in formal interviews, *Āṭi* is described as a distinctive period characterized by intense ritual activity. It became clear early on in my fieldwork that a striking intertextuality was at work between the popular genre of Tamil-language religious magazines and the rituals being performed in domestic and temple spaces during *Āṭi*. Many of the devotees whose homes I visited had these magazines lying around and offered to let me borrow issues with articles relevant to the research interests I articulated to them. Some of them reported that features about *Āṭi* in these magazines motivated them to undertake specific rituals and vows, or to visit temples that an article highlighted. One woman disclosed that although she had never heard of *nāga dōṣam* before, she had recently embarked on a forty-eight-day vow after reading an article that suggested her chronic back pain might be due to a flaw in her horoscope. Its inclusion in one of these magazines can and has

caused crowds at a particular temple to burgeon practically overnight, and altered the tenor and emphasis of worship at that site.

I began buying these religious magazines at newsstands in my neighborhood and perusing back issues at a local lending library, and discovered a significant number of articles that pertained to *Āṭi*, its rituals and practices, and temples and goddesses reputed to have particular power during this festival season. One such article, titled “*Āṭi Māta Makimai!*” (“The Special Features on the *Āṭi* Month”), appeared in the enormously popular Tamil-language religious magazine *Kumutam Pakṭi* (*kumutam* = lotus; *pakṭi* [*bhakti*] = devotion) a week before *Āṭi* began in 2006 (Parimaḷar 2006, 28). While it is unambiguous that worshiping the goddess in her multiple forms remains the primary focus of *Āṭi*, this feature also provides brief explanations for several other religious practices and rituals which occur during this period, such as making offerings to ancestors, propitiating the Cauvery River and the holy basil plant, and associations that particular deities and saints share with mythical episodes celebrated during *Āṭi*.

It is significant that this article is devoted to *Āṭi's makimai*, or special features, because this is the Tamil term that those with whom I spoke employed most often to describe *Āṭi*. Numerous individuals also used the English word “speciality” (*sic*) to stand

in for *makimai* in conversations about *Āṭi*. *Makimai* may be defined as “power, glory, impact” (Cre-A 1992, 795), “greatness, grandeur, glory, majesty,” and “honour, dignity, respectability” (*Tamil Lexicon* 1982, 2994). Taking the contexts in which this word is deployed as my guides, however, I translate *makimai* as “special feature,” “unique feature,” and sometimes “wonder,” because these glosses seem to best capture the various senses of the term and adhere most closely to what Tamils I spoke to were trying to convey.

It is also significant that this article was featured so prominently in *Kumutam Pakṭi*, Tamil Nadu’s most popular fortnightly religious magazine, because inclusion in such a widely read magazine can establish a temple or set of rituals as authoritative and account for their instant popularization. Published by the same group which publishes the popular Tamil-language astrology magazine *Kumutam Jotiṭam*, *Kumutam Pakṭi* was founded in 1947 and, according to its website, enjoys a print circulation of 5,200,000 and receives 1,300,000 online hits per day

(<http://www.kumudam.com/aboutus.php?type=aboutus>). The popularity of this

publication is even more widespread than these numbers suggest, however, because a single purchased copy of *Kumutam Pakṭi* may be passed among many hands in an

urban apartment building or office, and its inexpensive cover price (sixteen rupees, or less than fifty cents) puts it within reach of a wide range of Tamils. Another religious magazine, the monthly *Kāmakōṭi* which is published by the Mylapore-based religious goods emporium and exporters Giri Trading Agency, similarly runs an annual feature in the July and the August issues which explains the basis for the fasts and festivals of *Āṭi* and instructs readers about how they are to be observed and performed. I argue that these widely available and accessible publications and the proliferation of other new media plays a direct and expanding role in shaping devotees' perceptions about *Āṭi*'s special character, about this class of goddesses, and about the ritual practices appropriate to this festival season.

Those with whom I spoke offered a range of perspectives about *Āṭi*'s distinctive features and the reasons why this period is considered especially fruitful for devotional activities, vows, and ritual performances. The next several sections outline the most important among these understandings, but here I want to highlight one association, significant because of its bearing on *nāga dōṣam* and its repertoire of related ritual therapies. Several individuals linked *Āṭi*'s *makimai* to negative astrological configurations that occur during this month, a connection that evokes the relationship

between inauspicious planetary arrangements and *dōṣam*. One young man, who informally functions as a ritual consultant for his family and friends while holding a white collar job in Chennai's business process outsourcing (BPO) industry, told me:

In each and every month the power of the planets fluctuates. The planets have a perverse influence in *Āṭī*. All the planets are under the goddess's control. Each and every planet is under the control of one deity. If we pray to that deity we will get relief from the planet's unfavorable influences. ... In the month of *Āṭī* the planets have very negative influences so if we pray to the goddess we can get a cure from these damaging forces. Only the goddess can control these planets in *Āṭī*. If we *cool* the goddess during *Āṭī* then she will control the planets. This is one of the special features of *Āṭī*.

In addition to locating *Āṭī*'s special character in relation to astrological cycles and influences, this young man's comments highlight the pervasive association between *Āṭī* and the goddess and hint at the ways that her worship during this month is oriented toward cooling what devotees perceive to be her heated body. The ritual performances associated with each of these understandings of *Āṭī* are discussed in detail in subsequent sections of this chapter.

Āṭi and *Ammaṇ*: A Suitable and Happy Time

Āṭi is primarily understood as a special period for the goddess (*ammaṇ* in more common parlance and usually *ampā!* in more Brahminical terms), and the vast majority of the numerous festival occasions, fasts, and vows that take place during *Āṭi* are dedicated to the goddess. One devotee's simple statement captures this relationship succinctly: "*Āṭi* is for *ammaṇ*. That is the meaning of the month, and the reason why it is so special." Almost everyone with whom I spoke used the word *ukanta* – suitable or appropriate – to describe *Āṭi*, and many of them also employed verbal emphasis or used qualifiers and suffixes to mark *Āṭi* apart as the *only* suitable or appropriate month for the goddess, such as the woman who said, "*Āṭi* is special for *ammaṇ*. There are no other months for *ammaṇ*; only *Āṭi*." While many of them did identify *Āṭi* as a suitable month (*mātam/mācam*), it was also very common for people to refer to *Āṭi* as a day (*nā!*) to describe how this time is suitable (*ukanta*), special (*vicēṣam*), important (*mukkiyam*), or happy (*cantōṣam*) for the goddess. One temple custodian's wife told me, "*Āṭi* is the suitable time for *ammaṇ*. It is her important time. It is the special time to worship her, to make our vows to her. Only *Āṭi* is the suitable time for *ammaṇ*."

Both male and female worshipers emphasized that *Āṭī* is a happy time, both for the goddess and for devotees. Although vows and requests (*vēṅṅtuta* and *pirārttana*) are addressed to the goddess during this period, devotees characterized this period in terms of the goddess's power (*śakti*), the intimacy they share with her, and their own devotion, rather than themes of restraint, distance, austerity, or lack. Female festival celebrants, in particular, stressed the close relationships and affinities they share with the goddess during *Āṭī*, especially in terms of their mutual cravings for *kūḷ* (millet porridge), which is offered to the goddess, to women who embody her through possession performances, and to ordinary devotees throughout the month. According to one festival celebrant, "*Āṭī* is the goddess's time. For ladies it is a happy time, and for the goddess it is a happy time. She is near to us and on Sundays we offer *kūḷ* for her. *Kūḷ* is her suitable and favorite food, and ladies also desire it during the festival."

Several women also linked the goddess's happiness during the month of *Āṭī* to the practice of honoring her with special decorations (*alanikāram*), and some individuals, such as this temple priest, discussed the custom of inviting daughters back to their natal homes (*tāy viṭṭu*) to celebrate the *Āṭī* festival: "*Āṭī* is the goddess's day. For ladies it is a cheerful day. For the goddess it is the special day. In each and every house girls come

back to their mother's house for the month of *Āṭī*. Why don't we leave the girl at her mother-in-law's house? Because *Āṭī* is special for the goddess and the girl should be in her mother's house then." His comments suggest the status and pleasure associated with an out-married daughter's return from her marital home, where she typically lives according to patrilocal residence patterns, to her natal home. Because the transfer of a bride to her marital family is accompanied by the expectation that she assumes new customs and ritual responsibilities for new deities, it may be the case that the festivals of a woman's natal home are not celebrated in her new family, or that they are not marked in the ways that she is accustomed to. Since religious observances are indexed to place and family traditions, it follows that festivals and *pūjās* are key times for a daughter to return to her natal home so that she might participate in the worship of familiar deities, partake in the celebratory atmosphere, and enjoy the status that accompanies such a visit.

Many correlated the goddess's perceived happiness to the sheer numbers of devotees who make their way to the goddess's temples during this month, and suggested that the crowds are particularly pleasing to her, as this college student did, "The goddess is very happy in *Āṭī*. People go to the temples in great numbers [*kuttam*]

during this month and when the goddess sees the crowds [*kumpal*] she becomes happy.” Some also highlighted the social dimension of this month for the devotees themselves, such as this temple cleaning lady:

She [the goddess] is very happy. People go to the temple during this month and she sees the crowd and she is happy. People say, “I went to Periyapalaiyam, Mel Malaiyanur, and Mangadu” [important Tamil goddess temples]. They go to these temples once in a while during the year but *Āṭi* is a special time and we go to the temple every day. We meet people who we know at the temple and we also become happy. Like that for her [the goddess] also it is a happy day. People come here and *mix* together. And they also like that.

Āṭi, Ammai, and Cooling the Goddess with Kūl

Āṭi falls in the summer season (*kōṭaikālam*), and was traditionally the time when pox (*ammai*) and fevers afflicted communities in Tamil Nadu. It is commonly believed that the goddess herself heats up during *Āṭi* and that she expresses her heated condition by afflicting individuals with pox-related diseases. As numerous scholarly sources have discussed, sufferers appeal to the North Indian goddess Sitala and the South Indian goddess Mariyamman (and/or other of the Seven Sister goddesses) for relief from pox, measles, and related ailments, especially those which manifest as pustules (Dimock 1982; Flueckiger 2008; Kolenda 1982; Marglin 1990; Nicholas 1982; Egnor 1983; see

also Bradford 1983 on a class of skin diseases caused by the goddess Yellamma in Karnataka). In South India pustules – an expression of the goddess’s presence in a body – are imaged as Mariyamman’s pearls (*muttu*), and Muttumariyamman is one of the goddess’s most common appellations. The appearance of *ammai* on an individual’s skin indicates the goddess’s possession of or manifestation in that body, and this possession is interpreted both as a sign of her grace (*aru!*) and her anger or intensity (*kōpam, ukkiram*). Mariyamman – who is regarded both as the goddess who inflicts and who relieves pox – is typically propitiated with cooling offerings of millet porridge and vibrant green neem leaves to reduce the heat of her presence on an individual’s body.⁸⁰

A non-Brahmin priest who serves at a small Muttumariyamman temple reflected on the range of *ammai*’s causes, treatments and meanings in a conversation with me:

Walking around in the hot climate may cause *ammai* to come. Some people say we can remove *ammai* by taking *tablets* or medicine. Some people say it may be removed by taking injections. These methods may also be correct, but we use neem leaves and remove *ammai* this way. This is the custom for many years and people swear that neem works. So many people have faith in the

⁸⁰ On the uses of neem to reduce the heat associated with pox and the connection between neem and the goddess Mariyamman, see Ahmed 1995 and Amirthalingam 2001. On these and other medical and cultural practices associated with neem, see also Bradford (1983); Croke (1894, Chapter VII: “Tree and Serpent Worship,” especially 252-54); Smith and Narasimhachary (1991, 195; 197).

ammaṅ. If we surrender to the goddess she will save us, no matter how many sins we have committed. Some people say that *ammai* is a blessing from the goddess. ... If a person has *ammai* we must give respect to him in the temple because we believe that *ammai* is the goddess's *prasādam*. We treat him by stroking his body with neem leaves, but we must do it gently, because otherwise the pustules will open.

Devotees and ritual specialists discussed the worship of goddesses during the month of *Āṭi* in terms of devotees' desires to make the goddess "cool" in an effort to achieve what Hancock calls "thermic balance" (1999, 134), and cast *Āṭi*'s numerous vows and fasts in terms of averting or forestalling *ammai*.⁸¹ Several of them framed the contrasts between urban and village festival cycles in terms of efforts to contain *ammai*, and pointed out that while *Āṭi* is paramount in Chennai, it is insignificant compared with

⁸¹ Meyer's study of the Ankalamman cult in Tamil Nadu includes a myth which links the appearance of *ammai* with the goddess's desire to be worshiped and offered *kūḷ*. In it, the *ammaṅ* lists an enormous goat, a huge flour lamp, and a vat of *kūḷ* among the items she requires Lakshmi to offer to her before she will bring down the fever she has placed on her brother, Vishnu. Vishnu reflects aloud that it will be difficult for common (i.e., non-divine) people to make such lavish offerings to the *ammaṅ*, and he encourages her to modify her demands for ordinary devotees; "Go to a place where the Vaṅṅār (washermen) are. They will give you pure gruel [*kūḷ*] which you can eat and which will make you happy. You can place the pearls [pox] on people. Afterwards you cure them, and they will bring you gruel [*kūḷ*], so that you can eat and live" (1986, 18).

the festivals of the Tamil month of *Cittirai* (April – May) in villages, such as this priest

did:⁸²

In Madras they consider *Āṭi* the most important month. In villages they consider *Cittirai* the most important one. They regard the month of *Āṭi* as special because children are affected by many diseases [*nōy*] during this month. They fall sick. At that time they observe *viratam* [Skt. *vrata*; fasting, religious vow or austerity]. They have to perform petitionary prayers for healing during that time. The festival in *Āṭi* takes place because of the pox and diseases.

The practice of preparing, cooking, and offering *kūḷ*, the millet porridge mentioned above, to the goddess during *Āṭi* is a central and important feature of this festival season. *Kūḷ* is distributed to devotees at temples on Sundays, the concluding day of the weekend public festivals that begins each Friday, as well as in domestic spaces in the context of goddess *pūjās*, and then offered to neighbors and others after a portion has been reserved for the goddess. Widely considered a very healthy food and one that balances the body's internal temperature, *kūḷ* is regarded as particularly suitable for the hot month of *Āṭi*. A man from one of the fisherman castes told me, "Because of the heat a lot of diseases spread during *Āṭi*. This is because the goddess is hot [*cūṭu*] and she

⁸² *Cittirai* is especially associated with the Tamil New Year, which is celebrated on the first day of the month, as well as with grand wedding celebrations between South Indian deities, such as the multi-day festival celebrating the nuptials of Meenakshi and Sundareswarar in Madurai (on this divine wedding festival in Madurai see Harman 1992).

spreads her heat to her devotees. If we pour *kụ̄* her heat will reduce and it will cure the diseases. *Kụ̄* will also reduce *cholesterol.*”

Although I will offer a detailed description and analysis of the performance of offering *kụ̄* in the context of the celebration of the *Āṭi tiruvijā* at the Naga Mariyamman Anthill temple in the next chapter, here I would like to discuss perceptions about *kụ̄*'s suitability and appropriateness for the goddess, particularly in relation to perceptions of it as a “cool” food. In the words of a Brahmin temple priest, “*Āṭi* is the goddess’s intense [*ukkiram*] period. ... At this time the goddess is hot. To make her cool, everybody pours *kụ̄*.” A non-Brahmin female ritual specialist who embodies the goddess through possession in weekly consultations in her domestic *pūjā* room also cast the offering of *kụ̄* in terms of cooling the goddess and effecting healing from pox-related illnesses. She said, “We pray because at that time [in *Āṭi*] smallpox and cholera will spread over the people. If we pour *kụ̄* for her she will cool down and those pustules will go off. If we pour *kụ̄* she will reduce in heat.”

In the context of lamenting that *Āṭi* is the slowest month of the year in his profession, particularly because people do not arrange or perform marriages at this time, an astrologer commented on the centrality of *kụ̄* to the *Āṭi* festival and emphasized that

it is the only suitable food for the goddess: “People have no need of astrologers in *Āṭi*; they are busy pouring *kūḷ* in this month. ... The goddess drinks *kūḷ*, only *kūḷ*. This [reason] is why they perform *pūjā* and give *kumpam* [lit. heap; a mixture of non-vegetarian food offerings] in *Āṭi*. This is the special reason for and the special feature of the *Āṭi* festival.” A ritually observant non-Brahmin woman in her fifties also located the goddess’s heated condition during *Āṭi* within the cycle of the year; “*Āṭi* is special for the goddess, for Mariamma[n]. *Āṭi* is the suitable time for her; no other month is special like *Āṭi*. *Āṭi* is very special because they *chill* the goddess in that month. Throughout the other months in a year they give her camphor and heat her up with hot offerings – only in this month they cool her down.”

Related to conceptions about the goddess’s heated character during *Āṭi* and the ritual necessity of cooling her with offerings of *kūḷ* is the belief that the goddess Mariyamman will bestow rain if she is worshiped during this festival period. While this association is somewhat muted in Chennai by virtue of the distance most residents have from agricultural livelihoods, the monsoon remains critically important for the city’s drinking water supply. Additionally, people believe that if cooling rains arrive soon after a sultry *Āṭi*, they are a sign of the goddess’s pleasure and signal a diminished likelihood

that pox-related illnesses will take root in the community. One well-educated young man put it this way:

Māri means rain. This month is the windy, stormy month. In the next months, *Āvaṇi* [August – September] and *Puraṭṭāci* [September – October], the rains will come. The rains will bring good things for our world. We always pray to the rain as a goddess [*peṇ teyvam*], and the river as a goddess, and the earth as a goddess. Before the rain comes we pray to Mariyamman; we do *pūjā* to get rains. Only if we do *pūjās* to Mariyamman in *Āṭi* will we get rains in *Āvaṇi* and *Puraṭṭāci*. By pouring *kūl* – this is *famous* in the month of *Āṭi* – that is how we will get the rains.

Practice and Difference: A Note on *Āṭi* in Village Contexts

It is clear that the ritual performances and cultural practices I observed and participated in during *Āṭi* in Chennai are not observed uniformly throughout Tamil Nadu, and that not even the inextricable link between *Āṭi* and the goddess extends across all regions of the state. For example in Madurai, a Tamil city reachable by overnight train from Chennai, worshipers at an increasingly popular goddess festival that shares many ritual features in common with the *Āṭi* festival but falls in the Tamil month of *Pankuṇi* (March – April) told me repeatedly that there, “*Āṭi* is nothing,” and in *Āṭi* “nothing happens.” Some of them attributed this marked contrast to the fact that most of the people who patronize local goddess temples hail from agricultural castes and farmers

are busy preparing to plant paddy in *Āṭi*, which means that they do not have the disposable income or time necessary to undertake ritual practices and vows.⁸³ One non-Brahmin priest who serves at a snake goddess temple in Chennai but who maintains close ties to his native village, however, proposed that the early days of *Āṭi* before the paddy is sown are actually the ideal time to propitiate the goddess; “The month of *Āṭi* is the special period for the goddess. ... The farmers are *free* at this time. That is why they marked the month of *Āṭi* apart for the festival.”

One farmer from a village in south-central Tamil Nadu told me that in his region people pour *kūḷ* – a practice that Chennaiites would consider out of place in any month except for *Āṭi* – in the months of *Cittirai* and *Vaikāci* (May – June). He claimed that *Āṭi* is reserved for ear-piercing ceremonies (*katāṇi viḷā*), puberty rites (*mañcaḷ nīr*, lit. yellow water), and invitation rituals (*aḷaitta*) to install deceased relatives as protective household deities (*pūvāṭaikkāri*, lit. the woman who wears flowers). These contrasts between village and urban ritual cycles notwithstanding, this chapter will demonstrate that even in Chennai, this festival has not always been so lavish but has grown increasingly popular over the past five to ten years and is being celebrated in new and

⁸³ Paddy is traditionally planted on the eighteenth day of *Āṭi*, on *Ati Perukku*, a festival occasion which I describe in greater detail below.

expanded ways. This “growing” tradition is showing up in new temple contexts, is host to innovative practices at sites where it has long occupied an important place, and is overflowing the boundaries of a single month and becoming something closer to a festival season.

***Āṭi* and Enforced Abstinence for Newly Married Couples**

Related to the fact that marriages are typically neither arranged nor performed during *Āṭi* is the Tamil custom that newly married women return to their natal home during this month. This practice has two underlying motivations; first, the newly married couple should be invited back to the girl’s home at the beginning of the first *Āṭi* after their marriage so that the groom may be honored with gifts and treated to an elaborate meal. These gifts echo the *cīr-varicai*, items from the girl’s dowry that her family presented and ritually displayed on the couple’s wedding day. Second, although the groom returns to the marital home with his presents, the newly married bride is expected to stay in her parent’s home for the duration of *Āṭi* and will not receive gifts until she leaves in the first days of the following month, *Āvaṇi*. The couple is deliberately separated so that they cannot have sex and so that the woman will not conceive during *Āṭi*. The underlying

rationale is related to seasonal cycles and heat: if the young woman conceives in *Āṭi* she will give birth in *Cittirai*, the hottest month of the year in Tamil Nadu. The traditional belief is that pregnant women suffer during their deliveries in this summer month, and that both the mother and the newborn are vulnerable to fevers and/or pox in the dangerous post-partum period.

In her ethnographic research on childbirth in contemporary South India anthropologist Cecilia Van Hollen encountered similar practices of isolating newly married women during *Āṭi* in an attempt to prevent them from conceiving (2003, 84), as did Penelope Logan in Madurai (1980, 191). These customs are also attested in Tamil-language print sources, such as the *Kāmakōṭi* magazine feature on the fasts and festivals of *Āṭi* discussed above, which notes, “The bride’s family invites the couple home and offers a feast before sending the groom back alone and keeping their daughter back to stay in their house. If a woman conceives in the month of *Āṭi* she would give birth to her child in the month of *Cittirai*, so in order to safeguard women from facing difficulties in their pregnancies in the hot summer months they separate the bride and the groom” (“Special Days in July 2006,” 22).

Interestingly, some non-Brahmin women I talked to believed that the practice of separating newly married couples during *Āṭi* to prevent conception was an entirely non-Brahmin custom. Although I know some Brahmin families who bring their newly married daughters back to live with them during *Āṭi*, this practice does appear to be most common in non-Brahmin castes. One non-Brahmin woman (who has been cooking and cleaning in Brahmin homes since she was a young girl) suggested that Brahmins – who she perceived to be inherently more ritually observant than non-Brahmins – might be impervious to the myriad dangers posed by the birth of a child in *Cittirai*. “It has become very common for Brahmin couples to stay together during *Āṭi*. This is new, but they do so many types of *pūjās* that they have nothing to fear.”

Mary Hancock, who carried out research among Smarta Brahmins in Chennai in the 1980s, does not specifically mention the separation of couples during *Āṭi* in the context of her larger discussion of this month as the gateway to the inauspicious dark half of the solar year. However, she notes that this transition is marked by a “ritual management of the creative energy (*shakti*) associated with sexuality” (1999, 121–122), and that during these periods “some devout Hindus observe ritual prohibitions on sexual intercourse” (122). Although my research did not bear out the broader associations

between abstinence from sexual intercourse and *Āṭi* that Hancock implies exist – which she frames in terms of the tradition’s ascetic values (122) and the fact that the goddesses who are worshiped in *Āṭi* lack male consorts and thus participate in a cycle of sexual detachment that fosters *śakti* (133-34) – this difference may well be attributable to the fact that my research population was a mixture of Brahmins and non-Brahmins. I did encounter many instances where ritual participants from all castes opted for temporary celibacy in the context of personal vows during *Āṭi*, but refraining from potentially polluting activities is a standard element in Hindu vows no matter what temporal frame they occur in.

In addition to the heat of the summer months as a justification for separating newly married couples, I also encountered a rationale that involves potentially negative planetary positions. My non-Brahmin cook told me that the planetary positions in the horoscope of a child born in *Cittirai* pose a threat to the well-being of the entire family, and especially to the child’s maternal uncle (*māma*), the relative who stands in an important ritual relationship to his sister’s offspring, especially if they are female. An elderly Brahmin woman maintained that it is the child’s father who would be negatively affected:

In the month of *Āṭi* they should not enjoy [sexual intercourse]. They call the girl home in *Āṭi* so her husband cannot enjoy her. ... If they enjoy in *Āṭi* they will get the baby in *Cittirai*. A child born in *Cittirai* will not have a good birth star. That child's planets will pose difficulties for the father. That child will be prone to infections because of the heat and its horoscope will put the father at risk.

Her son, a Brahmin priest who also took part in this conversation, concurred with her account and then added, "Since it is the custom from long back to separate the couple in *Āṭi*, whether for the father's protection or for the health of the newborn and the mother, we still follow this."

Locating the Mariyamman Myth in the Month of *Āṭi*

On a few occasions my attempts to elicit explanations for *Āṭi*'s special character, and to understand the source of its persistent association with local goddesses, yielded a myth. The class of goddess temples at which *Āṭi* festivals are celebrated includes several "types" of the goddess Mariyamman, who is intimately associated with, and very often conflated with, the snake goddess. They share similar or identical iconographies, ritual responsibilities, and manifestations (especially their anthill and *nāga* forms), and they, like the broader *Āṭi* festival context, have experienced a surge of popularity as the incidence of *nāga dōṣam* has risen in recent years. Twice I was told detailed versions of

the Mariyamman story, and on several other occasions this narrative was referenced without being retold. Both of the individuals who offered versions of this myth were male; the first was a non-Brahmin priest at a small local goddess temple, and the second narrator was a non-Brahmin ritual drummer who was carrying on his family's traditional occupation. I offer excerpts from each of their tellings here in an effort to demonstrate how the relationship between myth and ritual performance is configured in the context of the *Āṭi* festival.

ALA: Why is the month of *Āṭi* important for the goddess?

Temple Priest: If you want to say, "The month of *Āṭi* is important," then the original Parashuraman story should be told. Parashuraman's father was a sage. He was Shiva only, not any other person. Shiva took the form of a sage and married Amma [the goddess]. Amma had to do a *pūjā* without losing her chastity [*karpu*], so every day she would go empty-handed to the river and with the sand of the river she would make a pot and return carrying the water for *pūjā*. One day when a *gandharva* [celestial musician] flew over her head, she looked at him and suddenly her pot would not take shape [i.e. by looking at a man other than her husband her chastity was compromised and she lost the magical ability to make a pot from the river sand]. So the sage got angry and said, "You became impure [*kaḷaṅkam paṭutta!*]" Then the sage told his son Parashuraman to cut off his mother's head. She ran and hid herself in the low caste people's house. I cannot even say the name of this caste. First, in the washerman's house they gave refuge to her. Then she went to the fisherman's house. She went to all the three houses and hid herself. And he [Parashuraman] cut the washerman's

wife's head off also, along with his mother's. So Parashuraman changed the two heads. These things happened in this month, in *Āṭi*. That is why we pour *kūl* in *Āṭi*

ALA: So he cut the heads in the month of *Āṭi*?

Temple Priest: Yes. It is only in the month of *Āṭi* that we do firewalking [*tīmiti*] and they pierce their skin with *cūlam* [tridents]. Milk pot processions [*pāl kuṭam*] are done. To bathe the goddess with milk [*pāl abhiṣekam*] they carry milk pots. Within the month of *Āṭi* itself all these festivals should be finished. But some people – for their own convenience – extend the weeks [i.e., recently people have started “counting” the Fridays of the next Tamil month, *Āvaṇi*, as the fifth, sixth, seventh, and so on Fridays of *Āṭi*].

According to this priest, these mythical episodes occurred in the month of *Āṭi*, a fact which accounts for why this period is designated as a special time for worshiping the goddess. Also significant about his narrative is that he enumerates particular ritual practices that are specifically associated with *Āṭi* and expresses disapproval about how the *Āṭi* festival is being extended beyond the boundaries of a single month. This expansion is recent, suggesting that the scope and activities of the *Āṭi tiruvilā* have outgrown the constraints of the calendar. Four Fridays are no longer sufficient to celebrate the festival at all of Chennai's goddess temples; indeed my research in the Mylapore neighborhood demonstrates that it is logistically impossible for all of the

temple's that consider themselves related to the MK Amman temple to gain access to its premises for the portions of their festival that they wish to celebrate there.

The young ritual drummer who recounted the following version of the Mariyamma myth to me was remarkably performative: his voice rose and fell throughout his narration, he sang particular lines, and his gestures, range of facial expressions, and intonations were dramatic. This myth, drawn from one of the songs that forms part of his repertoire and which was learned from his father, is an oral tradition and differs markedly from the priest's version excerpted above. The two versions do, however, share some elements in common; most notable is that that they frame the worship of the goddess that occurs in *Āṭi* today in terms of the myth of Mariyamman's switched heads, which they both assert originally occurred during this month, and also the fact that they both refer to how *Āṭi* is extended into the next month, and beyond.

During the Kali Yuga she was called Amma, Mariyamma. In olden days there came a *tsunami,* just like the *tsunami* you saw recently. The whole earth was darkened and everything was destroyed. Only two creatures escaped. Those two were Lord Brahma and Kalaimakal [Saraswati]. They escaped and they went through a tunnel. Ishwaran watched them. From the world above he watched this and with a sense of disgust he thought to himself, "Everything is destroyed and only these two escaped – only these two survived. It was in their minds that only they should escape and so they did not try to save any others."

He watched the world and he saw these two swimming in the water and then saw them reach a place and start a life there. At that time Ishwaran asked them, “Who are you going to save by living this life? The entirety of humanity is destroyed. What are you going to do by living? Who are you going to save? The entire earth is darkened, and both of you – whether you live or die – it makes no difference.” At that time Lord Brahma said, “If only we two are alive we two will have *sex* so that we may have a son or a daughter and they will have their descendants. It is possible only through the two of us.” Saying so, they [gestures to indicate sexual intercourse] and then Amma was born – thus the song goes.

In the heap of rubble Shakti [the Goddess] opened her eyes. That Mariamma is a *paraicci* [Untouchable] – do you understand what is meant by a *paraicci*? After the chaos there were these four: *vaṅṅiyar*, *ēkāli*, *paraīyar*, and *paṭṭar* [low-caste merchants, agriculturalists and washermen]. All Untouchables. That *ēkāli* and that *paraīyar* have a son. The Mari and this son, they have *sex.* These four were born to this couple: Anavan, Tanavan, Vicuvacu, and Paricamuttu [a local name used interchangeably for Parashuraman].

After the four children were born, a sage said to Parashuraman, “Your mother touched a man [had sexual intercourse with a man] from a different caste. Now what are you going to do?” He asked this of her son Parashuraman. He replied, “I will abide by you. I will do whatever you say.” Then the sage asked, “Will you do whatever I say?” Paricamuttu said, “Yes, I will do it.” The sage gave Paricamuttu a sword and told him to go and cut off his mother’s head. Do you understand? So he went and cut off his mother’s head. Paricamuttu cut off his mother’s head with this sword. Thus the song says [sings], “By the sword of Paricamuttu you [the goddess] were cut into a half-body” – do you know what that means? *Ampā!* [a Brahminic term of the goddess] has a full body; you might

have seen this in many temples. *Ampā!* is a full statue [*cīla*]. If it is *ammaṅ* or *amma*, it is a half-figure [*uruvam*].

Paricamuttu cut her, but when he cut her the sage said “Sinner [*ṛāv*]! Why did you do what I told you?” Paricamuttu replied, “You told me to do this!” Then the sage took his water vessel which was full of rain water, a kind of holy water [Skt. *tīrtha*; Ta. *tīrttam*], and he told Paricamuttu to sprinkle that water on his mother to wake her up. They had cut two bodies before – one was the body of a fisherman’s wife and the other was Mariyamma’s. After cutting, the Mariyamma’s head was put on the fisherwoman’s body and her head [the fisherwoman’s] went to this Amma’s body. The body is changed, and so the goddess was changed.

Thus goes the song [sings] – she was raised in the soil, and in this earth she became a deity. She grew up among the trees and in the Kali Yugam she became a deity. When the bodies were exchanged she became degraded [*nīccam*] – and she suffered from being stinking and low. The fisherwoman’s body is attached to that clean Amma, and Amma’s body went to the fisherwoman. From then on they keep the half statue [as her image in temples]. Her name is Mariyamma. We worship her in this month, *Āṭi* because this is when all these things happened. If I start telling the history [*varalāru*] it will go on and on.

From the first week of *Āṭi* to the thirteenth week, and even to the twenty-fourth week, we have work because people want to worship Amma. Because *Āṭi* is special for the goddess, that is when we are busiest. During *Āṭi* we do all the things in the temple. In other months we do the things in the home.

Both of these versions of the Mariyamman narrative establish that these events

occurred in the month of *Āṭi*, and lend credence to the traditions of commemorating

these episodes through the celebration of temple festivals that mark the centrality and significance of this myth. The temporal connection that exists between these mythical incidents and *Āṭi* is, in and of itself, a motivation for the festival, and the story's main characters and apotheosis theme buttress the fundamental link between *Āṭi* and the goddess. These tellings also provide an explanation for the iconography of many of the local goddess images that festival celebrants worship every day and pay sustained and particular attentions to during the *Āṭi* season: these myths describe how Mariyamman came to embody a half-figure, rather than a full body, and suggest particular caste identifications that link her narrative with her physical form. Although this myth emerged as one indigenous narrative framework for the *Āṭi tiruvijā*, the festival's ritual repertoire has significantly broadened in response to the increasing popularity that this class of goddesses now enjoys by virtue of its association with rituals to relieve *nāga dōṣam*.

The Ritual Repertoire of *Āṭi*

In an effort to demonstrate how the worship of snake goddesses and anthills during *Āṭi* fits within the larger ritual repertoire of the festival temple and domestic

performances, I will describe and analyze four *Āṭi* ritual occasions which involve *nāga* worship and share fertility aims.⁸⁴ I argue that the *Āṭi* festival is currently experiencing a new popularity by virtue of its association with *nāga dōṣam* and the snake (and other local) goddesses considered efficacious in mitigating this malignant condition, and that because these four occasions had preexisting links to *nāgas* and fertility, they were uniquely poised to draw new attention and have their rituals recontextualized and expanded in light of the growing concern about *nāga dōṣam*. Like the expanding repertoire of ritual therapies associated with *nāga dōṣam*, the *Āṭi* festival season (and several of its key ritual performances in particular), constitutes a “growing” tradition that has emerged as a site for ritual innovation and creativity.

First, I examine the *Ati Puram* festival, during which female devotees ritually exchange bangles with the goddess, focusing on its performance at a Mylapore-area snake goddess temple. This festival, which mimics a key South Indian pregnancy ritual and has overt fertility aims for many of the women who celebrate it, draws and innovates on the traditional association between *nāgas* and fertility. The two related ritual

⁸⁴ The *Āṭi* calendar included above provides a sense of the temporal relationships among these and other ritual occasions that occur during the month.

occasions that I analyze next, Naga Chaturthi and Garuda Panchami, occur in domestic space rather than in temple contexts. The direct relationships to *nāga* worship in each of these *pūjās* are expressed both in their mythologies and their ritual performances, as well as in the Tamil-language print sources that shape how these fasts and festivals are understood and observed at the popular level. Also significant are the connections that Naga Chaturthi and Garuda Panchami share with worship at anthills and with perceptions about *nāga dōṣam* and Rahu-Ketu *dōṣam*. The final festival that I will explore is Ati Perukku, a ritual occasion that has strong agricultural associations and is typically celebrated at water sources. My treatment of Ati Perukku's practices marks something of a shift from the previous festivals, because I concentrate on a ritual performance that occurred far from Chennai and that initially appears to have different central themes and aims than the *nāga*-related ritual that I examine previously. Ati Perukku's ritual performances, however, increasingly include propitiation of *nāgas*, and have become occasions where aims of personal fertility are being mapped onto a festival context that traditionally emphasized only agricultural fertility.

Ati Puram: Ritually Exchanging Bangles with the Goddess

The Ati Puram festival is celebrated by ritually exchanging bangles with the goddess in a ceremony whose symbols, processes, and grammar explicitly mark it as a fertility rite. As will be described below, bangle ceremonies are performed during their first pregnancies for all Tamil women, and so have widely known associations with fertility and feminine auspiciousness. Considered against the backdrop of increasing concern about fertility and the fact that *nāga dōṣam* cases are believed to be increasing in contemporary Tamil Nadu, it is obvious why the popularity of this festival has dramatically increased in recent years. Indeed, this ceremony may be considered a complement to the repertoire of ritual therapies that are prescribed and performed for *nāga dōṣam*. The festival is observed at many temples in the Mylapore area, but nowhere is it celebrated more elaborately than at the Arulmiku Nagattamman Alayam, a snake goddess temple whose reputation hinges on the miracle stories which circulate about long-awaited pregnancies and babies that follow from worshipping this powerful goddess and participating in her annual bangle ceremony. This ceremony reinforces not only traditional associations between the snake goddess and fertility but also perceptions about her intimate relationship with women's concerns and petitions.

Moreover, the Ati Puram festival also expands her repertoire to include a newly popular, innovative rite that has been recontextualized in light of anxiety about *nāga dōṣam*'s harmful effects.

Ati Puram occurs on the day in the month of *Āṭi* when the *pūram* star (the eleventh star) is ascendant. Devotees referred to *pūram* as “the goddess’s star” and the festival day as the goddess’s birthday or natal star (*nakṣatram*) day. Because these twenty-seven *nakṣatrams* (asterisms or lunar mansions) rotate cyclically, the timing of the *pūram nakṣatram* fluctuates from *Āṭi* to *Āṭi*. This month begins on or around July 17 of each year and ends on or around August 17, and in the three years I observed *Āṭi* celebrations in Chennai, the festival occurred at markedly different point in the month: August 8, 2005; July 28, 2006; and August 15, 2007.

As was mentioned above, the primary way that women mark Ati Puram is by ritually exchanging bangles (*vaḷaiya*) with the goddess in a rite called *vaḷaikāppu*, which resonates with the bangle ceremony (also called *vaḷaikāppu*) performed in the seventh or ninth month of an expectant Tamil woman’s pregnancy.⁸⁵ Most Tamil families then adorn the newborn baby with bangles, and sometimes anklets, on the seventh or ninth

⁸⁵ The timing of this rite depends on a woman’s caste, family traditions, and the proximity of any ritually inauspicious months or periods of pollution.

day after its birth. The term *kāppu*, which means “safeguarding” and “protection” (and refers to the ritual threads tied during *Āṭi* festivals that are discussed in this and the following chapters), signals that the bangles offered to pregnant women and gifted to infants have an explicitly protective, encircling function, as do the bangles that are returned to worshipers as *prasādam* on Ati Puram.⁸⁶ Glass bangles are also offered to, though not exchanged with, the goddess throughout the year by women who wish to get married or become pregnant. Red or green bangles, symbols of wifely auspiciousness, are most commonly tied to sacred trees at goddess temples or offered on the prongs of the goddess’s trident as part of petitionary prayers for the goddess to bless the devotee with a wedding or a baby.

On each Ati Puram day that I spent in Chennai (2005, 2006, and 2007), after spending my early morning hours at the Arulmiku Nagattamman Alayam (where bangles are exchanged with the goddess as part of an elaborate and beautiful ritual performance that will be analyzed below), I made “rounds” of several other area temples to assess how the festival occasion was being observed. In my visits to Brahminical temples

⁸⁶ Asko Parpola notes the strong association between bangles and pregnancy in many parts of India and, drawing on evidence from seals discovered there, suggests that the custom of women who wish to become pregnant offering bangles to trees (and, by extension, to the deities associated with those trees) may date to Harappan traditions (1987, 276).

(both Shaiva and Vaishnava) and local temples where non-Brahmin priests traditionally officiate, I witnessed a striking variety in terms of how the festival is marked in these different temple contexts.

On Ati Puram in 2005 the Karpagam Suvasini Sangam, a ladies' community group dedicated to service of the goddess, sponsored a *vaḷaikāppu pūjā* at the Brahminical Kapaleeswarar temple.⁸⁷ In an open pavilion just off the circumambulation pathway that encloses the shrines and only yards from the dual sanctums where the goddess Parvati (as Karpagambal) and Lord Shiva (as Kapaleeswarar) are enshrined, 108 *pūjā* "stations" had been established for the celebration of Ati Puram. Each station was comprised of a three-foot-high image of Ganesha standing on a small stool, and a small table, on which a flower bowl had been placed on a matching stand. A tall, shining brass oil lamp rested on a tiny pedestal placed inside the shallow flower bowl, and sixty green glass bangles had been hung from it. A plump plastic bag full of fresh flower blossoms, to be used during the *pūjā*, sat beside each station, and a garland of Bangalore roses hung down from each oil lamp. Waxy green betel leaves, bananas,

⁸⁷ See Waghorne for a discussion of the Karpagam Suvasini Sangam's donation of jeweled earrings for the goddess Karpagambal in 1995, a gold coin necklace for her in 1986, and other worship and devotional activities (2004, 128).

and a small matchbox had been placed neatly in the corners of the table. A new coin had been affixed to Ganesha's rotund belly with a dab of sandal paste, and his image had been garlanded with a thin garland of fragrant, lavender-colored buds.

The 108 women who had paid a fee to sit at each of the stations and conduct the *pūjā* were all dressed in some permutation of green and orange: there were green silk saris with wide orange and gold brocade borders, orange silk saris with green border designs, and a variety of green and orange blouses. All of the items at each station, which, incidentally, had been selected in keeping with the orange-and-green color scheme, would ultimately belong to the female devotee at the conclusion of her *pūjā*. This ritual event reflected excellent organization and execution from the entirely uniform *pūjā* stations through the synchronized showering of flower blossoms over the image as per the amplified instructions issued by the temple priest. In the final moments of the ritual each female participant eased some of the tinkling green glass bangles onto her wrists before packing up the ritual implements and offerings to take home.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ In 2007 on the fourth Friday of *Tai* (January – February), an auspicious time for the goddess, I witnessed a similarly structured, though unquestionably less elaborate, *pūjā* at MK Amman. The ritual was billed as a *viḷakku pūjā*, and involved 108 women worshiping gleaming brass oil lamps with a range of ritual items arranged on a green banana leaf. This occasion was the first time that I observed a *pūjā* with individual stations at this temple, and I questioned in my field notes at the

Although the image of the deity being used in this *vaḷaikāppu pūjā* was Ganesha, notable because bangles are typically exchanged with the goddess on Ati Puram, one woman I spoke with suggested that the participants were actually worshiping the goddess through Ganesha, as he must be honored first in any ritual sequence. Another woman, speaking in English, noted that the Ganesha images had been donated for the *pūjā* and so the organizers were sure that participants would not mind receiving this “fancy” image as *prasādam* after the ritual. As I observed their ritual performance, however, it became apparent that although these devotees had borrowed elements from the ritual grammar of the *vaḷaikāppu* as it is celebrated at local goddess temples, they were not embodying the ethic of intimacy and care that goddess devotees display when interacting with an image that they worship every year on this occasion. This bangle ceremony was a performance on multiple levels: these women were performing this ceremony for a deity seemingly disconnected with the festival’s underlying significance,

time whether this represented a trend toward the Brahminization (or Kapaleeswararization) of ritual life at MK Amman. The introduction of this new ritual performance, considered alongside the innovations in snake goddess worship and in remedial rites performed for *nāga dōṣam*, suggests that these transformations are part of broader shifts in the modes, emphases, and dynamics of Tamil religious expression. At this historical moment, Tamil religious idioms are at once self-consciously and explicitly grounded in notions of tradition and increasingly receptive to and accommodating of contemporary change, a stance which is explicated more fully in Chapter Six of this dissertation.

but whose image had been donated in sufficient numbers and which they would be able to take home at the conclusion of their worship. These differences, and the fact that each woman worshiped her own image at her individual station, suggest significantly distinct emphases from those of other temples, where devotees approach, touch, and decorate a permanent and ritually enlivened image of the goddess to whom other devotees also offer the same rites of adornment and honor in successive ritual performances. Female devotees regularly emphasized that the Āṭi festival repertoire provides them this space for innovation, bodily performance, and self-expression, and linked the opportunity to perform rituals with their own hands and bodies with enhanced ritual efficacy and amplified pleasure for the goddess herself.

As counterpoints to more Brahminical performances, I also observed Ati Puram ritual activities at several traditionally non-Brahmin temples. At MK Amman temple the stalls selling ritual items had a limited number of glass bangles on display, and some women were offering bangles along with the usual coconuts, milk, flowers, incense, and oil in the inner sanctum, at the temple's sacred neem and banyan trees, and at the anthill. At the nearby Ankalamman temple, the young priest on duty on Ati Puram morning bathed the goddess's image in milk with care and patience. Many devotees

offered bangles at his temple: they reached up and hung the delicate glass rounds from the goddess's trident, tied them in small clusters and threaded them on her garlands, or laid them in a large platter that had been placed at her feet. The priest then pulled a curtain closed to obscure our view as he completed the goddess's morning decoration, and when he opened it to reveal her, beautifully dressed in brilliant silks and adorned with flowers, powders, and jewelry, we saw that he had strung dozens of the colorful glass bangles into garlands and artfully swagged them across her sanctum.

At the Arulmiku Nagattamman Alayam (Merciful Snake Goddess Temple), the Mylapore-area temple that was introduced in the discussion of this dissertation's ethnoscape in Chapter One, Ati Puram is the year's main festival celebration.⁸⁹ Here the snake goddess is worshiped in the form of a beautiful, anthropomorphic stone image in the inner sanctum, as well as an anthill that sits beneath intertwined neem and peepal trees with a palmyra tree towering overhead. A snake is thought to reside in the anthill and is, along with the goddess's permanent stone image, metal festival image, and the anthill – identified with the snake goddess. Ati Puram is celebrated at this temple with the performance of a *nalaniku* (turmeric-anointing) ceremony in which female devotees

⁸⁹ This snake goddess temple is distinct from the Nagattamman temple that is linked to MK Amman temple and whose *Āṭi* festival is discussed in the next chapter.

ritually apply turmeric paste to the goddess's image. *Nalariku* ceremonies also mark other auspicious occasions in Tamil Nadu; one such occasion occurs in the days leading up to a couple's wedding when close relatives and friends gather separately with the bride and the groom for the *panṭa kāl* (the planting of the tent or *panṭal* pole) ritual, which includes *nalariku*.⁹⁰ Strictly speaking, this ritual is intended to be performed solely by *sumāṅgālīs*, given that the performer confers blessings for a long and prosperous married life characterized by healthy offspring, but on some occasions I have witnessed unmarried women being invited forward (and have myself been invited forward when I was unmarried) to participate as well.

Most significant in this context is that *nalariku* is a component of the bangle ceremony (*vaḷaikāppu*) performed for pregnant women, because the inclusion of this ritual element here further underscores the association of this rite with fertility.⁹¹ In most

⁹⁰ See P.V. Jagadisa Ayyar for one interpretation of premarital *nalariku* rites (1925, 60-61), as well as a general discussion of the ritual uses of turmeric (74-75). Dymock provides a survey of ceremonial practices involving turmeric, and includes a brief explication of the women's tradition of anointing a bride-to-be with turmeric (1891, 445-46).

⁹¹ Pregnancy rituals for Brahmin and non-Brahmin women differ significantly, and include the Brahminical *seemantham* (Ta. *cīmantam*), a hair-parting ceremony that is discussed in the *Gr̥hyasūtras* and is aimed at purification of the expectant mother as well as securing male offspring, the *pūccuṭṭal* (or *talai vāri piṇṇal*), the occasion on which a pregnant woman's braid is decorated with fresh flowers (*jaṭal*), and the *vaḷaikāppu*, or bangle ceremony. I have noted significant ritual innovation in each of these ceremonies in the ten or so years that I have been

nalaṅku rituals auspicious married women approach the pregnant woman and bend to dab turmeric paste on the tall brass oil lamp (*kuttuvilakku*) that stands before her, and then wipe more turmeric paste on the woman's cheeks and forearms before sliding a few glass bangles onto her wrists. Bangles are thought to serve a protective, encircling function for pregnant women and thus their inclusion in Tamil pregnancy rituals resonates with the belief that expectant mothers are especially vulnerable to dangers as divergent as demonic attack and complications associated with labor and delivery.⁹²

The soft clinking of the many glass bangles is believed to travel to the fetus and to comfort it as the day for it to leave the security of its mother's womb draws near. The sound of the tinkling bangles is also thought to alert the gods and goddesses that their assistance will soon be required in this woman's labor and delivery.

observing them, not least of which is the omission of some ritual elements and the conflation of several rites into one ritual event, done chiefly to control expenses. See Van Hollen's account of one *cīmantam* ceremony and her discussion of how the intensification of birth-related ceremonies (including the concern for displaying wealth in women's pregnancy rituals) dovetails with the biomedicalization of birth in contemporary Tamil Nadu (2003, 76-111). See also Ayyar on the custom of women wearing bangles and the symbolism and rationales of the *valaikāppu* ritual for pregnant women (1925, 76-78).

⁹² On the demonic predilection for pregnant women, see Ayyar (1925, 77-78); Balzani (2004, 145) and Meyer (1986, 206-207). See also *Atharva Veda* 6.81 for a potential early link to this ceremony.

At around 5 A.M. on Ati Puram day at this snake goddess temple the *ammaṅ*'s movable festival image (Skt. *utsava mūrti*; Ta. *urcava mūrṭti*) is placed on a pedestal in the sizable pavilion that is adjacent to the sanctum. Once Nagattamman's main image is woken, bathed, decorated, and presented with many camphor flames on a tiered brazier, ritual attention shifts to the festival image, a two-and-a-half-foot high anthropomorphic image of the snake goddess crafted from a compound of five metals. The temple trustee and his wife typically share the hereditary privilege of being the first individuals to worship the festival image. As they decorate her metal body, which is swathed in a brilliant green silk sari, she is visible to the gathered devotees, but soon all but her finely-featured face will disappear behind the heaps of flowers, bangles, and yellow cords (which some women wear as their marriage necklace, or *tāli*, and attach gold pendants to) that are offered to her. Arrayed before her on a silver tray are all the ritual substances and accoutrements necessary for her worship: sterling silver bowls holding turmeric paste, sandalwood paste, and vermilion powders, a silver rosewater sprinkler, and a shallow plate filled with red-tinted water. A sumptuous feast of more than twenty food items has also been laid out on wide green banana leaves in front of the goddess. These items were prepared by a Brahmin woman who has performed this service for

twenty-five successive Ati Purams, in addition to cooking more modest food offerings (*naivēttiyam*) daily for the snake goddess. In our initial interview at her home this devotee contrasted her enthusiasm about and embodied devotion toward this goddess with other worshipers, whom she perceived as more knowledgeable and better able to articulate their relationship to the goddess for my purposes: “Others will give you more details; they are capable of telling and writing, but I am only *interested.* I serve the goddess only with my hands. I make food for her. On that *valaikāppu* day I woke up at 12:30 A.M. to do all the cooking. Every day I get up at 3 or 3:30 A.M. to get the *naivēttiyam* ready before her *pūjā* starts.”

The temple trustee’s wife enjoys the honor of adorning the goddess with gold coin and pearl necklaces as well as with other jewelry set with precious stones, and of being asked to dress her image.⁹³ She first dabs the tall oil lamp with dots of sandalwood paste, and then tenderly smears some turmeric paste on the goddess’s cheeks and feet. She swirls the wide, shallow plate filled with red-tinted water around the goddess’s image, marks the goddess’s forehead with a dot of vermilion powder, and

⁹³ On the Tamil cultural significance of “firstness” in festival and worship contexts, and especially on the honor of receiving the first distinction (*mutal mariyātai*), or the first share of blessed foods on ritual occasions, see Mines (2005, especially Chapter Four).

showers her with scented water from the silver sprinkler. She then releases pinches of uncooked turmeric-rubbed rice grains around the goddess, gently lays woven lengths of creamy jasmine blossoms around her neck, and pushes a few glass bangles onto the goddess's diminutive wrists. Finally, she waves an oil lamp in slow circles around the goddess and bends to bow before her.

The Ati Puram festival is first and foremost a women's ritual celebration, and by the time the temple trustee's wife finishes her worship, hundreds of women are already waiting in line to approach the goddess with their offerings. In fact, the temple's *sthala purāṇam* says that on Ati Puram day the goddess teaches her devotees "how to stand in a big queue with patience and dignity" (*Srī Nāgāttammaṇ* n.d., 7). As one of this snake goddess's most passionate female devotees told me in 2006, "We started this *valaikāppu* in 1985. Five ladies came and I gave each of them betel leaves and areca nuts, bananas and a *blouse piece* [cloth with which to have a sari blouse stitched]. Now this [bangle ceremony] has become *famous.* Last year nearly 2,000 people came. This year *many* [emphatically] people came. You saw the *queue* with your own eyes." Her narrative highlights the striking expansion and growing popularity of the Ati Puram bangle ceremony over the past twenty years, a trend that I noted during my

participation in recent iterations of this ritual celebration. These shifts fit with the growing visibility, popularity, and increased appeal of snake goddess traditions and worship in contemporary Tamil Nadu (which stems at least in part from the perception that these traditions are efficacious in combating the increasingly prevalent *nāga dōṣam*), and the related development and temporal extension of the *Āṭi* festival season.

The offerings that devotees bring with them on Ati Puram vary widely: I spoke with one stooped Brahmin woman who opened a small jewelry box to display a small pair of gold and emerald earrings that she wished to present to the goddess, while another devotee of more modest means clutched five glittery glass bangles wrapped in a piece of torn newspaper. Another woman offered a large plate stacked with small boxes of assorted sweets and clear plastic pouches of savory fried snacks items from one of the city's most reputed sweet shops. One devotee included a seemingly innovative offering of cellophane-wrapped cones of henna paste among the "ladies' items" she offered to the snake goddess. The permanent temple stalls that sell *pūjā* items throughout the year stock hundreds of boxes of colorful glass bangles (typically sold by the dozen, with prices starting at ten rupees for the plainest varieties and climbing from there) for Ati Puram, and roving vendors appear on this day, pushing carts laden with an

attractive array of multi-hued glinting bangles. A stunning selection of flowers is always available outside goddess temples on Ati Puram, and at this Nagattamman temple three varieties of jasmine, scentless pink flowers, fragrant yellow ones, and chunky garlands of orange-yellow Bangalore roses were artfully arranged beside the beautiful mixed garlands which boast an assortment of colorful blossoms woven in striking patterns. The price of flowers – both the loose blossoms sold by weight to those willing to weave their own garlands and the woven garlands sold by length – always spikes in the face of the spectacular demand of festival days, a fact which puts the freshest and prettiest varieties out of reach of some devotees. In addition to the special items on display for this festival day, the temple stalls had their usual wares, like coconuts, oil, wicks, and camphor, available for devotees who wished to worship at the installation of *nāga* stones set into the temple's façade.

Brahmin and upper class women are usually the first to line up to worship at this temple on Ati Puram, and they typically bring platters arranged with dozens of yellow cords, flowers, bananas, boxes of incense, and colorful glass bangles. Lower class women carrying more minimal offerings are in the later tiers of women who comprise the enormous line, perhaps because many of them clean and cook in upper class homes in

the early morning but also because class and status differentials influence access to deities during temple celebrations. The waiting women approach the goddess one by one and carefully worship her in the same manner as the temple trustee's wife did. Her own worship complete, she now stands nearby and presents each of the devotees with a banana, chunks of turmeric, a few bangles, and a yellow cord placed on betel leaves at the conclusion of their worship. Additional forms of *prasādam* are also available: holy water is poured into devotees' cupped hands for them to quickly drink, and portions of tamarind rice are scooped from enormous vessels into leaf cups for devotees to eat themselves, or to bring home to share the blessed substance with family members.

The most important *prasādam*, however, is the bangles that worshipers exchange with the goddess in the central ritual transaction of this festival: women typically offer some bangles to her and are given others in return. The temple ends up with a huge surplus of these ornaments, which one of the trustees told me are kept in an open metal container and are "freely distributed" in the days following the goddess's *vaḷaikāppu*. Festival celebrants believe that proximity to the snake goddess's image has transformed these bangles from mere decorative accessories into charged symbols of her protection, benevolence, and grace. In particular, female devotees describe these

bangles as especially powerful for women who wish to become pregnant. These women shared numerous stories about friends and relatives who tried unsuccessfully to conceive over long periods of time and who, after they had abandoned hope, became pregnant through Nagattamman's grace and gave birth to beautiful, healthy babies. Indeed, I met some of these children, usually astride the hips of mothers who had carried them to the temple for my inspection once they learned of my interest in the relationship between the snake goddess and fertility. Many of these babies had been named in ways that acknowledge that their births are the blessings of the snake goddess. Their mothers specifically attributed their pregnancies to having worn "the goddess's bangles," which they or a relative had obtained at the temple on Ati Puram day. As one woman narrated:

I myself told two or three women who had no children to take the bangles that were offered to the goddess, and after that they got children. One girl was Ishvari, then there was that one Bengali girl, Geeta, and now Purnima – after waiting for so many years she got a child. I told her, "You say there is no child for you? Come and wear bangles from the goddess." The day before yesterday she delivered a child, a boy child. ... I heard stories of many people who got children after wearing the bangles. People from here [Chennai] and from far away come to this Nagattamman.

Another woman related how on the Ati Puram that fell during her pregnancy (which followed twelve years of devotion to Nagattamman while trying to become pregnant), temple officials invited her to be the first woman to perform *nalariku* for the goddess. Her advanced pregnant state made this invitation highly unusual, as most women will avoid temple visits in the final months of their pregnancies, but my Brahmin friend was very proud as she described this great honor and her abiding gratitude that this snake goddess had finally granted her a long-awaited and much-desired child. During the twelve years that she waited for a baby she undertook a variety of vows and ritual performances dedicated to the snake goddess, wore bangles from the goddess after Ati Puram, and also hung a poster depicting the crawling baby Krishna in her house that she was given by the devotee who cooks the daily food offerings for Nagattamman.

In addition to bangles that have been in contact with the goddess, split moong dal (Ta. *paccaipparuppu*; split green lentils) that has been kept in the goddess's sari is distributed on Ati Puram to women who wish to become pregnant. The moong dal is soaked so that it sprouts and is then tied into the folds of the goddess's sari at her belly (*matī*) and mounded such that she appears to be pregnant, or "carrying." Women who have had sustained difficulty conceiving, who are known to be particularly devoted to the

goddess, and who have made special advance arrangements with temple priests or officials are given small amount of the moong dal, which they are supposed to eat. This potent act – literally an internalization of the goddess's fertility, *śakti* and grace – is thought to result in their pregnancies by the next *Āti* festival. The wife of the temple trustee at this snake goddess temple explained to me:

That *gram* [moong dal] is given to the woman who has no children. When she eats that on this Ati Puram, it is certain that on the next Ati Puram she will come to the temple with a baby. Didn't you see Purnima there at the temple? Last year she prayed and took the *gram.* In each year five or six women will do this and each one will get a baby. All problems will be solved by worshiping this Nagattamman. Whatever you request [of her], immediately it will be fulfilled.

Although I have described above some of the ritual elements that are shared between the *vaḷaikāppu* performed for this snake goddess on Ati Puram and the bangle ceremony that is performed for pregnant women, I have yet to suggest why a pregnancy ritual is performed for the goddess at all. Although goddesses exist in multiple kinship relationships, which are expressed in myth and ritual performance, neither the Tamil snake goddess in particular or the class of goddesses to which she belongs is commonly

considered to be married.⁹⁴ As discussed in Chapter One of this dissertation, the snake goddess belongs to a class of local goddesses who are often understood to share in sibling relationships with each other rather than marital ones. For example, although MK Amman (and goddesses of her class) are sometimes identified as the younger sister of the great god Vishnu – a move which seeks to Sanskritize her or elevate her status to that of Meenakshi, great goddess of Madurai – these goddesses are far more frequently included among the “seven sisters” or are ranked relative to one another in big sister / little sister configurations.⁹⁵ Though the snake goddess and the local goddesses I

⁹⁴ More correctly, the anthropomorphic snake goddess is not commonly understood as married. Many worshipers identified the snake goddess in her reptilian form as married to the male *cārai pāmpu*, or rat snake, as the narrative from this snake goddess devotee, a non-Brahmin woman who earns daily wages as a helper on construction sites, illustrates; “Nagattamma’s husband is *cārai pāmpu*. *Cārai* is male [*āṇ*]. *Amma* is female [*peṇ*]. The two of them are living in the anthill. As we like to be together, man and woman, they, too, are like that. Like we are, they should also be. The snake is with her [the goddess]. They will never hurt anybody.” The idea that the reptilian form of the snake goddess lives together with a male rat snake also finds support in the short news item titled “Bala Nākamāl Gives the Blessing of Children” from the Tamil-language newspaper *Tina Tanti* (September 15, 2003), which describes how the male rat snake and the female cobra (*nālla pāmpu*, lit. good snake) live together in a small spring near Madurai where, if they are worshiped with offerings of eggs and milk, the snake couple is believed to dispense the blessing of fertility.

⁹⁵ In his *The Sacred Marriage of a Hindu Goddess* Harman discusses how the goddess Meenakshi, an incarnation of Parvati, is considered to be the sister of Vishnu in the context of the ritual drama of Meenakshi’s marriage to Shiva during Madurai’s *Cittirai* festival (1992, 84; 86-7; 156-58). Harman cites other scholarly discussions of the claim that a Shaiva goddess is the sister of Vishnu, including instances where the goddess is Mariyamman (Younger 1983, 20;

discuss in this dissertation share a distinctly Shaiva character, they are not “equivalent” to Parvati and are not commonly identified as being married to Shiva.⁹⁶ Understandings of MK Amman, various forms of Mariyamman, and Nagattamman as single, independent goddesses who operate without a husband are challenged by the ritual performance of a *vaḷaikāppu*, a ceremony that celebrates a woman’s pregnancy, because these ritual events raise the question: is the goddess pregnant on Ati Puram and, if so, who impregnated her?

It is important to note here that reflections on whether the goddess’s pregnancy is what is being ritually celebrated on Ati Puram did not surface naturally in my discussions with devotees and priests.⁹⁷ Rather, after this logical question occurred to

Cantāṇam 10), as well as Beck’s incisive comment that a “kin nucleus” exists in Tamil folklore: “The basic South Indian Hindu pantheon thus contains a married couple (Śiva and Pārvatī), plus Pārvatī’s all-important male sibling (Viṣṇu), their father Brahmā, and two sons, Ganesh ... and Murugan” (Beck 1974, 11 cited in Harman 1992, 86-87).

⁹⁶ In my experience, snakes goddesses and snake stones are rarely found on the premises of Vaishnava temples; they are most often found at *ammaṅ*, Shiva, and Murugan temples. For a similar observation, see Smith and Narasimhachary (1991, 250 n. 14).

⁹⁷ Narratives about the goddess being pregnant did surface in other contexts, however. In particular, an indigenous category exists for understanding the goddess as pregnant on Ati Perukku, the festival celebration that I treat in the next section. Additionally, in one case a male ritual specialist (who clearly identified the goddess Ankalamman with Parvati) said this about the cremation ground at Mel Malaiyanur:

That place is special; the goddess likes it. The goddess came there when she was pregnant. She was very hungry, so she started eating dead bodies. That place is called

me I asked some individuals to share their thoughts on the matter in particular interviews and conversations that seemed suited to this form of elicitation. I selected devotees and priests I knew well to ask about this topic, as well as individuals whose narratives veered close to these matters in ways that made consideration of the goddess's potential pregnancy a natural direction for the conversation to take. Some of them were dismissive of the possibility, such as the elderly snake goddess devotee I interviewed after witnessing her possession at an *Āṭi* festival. She responded sarcastically to my question about whether the goddess has a husband, saying, "Where is a husband for the goddess? There is nothing like that!" Although her quick rejoinder fit well with the feisty disposition she displayed throughout our interview, especially on matters related to husbands (powerless to comment on or interfere with her devotional activities and possession) and sons (disappointing for their irresponsible handling of financial resources and propensity toward drink and foolish women), I decided not to pursue matters related to the goddess's marital status or potential pregnancy any further with her. Another woman, a Brahmin snake goddess devotee, saw no tension inherent in the

māyaṇam [cremation ground]. The baby inside her womb was Murugan. When Murugan was present in her womb she was insatiable, so very hungry. So she started digging up the dead bodies and eating them.

fact that the unmarried goddess is understood to be pregnant and stated simply, “When a girl conceives, after seven months we do a *vaḷaikāppu*. Like that, we do one for the goddess. We bring bangles to her, because she is *carrying.*”

Several male priests with whom I spoke expressed no hesitation in declaring the goddess to be pregnant in *Āṭi*. One such *pūjāri*, who spoke to me at a roadside goddess shrine he had painstakingly festooned with hundreds of glass bangles in honor of Ati Puram, suggested that the goddess’s *vaḷaikāppu* is performed *imitatio dei*; “Parvati became pregnant and the gods performed a *vaḷaikāppu* for her in Kailash [the Himalayan abode of Lord Shiva]. In memory of that one we also do a *vaḷaikāppu* for the goddess every year.” Another priest, who serves at an important Mylapore temple where he is assisted by his son, demonstrated a willingness to entertain multiple explanations for the goddess’s bangle ceremony:

In our family they do *vaḷaikāppu* for pregnant girls. For the goddess they do the *vaḷaikāppu*, too. Some people say that it is done for her birth star [*nakṣatram*]. Other people say since she is the goddess of the seventh month [i.e., *Āṭi*; counts through the months on his fingers until he gets to July, the seventh month] they do *vaḷaikāppu*. Usually the *vaḷaikāppu* is done in the seventh or the ninth month of a pregnancy – for the goddess they do it in her seventh month. In my temple the goddess is together with the male god so we do *vaḷaikāppu*. We soak the moong dal. When we do this it will sprout. Then we put it in a white cloth and

put it in the *maṭi* [the front of the goddess's sari] to make her stomach look round [i.e., pregnant]. After that we take the moong dal and give it to the woman who has no child; she will get child. In some temples they do the *vaḷaikāppu* for the birth star, and in some temples they do it for the goddess's pregnancy.

Other priests correlated the goddess's ritual cycle with the human ritual calendar, especially the months which Tamils consider particularly auspicious for performing marriages. One *pūjāri* explained, “*Tai* is special for marriages and the seventh month from there [i.e. the month a woman's bangle ceremony would be celebrated in if she married in *Tai* and became pregnant immediately, which would be considered auspicious and favorable] is *Āṭi*. So this is why *vaḷaikāppu* is done in *Āṭi*, on *Ati Puram*.”

One female ritual expert, who runs a oracular healing practice and interprets signs (*kuṛi colluṭal*, lit. says *kuṛi*) in her domestic shrine on Fridays and Sundays, told me that the *Ati Puram vaḷaikāppu* should be understood in terms of the goddess's desires (*āca*) and wishes (*virupam*); “One day per year the goddess wants to play [*viḷaiyāṭu*]. That goddess has desire. She thinks that she is in her mother's house on this day, so we provide *poṭṭu* [round stickers worn by ladies on their foreheads], turmeric, and many bangles for her.” Her comments underscore Van Hollen's contention that the *cīmantam* (a term for a pregnancy ritual that is often used interchangeably with *vaḷaikāppu*) is

performed “for the express purpose of fulfilling and satisfying the pregnant woman’s *ācai*” (2003, 93-94). In this context *ācai* is understood to operate on several levels: pregnant women are believed to crave specific food items, to desire to be beautiful and to be gifted with beautiful things, and long to return to their natal homes where they will be indulged and cared for. These various levels of *ācai* converge in the *vaḷaikāppu* and *cīmantam* ceremonies where – in an effort to fulfill the pregnant woman’s desires – plates containing food and auspicious feminine items (like makeup, beauty products, and jewelry) are given to her before she is taken to her mother’s house, where she will stay until after her delivery. Van Hollen correlates the emphasis placed on the showing (*kāḍḍu*) of the ritual gifts offered in the context of the *cīmantam* in terms of the increasingly consumptive, display-driven nature of this ritual occasion in contemporary Tamil Nadu, calling it a “reinvention” of tradition (97), a concept I will take up in the final chapter of this dissertation.

As we sat in front of a small Ankalamman shrine near her house, a non-Brahmin woman who is a regular presence at the network of neighborhood goddess temples where I conducted my research related the bangle ceremony performed for the goddess to several of the larger ritual aims of the *Āṭi* festival, namely pleasing the goddess,

satisfying her desires with offerings in return for her protection, cooling her, averting pox, and securing rains:

My mother would have put bangles for my *cīmantam* [hair-parting ceremony performed for pregnant women], so we do the same for the goddess because she is also a lady. For her also we put bangles. If you keep her happy then people in the world will also be happy. It is so hot that people say, “Ahh, it is burning, burning!” In the body pox [*amma*] may come and become filled with pus, but if we make the goddess happy we will become cool and get pouring rains. It pours like this [gestures and makes sounds to indicate rain] – am I not correct? ... The goddess would have been pregnant when she was young, right? We should not neglect that *vaḷaikāppu*. Will the goddess open her mouth and ask for it, saying, “Come, give bangles for me, give me good food to eat?” She will not ask for all these things. We should know to take her whatever she likes. Then we should tell her, “You should keep my husband, my children, and the people who live in the village all happy. You should protect us. ... The boundary goddess [*ellaiyamman*], i.e. MK Amman] should hold and protect us – we ask only that from her.

Perhaps most striking about this narrative is how directly this devotee draws correlations between the desires and preferences of the goddess and her female devotees. Not only do the goddess and her female worshipers enjoy the same kinds of ornaments and foods, but they also share similar bodily cycles and participate in a reciprocal relationship of intimacy and protection.

The goddess's Ati Puram bangle ceremony constructs a striking and deeply resonant homology between a pregnant goddess, who desires beautiful ornaments, special foods, and ritual attention, and the female devotee, whose embodied devotion for the snake goddess reflects her longing to celebrate her own bangle ceremony. This ritual draws on and extends traditional associations between *nāgas* and fertility by providing an opportunity for women who desire fertility to enact a key pregnancy ritual with the snake goddess and receive charged *prasādam* (namely bangles and green lentils) from her, and thus offers an innovative and complementary ritual option that supplements the repertoire of therapies performed to counter *nāga dōṣam*.

Naga Chaturthi: Snake's Fourth for the Protection of Children

The next *Āṭi* festival celebration that I analyze, Naga Chaturthi, explicitly pays tribute to snakes and entreats them for fertility and protection. In light of growing concern about *nāga dōṣam*, this festival's overt connection to snakes has meant that it has attracted new attention in recent years and that it is being performed by an expanded number of worshipers. Further, at least one Tamil-language source posits a connection between worshipping *nāgas* on this festival day and experiencing relief from

dōṣam, signaling that this ritual context is amenable to expanded meanings and additional innovations in light of its association with these particularly “modern” problems.

In the early morning hours of the festival day Gajalakshmi rises and takes her first bath. She walks the short distance to MK Amman temple, where she will perform *pūjā* for the goddess and at the anthill, and will later conduct the domestic portions of her festival worship at home. A very devout and highly educated medical doctor in her late forties, Gajalakshmi’s knowledge of the customs of her Madhva Brahmin community were passed on to her by her mother, who has lived with Gajalakshmi and her husband since their marriage. It is her family’s tradition that the Naga Chaturthi *pūjā*, which honors divine snakes, should be performed at the hottest time of the day while wearing dripping wet clothes, both for “coolness” and purity. To achieve this, Gajalakshmi will bathe when she returns, and enter into *maṭi* (a state of ritual purity maintained by avoiding physical contact with individuals or objects that may not be absolutely pure, and restored by ritually bathing if it has been compromised), which she will preserve until her ritual practices are complete.

When she reaches MK Amman, where she is a regular worshiper, Gajalakshmi buys the 1,000-rupee *darśan* ticket that enables her to enter the sanctum and perform her own ritual bathing of the goddess's unadorned *svayambhū* image. Gajalakshmi has brought with her three steel vessels containing milk, as well as coconuts, incense sticks, fruit, and an assortment of flowers. She has also brought an embellished skirt that she has designed and sewn for the goddess's stone image, and which she will present as an offering on this festival day. After bathing the image with one vessel of milk, receiving a portion of her offerings back from the goddess as *prasādam*, and completing her *darśan*, Gajalakshmi takes one of the remaining vessels of milk to the nearby grouping of *nāga* stones. There, under the sacred trees, she carefully pours small quantities of milk over each stone in the installation, all the while quietly murmuring prayers. Finally, she takes the last vessel of milk and pours it onto the anthill at the roots of the banyan tree behind the goddess's sanctum. Reaching a crooked index finger into the roots she scoops out a bit of the anthill's soil (*purrumaṇ*), and wipes it into the hollow of her navel. Anthill soil is widely believed to have medicinal properties and Gajalakshmi secrets some in her navel every Naga Chaturthi for the protection and prosperity of her only son, in keeping with the offspring-centered focus and aims of this ritual occasion.

That afternoon Gajalakshmi enters her home *pūjā* room in a dripping wet cotton sari, and rivulets of water pool around her where she sits on the tile floor in front of her deities. For a year her family had lived in a rented apartment nearby as their house was demolished and rebuilt to their specifications, and of all the improvements and amenities they now enjoyed in their new three-story home her spacious *pūjā* room is Gajalakshmi's pride. For today's *pūjā*, Gajalakshmi draws two *nāgas* with fine rice flour and then places a silver *nāga* image on top of these drawings. She ritually bathes the silver *nāga* image with milk, turmeric-water, honey, and rosewater, using water to cleanse it in between each substance. After dressing the *nāga* image with a piece of rich, royal blue silk brocade, Gajalakshmi hangs a heavy gold and coral necklace around it as well as several other smaller pieces of jewelry. Then she leaves the *pūjā* room, careful to touch nothing and no one as she passes out the front door. At the entrance to her home she draws two additional snake images with white rice flour, and decorates them with strewn flower blossoms and tiny pinches of turmeric and vermilion. Then, using moistened turmeric powder, she sketches two *nāga* images on the wall next to the doorway, and reverentially hangs a tufted cotton garland around them. With clasped hands she murmurs some prayers to each set of *nāga* images, at the threshold and in the wall-

drawing, and pours spoonfuls of milk and of water over their wavy, protruding forked tongues as an offering.

Back in the *pūjā* room, Gajalakshmi decorates the silver *nāga* image with flowers and places silver trays with uncooked food offerings (rice grains, a variety of legumes, fruit, and coconuts) in front of it. She lights incense sticks and places them in stands, and then lights all of the wicks waiting in the tall oil lamps positioned to the side of the low table. Gajalakshmi then arranges tufted cotton garlands and creamy jasmine garlands around the *nāga* image and places a shallow dish of milk there for the snake to drink. Finally, she touches a match to a large chunk of camphor and circles this flame around the *nāga*'s image while singing a song that invokes the divine snake's protection and blessings, and bows before the *nāga* image.

I was a participant-observer at Gajalakshmi's Naga Chaturthi *pūjā* in 2005, 2006 and 2007, and witnessed the celebration of this festival in three other homes over the course of these three years. In all of these cases this *nāga* festival was celebrated on *chaturthi* (Ta. *caturtti*), the fourth day after the new moon, in the month of *Āṭi*. Chaturthi is the fourth *tithi* (Ta. *titi*); *tithis* are units of approximately twenty-four hours that comprise lunar months and are significant in determining the timing of festivals.

Because of different customs regarding the calculation of *tithis*, especially those associated with particular castes, not all individuals celebrate this festival at this time.

Some non-Brahmin castes in Tamil Nadu, including Mudaliyars and Chettiars, celebrate Naga Chaturthi in October or November. These and other variations may be attributable to different versions of the *pañcangam* (Skt. five limbs, an almanac that prescribes the appropriate dates for festivals and is used in fixing the dates for auspicious occasions) that are followed by various castes and sectarian communities. In many parts of India this festival is celebrated on the fifth *tithi* after the new moon, or *pañcami*, in commemoration of the day on which the *nāgas* were born to Kadru, a myth that I summarize in Appendix Two of this dissertation.⁹⁸ On the whole, however, in Tamil

⁹⁸ For descriptions of the myths and worship practices associated with the Naga Panchami festival, see, for example, Aravaanan (1977, 55-60); Buck (1917, 93-94); Choudhury (1991, 208) Crooke (1894, 272-73); Eck (1982, 264); Fuller (1944); Gupte (1916, 171-73); Kane (1997 5.1, 125-28); Mandlik (1869); Narayan (1997, 126); Panda (1986, 105-107); Pearson (1996, 107; 271, n. 2); Sinha (1978, 73-75); Smith and Narasimhachary (1991, 238-39); Sutherland (1991); Tewari (1991); Vogel (1926, 275-80); Wadley (1975), among others. Joseph S. Alter focuses a full chapter of his study of identity and the construction of the body in North Indian male wrestling traditions on the Naga Panchami festival and its celebration at gymnasiums in Banaras (1992, Chapter Six: "Nag Panchami: Snakes, Sex, and Semen"). He analyzes snake symbolism in terms of wrestlers' preoccupation with their own sexualities, and especially with their goal of cultivating "non-sexual virility" through the retention of semen, which they believe augments their physical strength and potency (166). Through an interpretation of wrestling culture's dominant symbols as well as the larger field of symbols surrounding snakes and their worship in India (especially feeding milk to snakes), Alter argues that Naga Panchami "symbolizes contained

Nadu this festival is celebrated as Naga Chaturthi on the fourth day after the new moon and is followed the next day by Garuda Panchami.⁹⁹

While Naga Chaturthi is observed for one's children, Garuda Panchami (the festival taken up in the next section), is observed to bless one's siblings, especially one's brothers. Naga Chaturthi is also celebrated to secure generalized blessings and prosperity from snakes (first and foremost among which is fertility), as well as to avert snake bite. The range of benefits that accrue from this *pūjā* is explicated in Sanskrit ritual digests, such as Lakshmidhara's *Kṛtya Kalpataru*.¹⁰⁰ This text describes the procedures for invoking and worshiping divine snakes on this festival day, and lists prosperity, freedom from the fear of snakes, immunity to snake bites, and passage through the abode of the snakes en route to the heavens after death among the "fruits" of performing *pūjā* (Aiyangar 1953). Naga Chaturthi is observed coincident with the

sexuality" (166), a central ideology of wrestling culture, and that the cobra is a key symbol of "coded virility" (137) which wrestlers seek to embody throughout the year and perform on this festival occasion. Alter's interpretations are especially interesting when considered in juxtaposition with this festival's goals (the protection of offspring) and the broader fertility aims that catalyze women's *nāga* worship traditions in Tamil Nadu.

⁹⁹ Mandlik notes that this festival is generally observed on *chaturthi* in "the Telanga and Tāmila districts" (1869, 178).

¹⁰⁰ This text is not alone in discussing the benefits of performing a *nāga pūjā* on the fifth day (*pañcamī*); Chapter 180 of the *Agni Purāṇa*, for example, describes how the worship of eight great *nāgas* on this occasion yields freedom from the fear of snakes, long life, knowledge, fame, and prosperity.

beginning of the rainy season, a period in which snake bites are more likely due to the fact that snakes are often displaced from their subterranean homes during the monsoon.¹⁰¹ One Sanskrit scholar described to me how snakes' anthill residences become flooded at this time, which forces them to look for temporary, more weather-proof dwellings, and which accounts for the increased incidence of snake bites.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ According to the *Gṛhya Sūtras* (e.g., *Āśvalāyana Gṛhya Sūtra* 2.2.1-3), the *pratyavarohaṇa* ("re-descent;" a ritual that occurs at the end of the *sarpabali*, or snake sacrifice, a four-month series of rites that coincides with the rainy season) is performed at approximately the same time as Naga Chaturthi (in the month of *Śravaṇā*) and involves invoking the *nāgas* and requesting their protection against snake bites (Sharma, 1997). This is performed at the conclusion of the rains when the worshiper is about to "re-descend" from the raised sleeping place (e.g. a cot) he has occupied and return to sleeping on the earth, which renders him vulnerable to snakes who may enter the house. On *pratyavarohaṇa*, see also Kane (1997 Vol. 2, Part 2, 821-23; 829-31) and Vogel (1926, 11). Some scholars have suggested that Naga Chaturthi/Panchami may be the only portion of the extended *sarpabali* rite that continues to be practiced in contemporary India (Jash 1990).

¹⁰² Many Tamils told me that although their *pūjās* are confined to snake images and anthills, elsewhere in India (especially Maharashtra) people worship live snakes on this festival occasion. In 2006 *The Hindu* carried a Reuters photograph showing a woman with a snake around her neck during a "Nagpanchami" celebration in Kathmandu (July 31, 2006). In West Bengal and Assam, where the snake goddess Manasa is worshiped, a festival honoring her is celebrated on the last day of the month of Shraavan. A snake charmer in Bedepara, West Bengal described to me the festival of Jhapan (also observed on the last day of *Śravaṇā*), when members of his community coax live snakes to coil around their bodies in a show of devotion to the goddess Manasa. The fact that they are not harmed in the course of their contact with the snakes on this festival occasion is interpreted as a sign that the goddess Manasa is pleased by their worship and has graced their community with her protection. Although Manasa also enjoys vibrant worship at the local level in Assam, one folklore scholar there told me that he knows of no instances of live snakes being worshiped there on Naga Panchami or other occasions. At the Kamakhya temple in Guwahati, Manasa also receives worship in the context of Kamakhya's festival, which also

Not all Tamil families, of course, celebrate this *pūjā* as elaborately as Gajalakshmi does; one Brahmin family reported that after performing their basic, daily *pūjā* at home on Naga Chaturthi they simply goes to a nearby *nāgāttammaṇ* temple where they have *darśan*, offer milk and eggs at the anthill, and pray.¹⁰³ Other families include additional ritual elements which find no place in Gajalakshmi's ritual performance. One highly orthodox Brahmin woman and her mother-in-law with whom I observed the Naga Chaturthi festival in 2007 perform an elaborate *pūjā* to the *tulsī* (Ta. *tuḷaci*) plant (sacred basil, associated with Vishnu) that grows in a large red-and-white striped planter in front of their house. These women drew images of a cow and her calf on the stone slabs that flank the *tulsī* planter and made offerings to them in what they called *gau pūjā*, or cow worship. Their ritual offerings were more extensive than

occurs during *Śravaṇā*. Vogel provides descriptions of the various ways that this festival is observed in different parts of India, and mentions the worship of Manasa in connection with Naga Panchami (1926, 275-80).

¹⁰³ An article titled "No Good Can Come from Evil" that appeared in the *Deccan Chronicle* (September 19, 2006, 30) focuses on the mistreatment of animals in the context of religious rituals. It describes the number of snakes harmed on Naga Chaturthi, both as a result of their being fed unsuitable foods (such as milk and eggs) and being handled inappropriately. It is important to point out that while numerous devotees insisted that (divine) snakes delight in the offerings of milk and eggs left for them, many other worshipers averred that milk and eggs are not appropriate foods for snakes. Some individuals mentioned that guides at the Madras Crocodile Bank and Center for Herpetology tirelessly lecture on this topic to Tamil visitors in an effort to correct the "superstition" that snakes enjoy milk and eggs.

Gajalakshmi's, and included ghee, additional grains and legumes, flour, and jaggery. In addition to chanting a formal *sarikalpa* (statement of ritual intent) at the commencement of their *pūjā*, they also recited mantras invoking Adishesha and other *nāgās*, and requesting their protection.

An article that appeared in the pull-out feature on religion published in the Tamil-language newspaper *Tina Mani* on the first Friday of *Āṭī* in 2006 describes how on this festival day Tamils have the custom of sprinkling milk offerings on anthills wherein snakes are believed to reside (“Nāga Pañcami Pujai,” July 21, 2006). The article recounts one version of the most common myth associated with this festival, which goes as follows:¹⁰⁴

According to a story in the *Purāṇas*, on Naga Panchami [*nāga pañcami*] day in a village a Brahmin was plowing his field and killed many baby cobras. The mother of those baby cobras took revenge by killing all the members of the Brahmin's family. The Brahmin's daughter had been married to a man from a neighboring village and was living in his home. That mother snake went to this village because she also wanted to bite that woman. When the snake came to the daughter's house, she saw the daughter involved in worshiping a snake figure [drawn] on the wall. When the mother snake saw that figure her heart changed. She abandoned her vengeful plan and forgave that girl for her father's sin. The snake asked the girl, “What boon do you want? Ask me and I will grant it.” The

¹⁰⁴ A summary of this myth can be found in Vogel (1926, 277).

daughter asked, "Please restore all the members of my family who you have bitten." The snake did so. Then the mother snake told the daughter that whoever worships snakes on Naga Panchami day will be blessed with wealth and will live happily. Saying this, the snake disappeared.

Iterations of this myth appeared in several print sources related to this festival, as well as in one oral version. Although this myth does not mention the possibility of *nāga dōṣam* accruing to the Brahmin farmer's family members, preferring to dwell instead on the fruits of the Brahmin's daughter's *bhakti*, an article on Naga Panchami that appeared in *Tina Mani's* pull-out feature on religion the next year (August 17, 2007) explores the connection between performing worship for *nāgas* during this festival and experiencing relief from *sarpa dōṣam*.

The Naga Panchami [*nāga pañcami*] vow is a *pūjā* done to seek the blessings of the serpent. If the snake planet occupies the second place, fourth place, or fifth place in one's horoscope then that person is said to have *sarpa dōṣam*. To attain peace one should worship the *nāga*, pour milk on the anthill, and perform *nāga pratiṣṭhā*. If you disturb the female and male snake when they are together [mating] or if, even without your knowledge, you kill a cobra, these acts will cause *dōṣam* for you. *Dōṣam* causes women to be barren, causes the separation of the wife and husband, and causes other confusion in the family.

The fifth *tithi* following the new moon in the month of *Āṣṭī* is Naga Panchami. On that day, in order to please them, we worship *nāgas*. On Naga Panchami the snakes will come out of the anthill and roam freely. On that day if you plow the field and destroy the anthill or kill a snake, that sinful deed will cause difficulties

for you. So, on this day people do not plow their fields. Hindu custom says it is good to give food and pour milk for the snake which lives in the anthill.

After marriage a couple may suffer without a child for many years because of *sarpa dōṣam*. On Naga Panchami if they follow all the procedures and pray sincerely, then good things will happen [i.e., they will be blessed with a child]. Children who are born as a result of performing *nāga pūjā* will be named Nagaraja and Nagarani. We can assume that the ancestors of people with these names performed the Naga Panchami *pūjā* (Moulisvaran, August 17, 2007).

Several Tamil-language print sources articulated a connection between

worshiping *nāgas* on this festival occasion and experiencing relief from *dōṣam*.

Consider this *bhakti* magazine article, which links rituals performed on Naga Chaturthi

both with a decrease in *nāga dōṣam*'s effects, and with an important mythical episode

from the epic *Mahābhārata*, and suggests that devotees should continue to observe this

festival to commemorate the vow performed by female *nāgas*:

By doing *pūjās* for *nāga* images at temples on Naga Chaturthi [*nāga caturthi*], Rahu-Ketu *dōṣam* can be avoided and one's chances of getting married will improve. This festival commemorates the day when the *nāgas* were saved from Janamejaya's snake sacrifice [performed to avenge his father's death by snake bite, this sacrifice was brought to a halt by the actions of the *nāga* Astika]. A vow was observed by the wives, mothers and sisters of the *nāgas*, so on this day we should also observe the vow and obtain their blessings ("Special Days in the Month of July 2006" *Kāmakōṭi*, July 17, 2006).

Garuda's Fifth for the Well-Being of Brothers and Sisters

When I arrived at the home of this Brahmin joint family on the morning of Garuda Panchami, I saw that the family's women had already arranged the necessary ritual offerings and implements in the garden. Nestled on a shiny round plate was a heap of flowers, cotton garlands, twisted lamp wicks, and one yellow ritual thread for every *pūjā* participant. All of the liquids and substances that would be used in the *abhiṣekam* had also been laid out on a stone tile. On this day Lakshmi and Padma, the two daughters-in-law of the house, and Lakshmi's two college-age daughters would be celebrating the Garuda Panchami *pūjā* together to secure generalized blessings and prosperity for their family, and to pray for their male siblings. While Lakshmi and Padma's mother-in-law would be present for the *pūjā*, because of her widowed status she would neither participate in any way nor partake in any of the special foods her daughters-in-law had prepared.

Once we all assembled in front of the *tulsī* planter in the garden, Lakshmi began the *pūjā*. She placed the deities she had carried from inside the house onto a silver plate: there were three *nāga* images – one each of brass, stone, and silver – a stone Ganesha image, and a tiny golden Ganesha. She poured water over each image in

turn, then a stream of golden honey, then water again, and followed this with milk and a final cascade of water. Padma then performed the *abhiṣekam*, bathing each deity with the same progression of liquids, before Lakshmi's two daughters stepped forward to take their turns. After the *abhiṣekam* was complete, Lakshmi carefully set each of the deities into the small niche in the *tulsī* planter and Padma placed cotton garlands around each image. We all tossed flower blossoms over the deities, and Lakshmi presented food offerings (*naivēttiyam*) to them. In keeping with the custom that only white food items should be consumed on this day, the sisters-in-law prepared *idli* (steamed rice and lentil cakes) for breakfast and two varieties of *koḷukkattai*, dumplinglike snacks stuffed with either grated coconut and jaggery, or a savory filling. In the culminating ritual gesture we approached the *tulsī* planter in turn and, while someone else rang a small brass bell, circled a camphor flame (*āraṭi*) around the deities ensconced in their niche before kneeling and touching our foreheads to the ground in front of them. Then, after Lakshmi tied a protective yellow ritual thread around each of our wrists while we held a coconut, banana, betel leaves and areca nuts, Padma offered *āraṭi* to the grinding stone (*kuḷavi*) which was propped nearby against the heavy slab (*amm*) it pairs with. The older women told me that doing *āraṭi* to this pestle would help the girls get good grooms, and

will also compensate for any lack or deficiency (*kurai*), whether in the *pūjā* or in one's life.

My interest in this *pūjā* stems from two particular associations: the fact that Garuda Panchami often overlaps with or is conflated with Naga Chaturthi or Naga Panchami, and the adversarial relationship that exists between Garuda and the *nāgas*.¹⁰⁵ While Garuda is the son of the sage Kashyapa with his wife Vinata, the *nāgas* are Garuda's half-brothers through his father's union with Kadru. The enmity between Garuda and the *nāga* race is described in rich detail in episodes from the epic *Mahābhārata*, which are briefly summarized in Appendix Two of this dissertation. In conversations about Garuda Panchami, celebrants sometimes offered an oral version of

¹⁰⁵ Interestingly, there is a belief that when invoked by snake charmers and praised with various mantras (*karuṭa vitta*) Garuda may neutralize the poison of a snake bite. This practice, and the specialized knowledge of magical and curative incantations in general, is associated by many Tamils with a class of priests from Kerala (see also references to the *nāga* temple at Mannarsala [which means "unburnt ground," an allusion to the belief that this plot was spared from the Khandava forest fire by the prayers of Takshaka] and the reputed ability of this family's matriarchal priestess to neutralize snake venom, in Bala Ratnam 1946; Pannikar 1900, 149-50). Another example where Garuda is called upon to cancel the curse of the *nāgas* and rectify *nāga dōṣam* is a highly innovative ritual performance during which a unique image of Garuda, which is adorned with eight *nāga* ornaments, is worshiped as a countermeasure for *nāga dōṣam*. I witnessed this *nāga dōṣam* ritual at a Tamil Vishnu temple in 2006, on the day that it was performed for the first time.

the myth associated with this ritual occasion. The common motif that emerges across these multiple tellings concerns either Garuda's saliva or a *nāga's* vomit poisoning a portion of food, which results in the death of some family members. These myths are didactic, in that they illustrate the fruits of ritual action and prescribe worship on this festival occasion. Further, most versions are cross-sectarian, in that they feature the grace of the Vaishnava deity Garuda, as well as the merciful intervention of the Shaiva goddess Parvati. All of the tellings I encountered highlight the *bhakti* of a female character, whose devotion to and interaction with the goddess results in Garuda gracefully withdrawing his poison and restoring the lives of the girl's family members. I offer two versions of this myth here, one from a print source and the second from an oral narrative. The first was recounted by an astrologer in a Tamil-language newspaper feature on Garuda Panchami and Naga Panchami:

Once upon a time on Garuda Panchami [*karuṭa pañcamī*] a farmer accidentally destroyed an anthill while he was plowing the field. The snake which came out of that anthill became the prey of Garuda [*karuṭaṅ*]. When the eagle was flying in the sky with the snake hanging from its mouth, a lady from that farmer's family was going towards the field and carrying food on her head. The snake vomited its poison into that food. Without knowing this, the entire family ate that poisoned food and died. The lady of the family who carried the food did not eat any, and so she was the only one who survived. She cried and prayed to Parvati Devi.

Parvati Devi heard her cries and felt pity for this lady, so she asked Garuda to release the snake. He agreed. The snake drew its poison back from the family members, and because of this the lives of the farmers were restored (Jotiṭar Moulisvaran, “Nāka Pañcami! Karuṭa Pañcami!” *Tinamani*, August 17, 2007)

The second version was recounted to me orally by a friend in the context of her family’s

Garuda Panchami *pūjā* in 2007. Her grandmother shared this ritual narrative (Skt.

kathā; Ta. *katai*) at the conclusion of the *pūjā*. Because her grandmother narrated the

myth in Telugu, her mother tongue, my friend repeated it for me in English. I recorded

her version and reproduce it here.¹⁰⁶

There was a girl who had six or seven brothers, all of them woodcutters. On Garuda Panchami day she served thin porridge [*kañci*] to them in the forest without doing *pūjā* or having her bath, and they fainted. She cried aloud, and Shiva and Parvati heard her crying. Parvati asked the girl what happened and she told Parvati the whole story. Parvati told the girl that that day was Garuda Panchami and that since she did not do *pūjā* or bathe before serving food, Garuda’s saliva fell into the food and turned it poisonous. Parvati instructed her to go bathe in the river. The girl bathed and then fashioned a *nāga* and a Pillaiyar [Ganesha] from river mud. She also made the *naivēttiyam* [food offering presented to the deity], *koḷukkaṭṭai*, out of mud, as well as the cotton garland, and offered them. She prayed to Parvati and to Garuda, and wiped the mud on her brothers as if it was holy ash and they woke up. This girl told everyone in the village what had happened and that they must also worship in this manner on

¹⁰⁶ See Mandlik (1869, 172-73) for one version of this myth.

Garuda Panchami day. She did these things every year thereafter. This story spread from village to village by word of mouth.

These narratives emphasize themes related to the mercy shown by a deity in the face of human wrongdoing, and are explicit about the necessity of performing appropriate worship. While Garuda Panchami is celebrated domestically and by relatively fewer devotees in Chennai than the other *Āṭi* festivals I have treated in this chapter, it shares an overlapping bank of symbols and motifs with them (and is, in fact, often conflated with Naga Panchami) and features the worship and propitiation of *nāgas*, both in practice and in its mythology. As such, it shares in the association with fertility that characterizes so many of this festival's ritual performances, and stands in the expanding tradition of *nāga pūjās* that are attracting increased attention (from devotees and in popular media) by virtue of their location in the *Āṭi* ritual repertoire and their links with *nāga dōṣam*.

Ati Perukku: Worshipping Water Sources for the Blessing of Fertility

The Ati Perukku (lit. “*Āṭi* overflowing”) festival is observed on the eighteenth day (*patineṭṭām perukku*) of *Āṭi* in Tamil Nadu, principally by performing *pūjās* with explicit

fertility aims at water sources.¹⁰⁷ The word *perukku* means flood or inundation, and refers especially to the flooding of the river Cauvery that brings agricultural fertility. The river goddess is worshiped and propitiated for a range of blessings and prosperity, including good rains and an “overflow” into paddy fields, where seeds are traditionally sown by farmers on this or the following day. Especially in the regions around Trichy and Thanjavur in central Tamil Nadu, this festival retains its strong agricultural associations, so much so that a friend of mine declared in English, “This is 100 percent a farmer’s festival.” While his sentiment correctly gestures toward the deep agricultural resonance of this festival, which is inflected quite differently in regions of Tamil Nadu where the Cauvery actually flows and there is a river to perform worship *at* and *to*, I discovered that women are increasingly using this festival celebration as an opportunity to pray for personal fertility. Although I will concentrate on the ritual performances conducted near the Cauvery River in Trichy below, I will first outline how Ati Perukku is observed in other Tamil locations.

Ati Perukku is celebrated at numerous temples and other sites in, and beyond, Chennai. Small-scale, individual worship takes place at water sources, such as temple

¹⁰⁷ Logan provides a detailed treatment of this festival (1980, 191-205).

tanks and at the ocean. Interestingly, at Marina Beach in Chennai, at least some devotees worship the ocean as the male deity Samudra Rajan (Ocean King), rather than as female, as most rivers and water bodies are. One Brahmin woman told me that women from her community perform *pūjās* at wells on their property, and newspapers annually feature colorful photos of young college women dressed in traditional clothes making offerings at wells and ponds on their campuses.¹⁰⁸ A Tamil-language newspaper feature on *Ati Perukku* briefly describes large crowds bathing at the confluence of the Cauvery and its tributary, the Bhavani, at Erode, in Tamil Nadu, and ladies worshiping at the shrine of the goddess and changing their marriage necklaces at Madurai's Meenakshi temple, before devoting the remainder of the page to the ritual activities at Trichy (Tirucciyl Āṭipperukku Viḷā Kōlākalam 2007, 14).

A small news item embedded within a special feature on *Ati Perukku* in one Tamil newspaper reports on the festival's observance even further afield:

In North India at the Ganges people light camphor and worship and leave lamps in the river on *Ati Perukku* day. They believe that by doing this they will get good rains throughout the year and their farming will be prosperous. Similarly on *Ati Perukku* day in Tamil Nadu people also light lamps and camphor for their own

¹⁰⁸ Examples include the front page of *Tina Mani*, August 4, 2007 and *The Hindu*, August 4, 2006.

good fortunes at the famous Cauvery River. This tradition is handed down by the saints (Viḷakkēṛri Valīpaṭuvōm 2006, 17).

This association between the Cauvery and the Ganges is not merely coincidental; the Cauvery is identified as *dakṣiṇa gaṅgā*, or the southern Ganges, and “local legend has it that even the Gaṅgā comes down to the Cauvery once every year to purge herself of the accumulation of sins which the sinners have deposited in her by bathing in her waters” (Lal 2007, 65).

These practices, however, are neither widespread nor “famous” in the way that the celebration of Ati Perukku is at Trichy (Tiruchirapalli), where the Cauvery actually flows. The festivities had been uneven in the previous few years; in 2003 there was virtually no water at the time of the festival, in 2004 water was released from the dams but the flow was insufficient, and in 2005 there was serious flooding.¹⁰⁹ In 2006,

¹⁰⁹ It is worth noting here that the only time I heard consultants describe Cauvery as anything other than a compassionate, beneficent mother who can be relied on for agricultural fertility and generalized blessings and prosperity was in relation to the floods of 2005. In these contexts people referred to the trials (*cōṭaṇa*) and difficulties (*kaṣṭam*) she caused for them in that year. Vasudha Narayanan also points to the potentially destructive side of Indian rivers, noting, “Rivers are perceived to be nurturing (and sometimes judgmental) mothers, feeding, nourishing, quenching, and when angered flooding the earth” (2001, 193-94). In her study of the religious meanings attributed to rivers in Maharashtra, Anne Feldhaus describes the *otī-bharanam* (filling the lap) rite, in which women place food items and other auspicious offerings into the lap of an auspicious married woman, just over her womb, to express their wishes for fertility. This ritual

however, reports on the Cauvery's water levels in the days leading up to the festival, indicated that the flow would be "just right." The caption under a newspaper photo depicting the preparations for the festival characterized this balance between drought and flood as an expression of Mother Cauvery's compassionate fulfillment of her devotees' requests, and emphasized the auspiciousness of the 2006 festival celebration (Nāḷai Āṭipperukku Vīḷa Kaḷai Kaṭṭutu Kāvirikkarai 2006, 17).¹¹⁰

In 2006 I traveled the 300 kilometers by bus from Chennai to Trichy to observe how this festival is marked and performed on the banks of the Cauvery, where I had long been told it is celebrated in its grandest incarnation. When I descended the crowded, slippery steps leading to the river and joined the many women (and some men) who had assembled to worship there just after dawn on Ati Perukku there were already dozens of family groups in all stages of their *pūjās*. Just-arrived clusters of women were staking out a spot on the stone steps and busily unpacking woven bags and silver baskets full of ritual supplies, other ladies were putting the finishing touches on carefully arranged banana leaves heaped with offerings before lighting a chunk of camphor and circling it

gesture is also performed for rivers by dropping the offerings into the waters, and is performed during floods to make the waters recede (1995, 43-44).

¹¹⁰ Because Ati Perukku fell on a ritually important *Āṭi* Friday in 2007, Chennai's goddess temples were overflowing with devotees.

for the culminating *ārati*, and other family groups were sprinkling last drops of Cauvery's sacred waters on their heads as they turned towards home, their worship complete.

Although many of the *pūjās* I witnessed here at the river's edge were composed of familiar ritual elements like making offerings, ringing bells, and circling camphor flames, they also included some more distinctive features. In addition to an uncommon variety and abundance of fruits, lengths of sugarcane also figured among the offerings, as did child-sized black bangles (*kāruvaḷaiyaḷ*) of the sort that are offered to avert or appease Katteri (a fierce female spirit who is believed to interfere with fertility), palmyra leaf earrings (*kātōlai*), and yellow threads (*mañcaḷ kayiru*). These turmeric-rubbed threads are ritually exchanged between *sumariḡalīs* on this occasion; elder women usually tie them around the necks of younger *sumariḡalīs* with the blessing that they should have long and happy married lives, and also for unmarried girls in the hope that they should get married to good grooms. Many *sumariḡalīs* remove their gold *tālis* and temporarily lay them among the items that are offered to the river goddess.

The special, and arguably most important, item offered on Ati Perukku is *cittirāṇṇam*, a mixed rice preparation whose assorted ingredients (such as jaggery, tamarind, sesame, lemon juice, and mustard seeds) provide a range of contrasting

tastes. Worshipers explained that *cittirāṇṇam* is offered to symbolize the complementary experiences of life in the world: sweet, sour, and sometimes bitter, and some suggested that this special rice mixture is a characteristic offering for pregnant women because it is believed to satisfy their desires, or *ācai*. In the context of a larger discussion of the imaging of rivers as goddesses in Hindu traditions, Vasudha Narayanan notes:

When the Kaveri [Cauvery] is swollen after the early monsoon rains I have heard the residents of Srirangam (a large temple town on an island in the middle of the river) say she was pregnant. This is a wonderful celebration of her life-giving potential: the surging river, rich with the monsoon waters, sweeps into the plains, watering the newly planted crops in the Thanjavur delta, and giving birth to the food that will nourish the population (2001, 194).

Narayanan goes on to describe the Ati Perukku festival, when individual families each welcome the goddess Cauvery as their guest at riverside picnics where they celebrate the river's "pregnancy food cravings" (*macakkai*). She mentions that some elderly women offer handfuls of colored rice (likely *cittirāṇṇam*) into the river to satisfy these cravings (194).¹¹¹

¹¹¹ One additional related festival practice that was described to me but that I did not personally observe, was the offering of *cīr-varicai* (a range of auspicious gifts ritually presented to a new bride by her natal family, described above in the context of a pregnant woman's bangle ceremony) into the river at the famous Vaishnava temple at Srirangam because Cauvery is considered the sister of Srirangam's Sri Ranganatha Swamy. Interestingly, Narayanan reports that Mother Cauvery "is seen as a devotee and sometimes the consort of Lord Vishnu" (2001,

The intricate *pūjās* honoring Cauvery, whose image *is* the river and who is worshiped here in liquid form, are not the only ways in which Ati Perukku is ritually marked. This festival's repertoire of ritual practices includes offering sprouts to the river goddess, linked with Ati Perukku's agricultural meanings, as well as *nāga* worship and *dōṣam*-removal rituals.

Most prominent among the agricultural ritual practices is the offering of earthen pots filled with *muḷaipari*, tender shoots or sprouts. These usually contain an assortment of nine different grains, which sprout in the context of a vow undertaken by the devotee who desires blessings and who usually fasts as the new shoots grow.¹¹² These sprouts, which signify new life and fertility, are offered to and immersed in the Cauvery on Ati Perukku by farmers who desire agricultural plenty and a successful harvest. Articles from several Tamil-language magazines describe the persistent associations between

194). The relationships of the river goddess to Vishnu serve as interesting counterpoints to the sibling relationships, discussed above, that Shaiva goddesses typically share in with Vishnu. For a discussion of levels of reciprocity between the goddess Mariyamman at nearby Samayapuram and Srirangam's Sri Ranganatha Swamy, see Younger 1980.

¹¹² Compare the ritual use of *muḷaippāri* in the Tamil context of the Ati Perukku festival with Flueckiger's discussion of Chhattisgarhi women planting *bhojalī* (sprouts/seedlings), worshipping them as the goddess for nine days, immersing them, and exchanging them to form ritual friendships (1996, 26-49), as well as childless women planting them in hopes of securing the blessing of fertility (45). Hildebeitel (1991) also describes "sprouting rites" in Tamil Nadu.

the eighteenth day of *Āṭi* and sowing new seeds, and refer to the belief that leaving these pots full of new shoots as an offering to Cauvery ensures that crops will be abundant. One article employs an analogy to make these fertility themes even more explicit; “Like a mother who gets happiness when she gives birth to a child, so Mother Cauvery becomes happy when the farmers get harvest.” It compares the agricultural growing season to the term of Cauvery’s pregnancy, and correlates her flooding on Ati Perukku with her delivery time. The article goes on to say that because Cauvery is pregnant, the people offer her Ati Perukku’s special sweet-and-sour rice preparation (*cittirāṇṇam*), which makes her happy (Cantāṇarāmaṇ 2005, 24).

At one riverside location I encountered throngs of women worshipping clusters of snake stones installed under a banyan and a neem tree in the courtyard of a nearby Mariyamman temple. These worshipers lavished ritual attention on the snake stones: carefully smearing them with turmeric, dotting them with vermilion powder, and tying yellow threads around them individually and also around their whole grouping. In some cases this required many meters of turmeric-rubbed thread, which they spooled out from carefully wound balls they had prepared for this purpose. Nearby stood an anthill decorated with turmeric and vermilion and which featured an anthropomorphic *ammaṇ*

head near its crown as well as a border of *nāga* stones. Devotees had placed eggs and small vessels of milk at the base of the anthill as offerings for the snakes thought to dwell within. A little further on stood a large festival image – made of papier-mâché and dressed and garlanded – of Mother Cauvery which had been fitted with a motorized pot that continuously issued a stream of water. Many women had tied yellow threads for Mother Cauvery in the same fashion as they had for the snake stones. When their worship of the *nāga* stones, the anthill, and the temporary festival image of Mother Cauvery was complete, these women tied yellow threads around one another's necks in a series of ritual exchanges that emphasized prosperity, fertility, and the values of the auspicious married state.

Since these activities are not associated with the celebration of Ati Perukku in Chennai, I had not been expecting to see *nāgas* worshiped in Trichy. It is, however, understandable how, with its emphases on the sowing of seeds and agricultural fertility, this festival might be amenable to the inclusion of rites directed at personal, individual fertility. As one ritual specialist put it, “Previously Ati Perukku was not special for the *nāgas* also, but nowadays we see many ladies worshiping them, and also at the anthill.” Over the course of several conversations, it became evident how these fertility meanings

dovetailed with this festival's emphasis on feminine auspiciousness and agricultural fertility. While they have not displaced the traditional association of Ati Perukku with agricultural plenty, these newer meanings are very much at work in the festival context. In 2006 these matters commanded the majority of the ritual attention, and were the focus of the vast majority of the ritual practices I witnessed.

Taking a sacred bath in the Cauvery is another common way in which the festival is observed, and men could be seen engaging in this activity in significant numbers in contrast to the *sumangali pūjās*, in which they played no role outside of the occasional participation in *ārati*. Where men were notably present on Ati Perukku day was in their participation in the *pūjās* performed by and for newly married couples. Significantly, festival celebrants told me that in this region new brides, who had been staying in their natal homes from the first day of *Āṭi* until Ati Perukku, are reunited with their husbands on this festival occasion to perform rites dedicated to the river Cauvery. Couples who had been married since the previous *Āṭi* approach the river, the bride typically dressed in her wedding sari, to worship, bathe, and release their wedding garlands. These couples carefully removed their dried-out flower garlands from plastic bags in which they had been saved since their weddings, and waded out into the river's wide, rushing body to

release the now-crumbling blossoms into her sacred waters. These couples would then approach one of the Brahmin or non-Brahmin priests who turn up at auspicious riverside locations in great numbers on Ati Perukku. These ritual specialists arrange themselves in neat rows with their array of ritual paraphernalia, including their own *nāga* stone, (not a highly portable item), and call out to hesitant new couples to sit down and have their rituals performed. In addition to *dōṣam*-removal rituals and *pūjās* for the good fortunes of newly married couples, various *śrāddha* rites (offerings to deceased lineage members) were also being offered by the cadre of priests who assembled at various places near the Cauvery on this festival occasion.

All of the new couples who sat before one of the priests at his ritual “station” had a short rite performed in which they changed the woman’s *tāli* thread, and afterwards discarded the old thread in the river. The new *tāli* was tied to the accompaniment of mantras, and this *tāli*-tying rite was usually embedded in the context of a larger *pūjā* with explicit fertility aims. In some cases the newly married couple themselves (or in-laws accompanying the couple) expressed concern about fertility to the priest, but in most cases the priest simply inquired whether the couple had a baby yet and, if the answer was no, guided them in a simple *nāga pūjā*. When I asked one priest if such a *pūjā* was

customary for Ati Perukku, or for couples married less than a year but not yet “carrying,” he answered, “Before, it was not like this. But now we are seeing so much *nāga dōṣam*. It is everywhere. So we do the *pūjā* to help them get a child.”

These rites seem to take a prophylactic rather than a therapeutic or curative approach, and therefore appear to constitute a distinct genre from the ritual therapies performed to relieve diagnosed *nāga dōṣam* that were discussed in the previous chapter. Most of these *pūjās* involved the couple making simple offerings to a stone snake image, particularly feeding it milk. Some priests asked the new bride to decorate or anoint the *nāga* image with turmeric and vermilion, and instructed the groom to garland the snake stone and to tie a new *tāli* around his wife’s neck. Although these condensed *pūjās* were similar to the *nāga pratiṣṭhā* rites that individuals or couples with *nāga dōṣam* perform to mitigate their conditions, all of the rituals I observed in Trichy were conducted for couples who either said that they did not know whether they had any *dōṣam* in their horoscopes, or who said they did not have it. Only one priest who I encountered claimed to be offering astrological assessments there on the spot to determine whether either party suffered from *dōṣam*.

One couple sat down before the priest with the explicit aim of having a *nāga dōṣam pūjā* performed. Before the priest could even ask their names, birth stars, or any other identifying information, their narrative came tumbling out: they had performed several previous *nāga dōṣam parikārams* but had still not successfully conceived, and were hoping to do some other remedial ritual here at the river's edge on Ati Perukku day. The priest recommended that they tie a *tāli* on a banana stalk (which he had on hand), which would effectively bind the sufferer to that stalk in a marriage rite and thus transfer the *dōṣam* to the banana tree. He explained that once the stalk was cut and cast into the Cauvery, the *dōṣam* would be “cancelled,” and rendered powerless to interfere further with their fertility. The whole rite – kindling a small fire, anointing, dressing, and garlanding the banana stalk, tying the *tāli*, cutting the stalk, and disposing of the severed pieces in the river – took just twenty minutes to perform. When the couple had paid the priest and departed, the ritual specialist remarked, “This is the time for them to get a baby. It will happen for them now that they have done this.”¹¹³

¹¹³ While this was the only rite of this type that I witnessed, one Tamil-language article reports, “If young couples have any problem they sit in front of the priest and perform a fire sacrifice and a *pūjā* for marital auspiciousness in which they tie another *tāli* along with the original one they already tied. Hundreds of couples perform these *pūjās* for marital auspiciousness at Trichy on Ati Perukku” (*Tina Malar*, “Splendid Ati Perukku Festival in Trichy,” August 4, 2007, 14).

All of the priests with whom I spoke were unanimous that *nāga dōṣam* is currently on the rise, or “growing,” in Tamil Nadu. Most of them, however, were at a loss to explain this increase, suggesting, variously, etiologies ranging from the Kali Yuga to payback for sins committed against snakes, especially as encroaching human settlements displace snakes from their natural habitats and cause their deaths or disturb their mating or their nests. The sources that they mentioned, and others that surfaced in other contexts, crystallize a range of concerns inspired by the changes that individuals notice from the last generation to this one and by what they experience as the disconcerting changes of modern times. The expanding repertoire of meanings being inscribed on the Ati Puram rituals that I described above, then, are being positioned as modes of response to the modern problems of difficulty conceiving and infertility, as well as to the generalized anxiety that modern social life may inspire.

Perhaps most interesting to me was the priests’ claim that performing a *nāga pūjā* on Ati Puram day could be efficacious even for couples whose conception was not being blocked by *nāga dōṣam*. I encountered similar innovative contentions elsewhere in my research, such as the priests at Kalahasti who maintained that their *dōṣam*-removal *pūjās* would benefit anyone, and not just those suffering from horoscopic flaws.

In Trichy, priests told me that Ati Perukku *pūjās* and the *tālī*-changing rite had always been performed as a way of asking Cauvery for prosperity, which includes offspring, but that this preoccupation with fertility and these truncated *dōṣa-nivartti pūjās* were, indeed, new. The innovative rituals which are now being performed in this festival context have, I argue, emerged as additional ritual responses to the modern problem of infertility and contemporary anxiety about conception.

These emerging personal fertility aims, which take shape in ritual practices performed at snake stone installations and anthills and find expression in innovative, hybrid rituals that combine auspiciousness rites for newly married couples with *nāga dōṣam pūjās*, have clearly joined more traditional agricultural fertility meanings of Ati Perukku. Further, this shift in emphasis does not appear to be a superficial veneer, but rather part and parcel of larger shifts where festivals, worship, and practices that are amenable to change, as many of these traditions continue to be, are host to significant ritual innovation. In many cases *nāga* traditions, which enjoy long-standing associations with fertility and women's concerns, are recontextualized and popularized by means of new media. In places where the Cauvery flows and occupies a central place in the Tamil religious imagination, the river goddess has given herself over to expanded

meanings, a move which is demonstrated in the celebration of Ati Perukku and which is demonstrated in the festival season's larger context.

Conclusions

Although the *Āṭi* festival exhibits enormous diversity in village and urban contexts and due to variations in ritual calendars as well as family, caste, and sectarian traditions, devotional practices dedicated to and ritual relationships with snake goddesses function as a unifying central motif in this month's local celebrations, vows, and observances. Throughout my discussion of the broader *Āṭi* repertoire and my analyses of four distinct ritual performances, I have argued that the development and expansion of this festival season stands in direct relationship to the increased popularity and visibility that *nāga* traditions are enjoying as anxiety about the modern problems of late marriage and infertility soars in contemporary Tamil Nadu. Indeed, much of this popularity stems from the fact that the *Āṭi* festival is celebrated at snake goddess and anthill temples (as well as at a range of other non-Brahmin goddess temples) that have recently become known as powerful sites where a spectrum of ritual therapies for *nāga dōṣam* may be performed. As the reputation of these temples as efficacious for relieving *dōṣam*

circulates among satisfied devotees and as the result of a proliferation of media focused on *nāga dōṣam* and related issues, snake goddess and anthill temples are drawing increasing crowds from a widening array of caste backgrounds for their annual festival celebrations.

In turn, these local temple celebrations are engaged in an ongoing process of development and growth, and are annually inventing/reinventing elements of their *Āṭi* festivals in ways that seek to respond to the modern concerns of fertility and late marriage. *Āṭi*, then, has become a context in which an ever-increasing number of worshipers from a spectrum of caste backgrounds publicly perform their devotion – whether newly inspired as the byproduct of a recent ritual success or an outgrowth of a permanent and reciprocal relationship – and where *nāga* traditions are observably innovating in response to the dilemmas and desires of modern times.

CHAPTER FIVE

PERFORMING *Āṭi*/DEVOTION AT TWO SNAKE GODDESS TEMPLE FESTIVALS

While the previous chapter described *Āṭi*'s ritual repertoire broadly and argued that its expansion and growing popularity may be indexed to the fact that it is celebrated at sites that are increasingly associated with *nāga dōṣam*, this chapter offers a focused, performance-centered analysis of the three-day *Āṭi tiruvilā* at two different snake goddess temples in Chennai. I argue that by concentrating on these particular examples we can see how two different snake goddess temples – one established and one emerging – have attempted to harness the rising tide of devotion interest resulting from their associations with *dōṣam*-removal to develop and expand their *Āṭi* festivals. This in-depth focus on two particular sites provides a contextualized portrait of one variety of vernacular Hinduism, indigenously framed, and accessible through personal narratives, embodied performances, and ritual processes; it also allows us to identify specific sites of religious change, flexibility, and innovation. These two rather different snake goddess temples are both, in their own ways, capitalizing on this moment of burgeoning interest in and awareness of *nāga* traditions to refashion and develop their *Āṭi* festivals, drawing

in increased donations, and attracting additional worshipers. Bolstered by the financial proceeds of the surging interest motivated by concern about *nāga dōṣam* and the challenges of these modern times, these religious sites are repositioning themselves and recontextualizing their identities as snake goddess/anthill temples in ways that are most dramatically performed during the *Āṭi* festival.

The first temple, Aruḷmiku Srī Nākāttammaṅ Tīrukkōyil (Merciful Snake Goddess Temple; hereafter Nagattamman), is a modest snake goddess temple located in the Mylapore neighborhood just down the street from MK Amman. This temple participates in close ritual relationships with MK Amman, particularly during the *Āṭi* festival, and Nagattamman is understood as MK Amman's younger sister (*taṅka*). The second temple that I will discuss is the Srī Nākamāriyammanṅ Puṟṟukkōyil (Naga Mariyamman Anthill Temple; hereafter Naga Mariyamman) which is located in another Chennai neighborhood, about fifteen minutes' travel from Mylapore. Its geographic location renders Naga Mariyamman relatively isolated from other temples as compared with Nagattamman, and this fact has meant that to date it has not participated in ritual relationships with any local temples. I witnessed the *Āṭi tiruviḷā* at each of these temples

in its entirety in 2005, 2006, and 2007, and at the Naga Mariyamman temple again in 2008.

The Friday – Sunday *Āṭi* festivals that are celebrated at local goddess temples in Chennai follow a largely consistent ritual grammar: they begin with building the ritual vessel (*karakam*), proceed to tying protective threads (*kāppu*) on participants' wrists, and also include the preparation and offering of ritual foods (*kūḷ* and *kumpam*), possession, oracular speech (*aruḷ vākkū*), and processions. The goddess, who is invited and installed in the *karakam* on Friday, is ritually dismissed on Sunday when the *karakam* is immersed in a body of water.¹¹⁴

While the *Āṭi* festivals at the Nagattamman and Naga Mariyamman temples share a similar ritual progression, a common cadence, and a core body of ritual events, each temple's performance does reflect some significant differences. These variations are indicative of the cross-cutting influences of the temples' local geographies, social settings, and ritual relationships with other temples, as well as the long-standing

¹¹⁴ See Hildebeitel 1999 for a description of an eighteen-day Tamil festival dedicated to Kuttantavar (or Aravan) that includes many of the same ritual elements I analyze here, such as worship of a *karakam*, distributing blood rice, tying *kāppu*, possession, processions, ritual drumming, oracular speech, and offering *kūḷ*. Hildebeitel also treats different combinations of these ritual elements in the context of the goddess Draupadi's festivals in both volumes of his *The Cult of Draupadī* (1988 and 1991).

traditions of each individual temple. In a broader sense, I argue, these factors are each indexed to how closely aligned (and for how long) each temple has been with the *nāga dōṣam* ritual tradition and whether it is embedded in networks of sites considered powerful for relieving this condition. The most notable difference between the two festival celebrations is the presence of a firewalking ceremony (*tīmiti*) and a milk pot procession (*pāl kuṭam*) at Nagattamman, whereas these ritual events are absent at Naga Mariyamman. The absence or presence of ritual relationships with other temples also appreciably shapes each festival's ritual grammar; while the *Āṭi* festival is a context for the performance of Nagattamman's ritual connections with MK Amman, Naga Mariyamman operates independently, unconnected with a nearby "main" or "big" goddess. Additional differences, including the fact that the priest at Naga Mariyamman experiences possession during the festival while his counterpart at Nagattamman does not, and the presence of blood sacrifice at Naga Mariyamman as opposed to its absence at Nagattamman, contribute to making these two temples particularly rich and instructive examples for our examination.

Āṭi celebrations like those described here are the highlight of the religious cycle for many non-Brahmin women who nurture devotional and ritual relationships with local

goddesses throughout the year that intensify and take on new dimensions during the *ammaṅ*'s festival season. I highlight both how gender “counts” in these relationships and how devotees frame these relationships as reciprocal, characterized by shared responsibility, intimacy, and dependence.

A Note on Expansion, Development, and Aesthetic Innovation

These weekend-long *Āṭi* festivals, which are celebrated by virtually all local goddess temples in Chennai, are increasingly popular and constitute a “growing” tradition. As was described both by the priest and the ritual drummer whose retellings of the Mariyamman myth were included in Chapter Four, these festivals have recently expanded well beyond the traditional borders of the *Āṭi* month and into *Āvaṇi*. Where the month of *Āṭi* would typically include only four ritually auspicious Fridays, and thus four weekends during which goddess temples could stage their three-day *Āṭi tiruvilā*, in the last several years the Fridays of *Āvaṇi* have also been “counted” as if they were in fact part of *Āṭi*. A very practical consideration motivates the explicit annexation of these additional Fridays into the festival season: as the number of temples celebrating *Āṭi* festivals has grown, it has become logistically impossible for all of them to schedule their

celebrations within the confines of four weekends. The demand for troupes of ritual musicians, professional *karakam*-carriers, and other ritual specialists now far outstrips their availability. Competition for space at important temples like MK Amman has become ultra-competitive and, with so many festivals occurring simultaneously, efforts to attract ritual participants and spectators has also intensified. This combination of factors has created a need to amortize *Āṭi*'s ritual performances over a great number of weeks, and thus the *Āṭi* festival season now “spills over” into *Āvaṇi*. Temple flyers routinely herald ritual events scheduled for the “seventh Friday of *Āṭi*,” and I heard devotees and festival organizers speak of as many as thirteen Fridays of *Āṭi*.¹¹⁵

These expanding festival traditions are now the unequivocal focal point for goddess worship in the Tamil non-Brahmin Hindu ritual year. One of my opening questions in conversations with priests and devotees at local goddess temples was to inquire what worship occurs there, and their responses almost invariably included a reference to or description of the *Āṭi* festival. Most of these narratives portrayed their festival celebrations as increasingly “grand,” or becoming “famous;” many of them

¹¹⁵ The ritual drummer quoted in Chapter Four describes his ensemble being busy with festival engagements for as many as twenty four weeks of *Āṭi*: “From the first week of *Āṭi* to the thirteenth week, and even to the twenty-fourth week, we have work because people want to worship Amma.”

outlined changes in its current structure from even a few years ago, shifts they often characterized in terms of the devotees from outside the local area that the festival attracts, in contrast to the purely local character of previous iterations. The innovations and expansions I document appear to be of very recent vintage, as one Brahmin priest commented in 2006, in the midst of enumerating some of the developments he has noticed at Mylapore temples, “*Āṭi* has only been celebrated in such a big way in the last five years.”

Many of the small roadside goddess shrines which earlier did not celebrate the festival in any way have recently begun to mount modest iterations of the *Āṭi tiruvijā*, and custodians of these shrines express their desires to augment their celebrations as neighborhood interest and donations grow. I have noted this trend at several snake goddess shrines, including some so tiny that the temple is only large enough to house the deity and there is no interior space whatsoever for hosting a festival celebration. Temples with well-established *Āṭi* festival traditions – such as the Nagattamman temple which celebrated its first firewalk/*Āṭi* festival in 1963 and the Naga Mariyamman temple which began its *Āṭi* festival in 1966 – strive to add some new dimension to the festival’s celebration each successive year, an aspiration that is made possible by increasingly full

donation boxes and offerings made by individuals engaged in cycles of *nāga dōṣam* ritual therapies. These innovations include enormous displays depicting the goddess in many colored light bulbs, professional invitation cards sent to key donor-devotees, and the addition of uniformed marching bands, dance ensembles, fire-eaters, and fire-jugglers to the festival entertainment. One unpretentious Mylapore temple used the significant donation to its *Āṭi* festival fund provided by a successful local entrepreneur to rent mechanical exhibits for the festival's final procession, including a motor-driven pot that continuously poured milk over a large plastic *liṅgam* and a goddess whose image repeatedly raised its hands in blessing as she was pulled through the streets on the back of a vegetable cart. These innovations fit with the move toward conspicuous consumption and the emphasis placed on ritual display in recent years, but in a very practical sense they are made possible by the influx of donations and offerings brought in as a result of many of these goddesses' newfound associations with *nāga dōṣam*.

In the years I have observed the *Āṭi* festival, hand-painted cloth banners announcing the program of ritual events were increasingly displaced by digitally printed color signs with graphics and decorations segued from clumps of green neem fronds hung above temple entrances and colorful hand-woven flower garlands swagged from

temple ceilings to roadside displays featuring enormous plastic Gothic pillars and archways, silk flowers, and glitter-covered Styrofoam cut-outs of deities and religious symbols. Devotional songs now blare from huge, rented speakers virtually around the clock during the festival, and colorful tents are erected across the road to signal the celebration, extend the temple's ritual space, and lend "richness."

Temple priests regularly voiced their aspirations to "develop" their *Āṭi* festivals, and these *pūjārīs* were quick to point out that the neighborhood people themselves wanted something new every year. The "development" of the *Āṭi* festival and the increasing incorporation of aesthetic novelties into its celebration do not, of course, stand alone; these innovations work in tandem with the middle-class processes of visual gentrification described by Waghorne (2004) and demonstrate the tradition's larger impulse to respond to changing social contexts with ritual adaption, invention, and innovation.¹¹⁶ The *Āṭi* festivals at Nagattamman and Naga Mariyamman serve as strong

¹¹⁶ At least some of *Āṭi*'s new features are also motivated by economic considerations. As was discussed in Chapter Four, marriages are typically neither arranged nor performed during *Āṭi*, a social custom which can be indexed to sharp declines in retail sales in stores that rely on wedding business (e.g., sari and jewelry shops). In the last few years many of these retail establishments have been offering special *Āṭi* discounts in an effort to stimulate sales, and placing full-page advertisements which claim that as long as one makes a single wedding purchase before the month of *Āṭi* commences, there is nothing inauspicious about continuing to shop for wedding

examples of the kind of development and innovation that I have described above, and, as will be demonstrated below, have quite self-consciously expanded their festival celebrations in recent years.

Nagattamman's *Āṭi Tiruvilā*

At Nagattamman temple, less than a dozen feet lie between the snake goddess's stone image, installed in the temple's tiled inner sanctum, and the busy street she gazes out on. Here, as she is in many other places, Nagattamman's image is a stone head. Her temple is small and neat, with the thick red and white stripes typical of many South Indian temples on its exterior wall, brightly painted cornices, and decorative yellow metal grillwork featuring Tamil *ōm* symbols and rows of tridents. Colorful painted concrete lions line the temple's roof, stationed between images of some of the goddess's other incarnations, and shaded by the spreading branches of a venerable peepal tree. A few snake stones sit at the gnarled base of this tree, which grows up through a hole in the temple's roof, and oiled stone images of the *navagrahas* stand nearby on a tiled base.

items throughout the *Āṭi* month. An advertisement for Rasi, the famous Mylapore silk house, depicted a stereotypically orthodox-looking extended family selecting wedding garments after completing their worship at Kapaleeswarar temple, just steps away.

The corridor to circumambulate her sanctum is just wide enough to accommodate one devotee at a time, and the temple's back wall abuts the dense residential colony from which this snake goddess draws most of her devotees. A framed calendar art image depicting Ankalamman, goddess of Mel Malaiyanur, rising from an anthill and encircled by a cobra, hangs just above the entrance to Nagattamman's sanctum, a visual reminder of the dynamic networks and ritual relationships that exist among these two goddesses and their devotees.

Over several conversations with the aged non-Brahmin priest who was serving at this snake goddess temple in the weeks leading up to the *Āṭi* festival of 2005, I learned that this temple had originally been established after a group of local devotees initiated consultations with the priests and trustees at the nearby MK Amman temple. Together they decided that Nagattamman would be the little sister (*tarikā*) to MK Amman, who would be the big sister (*akkā*). This priest explained that MK Amman is considered to be superior to Nagattamman in terms of her *śakti*, primarily because "MK Amman's form manifested on its own, *naturally,* more than one thousand years ago."

We start *everything* at MK Amman because she is the *akkā*. Tying *kāppu*, decorating the *karakam*, processing the *karakam* – it is *all* done from there. For example, you are the older brother [*aṇṇaṇ*], and there are some rituals to be

done in your younger brother's [*tampi*'s] house. He should consult you before doing that ritual work. It is like that. We go to *akkā*. We ask her and get her permission [*uttaravu*] to do everything, and only then will we do it here.

In addition to the special status she is accorded as a “big sister” goddess, one who is *svayambhū*, and who arose “naturally,” MK Amman is also described as the “main” goddess for her geographic area and a village goddess who presides over Mylapore’s circuit of local goddess shrines. Although MK’s permission is considered essential for all of Nagattamman’s festival celebrations, it is regarded as especially crucial for the *tīmiti*, or firewalking ceremony, which stands as the central ritual performance of her *Āṭi tiruvilā*.

The narrative I recorded from Nayaki, a non-Brahmin woman who is active in this network of goddess temples, captures the centrality of the firewalking ceremony and illustrates the range of vows (*vēṇṭuta*), possession experiences, and ritual relationships that bind devotees to the goddess. About forty five years old and working as a cook in another family’s home when I first met her in 2005, Nayaki maintained a small goddess shrine under a sacred tree in the alley just steps from both MK Amman and Nagattamman. I searched her out there one afternoon soon after the *Āṭi* festival, where I had observed her acting as a ritual leader and working closely with the temple *pūjāri*. It

was not difficult to locate Nayaki's house; the lanes were full of women washing clothes, drawing water at public taps, chatting, braiding hair on front steps, pounding spices, and chasing toddlers, and they were happy to direct me. When I reached her house, she invited me to duck low under the lintel and enter. It was dim and cool inside and, after we spoke informally for about ten minutes, I asked Nayaki to tell me about MK Amman and Nagattamman:

Nayaki: MK Amman is the *main* [goddess] for everyone. Do you want me to talk louder? We got together as a village [*ūr*] and put Nagattamma there. The children wanted to have a temple that belongs only to this village [*kirāmam*]; it was only through the efforts of our children that this temple came here. Now it has become well known. ... It is twenty eight years since I married, and for the past eighteen years I am doing firewalking [*neruppu mit*].

ALA: What are the *pūjās* you do for Nagattamman?

Nayaki: Only once per year firewalking [*tīmit*] occurs. We pierce with *alaku* [metal hooks, skewers or tridents, ranging in length from a few inches to several feet, that are used to pierce the devotee's tongue, bottom lip, and/or cheeks] and do firewalking in the month of *Āṭi*. During *Āṭi* we also carry milk pots [*pāl kuṭam*] in procession. These are the important *pūjās*. Whoever comes to worship, wherever they come from, first they must go to MK Amman, and second they go to the other local *ammaṅ* temples and do *pūjā*. MK is the village goddess [*kirāma tēvata*].

ALA: When did you first get [possessed by] *cāmi* [a general term any deity]?

Nayaki: When I was ten years old MK Amma possessed me. I grew up in this place. My mother's house was here. For the past eighteen years I have put *alaku*. I walk on the fire and put *alaku*. I became very sick when I was pregnant with my son; ten days before my delivery I got three types of *ammai* [pox]. Everyone said that I would not survive. My legs and hands were swollen. I got measles, mumps, and chicken pox. People who lived in my mother's place made a vow [*vēṅṭuta*] to MK Amma, "If she gets well and if she delivers her baby well, she'll pierce her tongue [*nā alaku*] and she'll walk on the fire."

ALA: So when you were ten years old she came on you.

Nayaki: When she [the goddess] likes a person she comes on them. When the pox comes you must bathe three times: with turmeric water, neem leaves, and then flowers and grass. I bathed a first time and a second time, but before I bathed the third time I delivered the baby. I gave birth on January 16 and in the month of August [counts through the intervening months on her fingers] they did the [*Āṭi*] festival; that was the first time I did the firewalking. They poured *kū* and put *alaku*. This was the first firewalking for me, and for the past eighteen years I have walked. In the course of the whole year, nothing is as special as the *Āṭi* festival, and in that the most special event is the firewalking.

Following many years of possession by MK Amman, Nayaki's vow (made on her behalf by others) to participate in the *Āṭi* festival was catalyzed by an experience of healing after suffering from three types of pox which threatened her own life and that of the baby she was carrying. Her personal narrative highlights the experience and perceptions of a

long-term and committed devotee, and serves as a useful point of entry to the more general description and analysis of the *Āṭi* festival that follows.

Ritual Musicians as Ritual Specialists

At the opening of Nagattamman's festival in 2005 – which actually “starts” at MK Amman where each related temple builds its *karakam*, the elaborate, flower-covered ritual vessel that houses the goddess during the festival proceedings – one resigned-looking female devotee who was awaiting the arrival of the ritual drummers told me, “Nothing can begin without the *pampaikkārar*.” *Pampaikkārar* is the general term applied to the all-male troupe of ritual musicians/religious specialists who play and sing the music for and preside over the ritual arrangements and transactions at many Tamil festivals and non-Brahmin rites of passage, including the *Āṭi* festival. As was described briefly in Chapter Three, this ensemble is comprised of four to six men: two play the *pampai*, twin-headed drums that are played in sets of two, one plays the *uṭukkai*, a small, hourglass-shaped drum which resembles Shiva's *damaru*, one plays the *maṇi*, a brass bell, and at least one plays a set of *cilampu*, ring-shaped brass rattles. The leader sings songs that praise and extol the feats of the deities, invoking and inviting them to

possess human hosts. They are credited with the special ability to summon the goddess (and other deities) with specific cadences of drumbeats, as well as to possess the knowledge of how to ritually, and respectfully, dismiss these deities. These ritual musicians call and communicate with a range of possessing supernaturals – from gods and goddesses to disgruntled spirits, demons, and ghosts – but do not themselves become possessed as some other classes of ritual specialists do. Their dialogues vacillate between sung lyrics and improvised queries as the ritual musicians attempt to ascertain supernatural identities, seek permission for ritual performances, and determine whether festival preparations are satisfactory.

Given that the *pampaikkārar* provide the crucial musical accompaniment for non-Brahmin Tamil festival occasions and their skills and services are considered essential for building the *karakam* and inducing goddess possession in festival participants, this female devotee was correct in noting that nothing could start without their presence. Indeed, the vast majority of devotees do not even show up at the temple on an *Āṭi* Friday until the *pampaikkārar* have already invested an hour or more in their ritual preparations, though some, like this devotee, arrived early because she knew from experience that by four o'clock in the afternoon on an *Āṭi* Friday at MK Amman all of the “good” spots would

have already been staked out. These prized locations offer a temple group space to congregate while the *pampaikkārar* make their ritual arrangements and build the *karakam*, as well as sufficient room for possessed individuals to dance with the goddess's presence in their bodies. Assembled devotees want to be able to watch these possession spectacles, and have the opportunity to take *darśan* of the goddess possessing her human vehicle, as well as to be able to hear the goddess's spoken grace, or *aruḷ vākkku*, in the form of prophecy spoken spontaneously or in response to questions posed by the ritual drummers and ordinary devotees.

During the period that I argue that *nāga* traditions were becoming newly popular and visible and awareness of *nāga dōṣam* was increasing, the *Āṭi* crowds at MK Amman were growing significantly, particularly on Fridays. Since 2005, as demands on the temple's limited spatial resources have burgeoned, I have witnessed escalating tensions related to access and room at this popular goddess temple, especially at the snake stone installation. The *porikal*-cooking area has been relocated to the street outside the temple in recent years, which has freed up additional room in the temple's interior, and I was told that the temple is in delicate negotiations with a municipal office next door to annex their property to the temple premises. Another persistent issue which flares up

every *Āṭi* Friday is the performance of *pradakṣiṇa* (Ta. *pirataṭciṇam*) vows, in which devotees circumambulate the goddess's sanctum by means of full-body rolling (*aṅgapradakṣiṇa*) or by falling, rodlike, over and over with her arms outstretched (*daṅḍapradakṣiṇa*). Devotees often describe these difficult vows as expressions of devotion performed in thanksgiving for wishes fulfilled.¹¹⁷ Temple officials (and increasingly other devotees) complain that there is not sufficient room to discharge these bodily vows on a crowded Friday. On several occasions I have witnessed them scolding these votaries, who are always accompanied by at least one helper (usually another woman whose job it is to preserve the vow-taker's modesty by continually tugging her sari back into place as she rolls) and forcing them to reschedule or abandon their vow, or reduce the number of "rounds" they have committed to offer to the goddess.

¹¹⁷ For a different interpretation of *aṅgapradakṣiṇa*, which emphasizes the "compromising position" this vow places devotees in relative to the goddess as well as the deliberate weakening and humiliation the devotee undergoes to establish a relationship with the goddess, see Harman (2006, 33). For an assessment of the multiple motivations participants themselves expressed for undertaking this vow see Martin Baumann on the festival performance of *aṅgapradakṣiṇa* in Germany (2006, 135-36).

Building the *Karakam*

Once the *pampaikkārar* do arrive and claim their space, they immediately set out all of their ritual supplies and begin building the *karakam*. Starting with a new, unglazed terracotta pot, they place a mound of moistened turmeric inside it, as well as some raw rice and shiny rupee coins. In some cases lemons and a small amount of milk are also added.¹¹⁸ The ritual musicians fill it partway with water someone has fetched from the shore of the Bay of Bengal, just ten minutes away from Mylapore, and float a chunk of burning camphor on the water's surface. Burning the camphor in the midst of sacred water carried from the ocean, called the Gangai (Ganges) by ritual participants, is essential to establishing the goddess's life (*uyir*) in the ritual vessel. After one of the ritual specialists winds white cotton twine around the pot's exterior in an intricate pattern, he rubs it with turmeric powder and dots it with vermilion. Next they secure lengths of bamboo to the pot with jute rope, and lash numerous bushy clusters of neem fronds to the bamboo frame.

¹¹⁸ Whitehead discusses the role and construction of the "karagam," which he says is "treated exactly like the goddess" in South Indian festival contexts (1921, 37-8; Plate 3; 100-101). For discussions of Tamil ritual uses of the *karakam* beyond those described here, see Madeleine Biardeau 2004; Hildebeitel 1988 and 1991; Nabokov 2000.

Satisfied with the *karakam*'s overall shape, the *pampaikkārar* unfurl long spools of flower garlands – several varieties of creamy jasmine, fragrant yellow pom-poms, lush but scentless pink blossoms, and similarly scentless vivid orange blooms – and begin winding them around the neem structure. Loops of flowers are suspended in concentric half-circles from the rim of the pot to resemble a skirt for the goddess, an effect which is bolstered by the inclusion of additional neem branches. The ritual drummers affix a silver goddess “face” to the front of the flower-draped edifice, and decorate the head portion of the goddess’s “body” with pointy palm fronds and faux parrots. Various pieces of fruit are decorated and nestled into the flowers at the top of the vessel; large circles of vermilion are applied to green-skinned citrus fruits called sweet limes, and smaller circles, reminiscent of eyes, are drawn in black paste on small, smooth lemons.¹¹⁹ One

¹¹⁹ On *karakam* which included pieces of fruit with black circles on them there was an attempt to conceal the application of this black substance from onlookers. When I asked what accounted for this secrecy most people said that bystanders’ glances could be polluting to the ritual process and that their gazes might attract, rather than repel, the evil eye. While Beck observes that black “is an important colour in repelling evil influences,” and notes that lamp black is applied to children and black beads are used as charms to dissuade the evil eye and jealous glances (1969, 571 n.4), I was told by several ritual specialists that black draws evil spirits and was scolded during one village possession ritual for carrying a black camera case. Ritual musicians in Chennai told me that although today eyeliner is often used to draw these black circles on fruit in ritual contexts the most powerful substance to use would be *mai*, a black pigment associated with sorcery and black magic. Nabokov notes that in order to activate the life-force (*uyir*) of effigies they have shaped, sorcerers are said to dot the effigies’ bodies, and especially their eyes, “with a black

pampaikkārar described the placement of these black “eyes” as the ritual act which establishes *uyir* (life) in the *karakam*, much as eye-opening ceremonies are performed as part of the consecration of temple images (see Eck 1998). Finally, a foil multi-hooded snake decoration is set atop the now-towering flower-covered ritual vessel where it shades the goddess’s face, and a thick flower garland is placed around the entire structure.

“The *Karakam* is the Goddess”

Ritual specialists and devotees alike were resolute in their declarations that the *karakam* is identical to the goddess in the context of the *Āṭi* festival.¹²⁰ When, in a conversation with one professional *karakam*-carrier, I used a comparative adjective (*mātir*) to suggest that the *karakam* is *like* the goddess for the duration of the festival, he

substance (*ma*) that is concocted from the boiled then charred skull bones of first-born sons” (2000, 45). In her description of an expulsion (*kalippu*) rite involving effigies that she observed first-hand Nabokov notes that charcoal-paste was used for this purpose (57). In the half-dozen or so *kalippu* rites whose performance I witnessed in the cremation ground of the Mel Malaiyanur temple (where Nabokov carried out much of her research) ritual specialists avoided answering my questions about the nature of this black pigment and would say only that its application instilled *uyir* in the dough effigies (*pomma*).

¹²⁰ Meyer refers to some instances where the *karakam* is not identified with the goddess, and speculates about a range of meanings these scenarios suggest (1986, 235-37). For other local exegeses of the significance and role of the *karakam*, see Clark-Decès (2007, 93-94).

flatly rejected my simile, and retorted hotly, “Why do you say it is *like* the goddess? The *karakam* is the goddess. It *cannot* be different.” One Brahmin priest emphasized that the *karakam* must be created from materials that are pleasing to the goddess and filled with fragrant substances, such as flowers, cardamom, nutmeg, and green peppercorns, so that she will concede to be present in it.¹²¹ “We invite the goddess into the *karakam* and she lives there. It is her form [*rūpam*]. If you ask where the goddess dwells, I will recite this verse: ‘Wherever there is fragrance, I am there.’ So we have to put substances which have fragrance inside the *karakam*. If we put all fragrant things in it they will act as a magnet for the goddess and attract her.” Another priest highlighted the democratizing nature of the *karakam*, which is essentially a mobile form of the goddess which leaves the temple to offer *darśan* to devotees.

You cannot take the *mūlavar* [image of the deity which is permanently installed in the temple’s sanctum sanctorum] to each and every house, but you can take the *karakam*. ... We say, “Goddess, please come and reside in this *karakam*. Only if you reside in this *karakam* can we take it to all the houses in the *ūr*.” We do the festival to establish the goddess in the *karakam* and bring her in

¹²¹ The idea that fragrance serves as a marker of the goddess’s presence was referenced in several conversations with ritual drummers and festival celebrants. Several women who embody the goddess through possession experiences described becoming aware of the goddess’s scent as the first indication that she is about to possess, or “climb up,” their bodies. See also Santhi, who reports that flower scents are thought to surround snakes, and that the fragrance of jasmine is believed to spread when two snakes mate (1991, 89).

procession [*ūrvalam*]. Some people can walk to the temple, but others may not be able to. They may be blind or paralyzed. So the goddess comes to their doorsteps once in a year. The goddess goes in search of the *bhakta*.

Someone rings a bell as the ritual specialist waves a camphor flame in front of the *karakam*, and all the assembled devotees press their hands together in salutation.

Women who intend to participate in the weekend's *Āṭi* rituals are dressed in yellow and red saris, whereas men are bare-chested and wear gauzy yellow or red cotton sarongs.

As Brenda Beck has shown in her study of South Indian color symbolism, red expresses auspiciousness and vitality in most ritual contexts, where yellow – embodied by turmeric – is considered cooling and purifying, connoting fertility and prosperity, and is regularly dabbed on ritual offerings and gifts (1969). Some of the men have had small lemons sewn onto their chests, arms, and backs with colored yarn as part of their vows to the goddess, and many of the male and female devotees have arranged for ritual piercings (*alaku*) as components of their *Āṭi* vows.

The Goddess Speaks: Flickering Flames and Possessed Bodies

The lead musician first sings in honor of Ganesha, and then launches into songs praising the goddess, enumerating her powers, and invoking her presence. As his

ensemble plays their instruments, the singer gestures, singing expressively, his voice rising and falling, his eyes trained on the burning oil lamp next to the *karakam*. Called the *pativilakku*, this lamp is sometimes fixed on the *karakam* itself and at other times is placed beside it. The ability to interpret the goddess's wishes, orders, and instructions in the flickering of the *pativilakku*'s flame numbers among the unique ritual skills that characterize the *pampaikkārar* and render him essential to the ritual progression of the *Āṭi* festival. A non-Brahmin priest who serves at a nearby goddess temple which participates in ritual relationships with MK Amman said this of the *pampaikkārar*,

Their role is very important. They stand in front of the *pativilakku* and sing songs to invite *ammaṅ*. They also sing along with the procession as it goes through the streets. The *pampai* is a necessity for *ammaṅ*, it is definitely required. The people want it and the *ammaṅ* wants it. Only the *pampaikkārar* and *uṭukkaikkārar* [two types of ritual drummers] can interpret the flickering of the *pativilakku*. Only they understand the language of the flame. When the *pampaikkārar* sings there will be some change in the lamp's flame – an indication, a sign. They sing in praise of *ammaṅ*, and while they sing the *pativilakku* shows her commands [*uttaravu*].

The watchful ritual musician announces that the goddess's presence has been indicated by the *pativilakku* flame, and then shifts his attention to the handful of ritual participants who are beginning to show signs of supernatural presence on their bodies.

One woman breathes in short, noisy huffs, another sways from side to side in wide, uneven arcs, and another, a very young woman, gestures for a clump of neem branches to be handed to her and chews them slowly, with unfocused eyes and a vacant expression on her face. Neem is widely regarded as *ukanta* (suitable, appropriate) for the goddess and is often ingested by those she possesses; consuming neem is both believed to deliver a *śakti* infusion to the possessed individual and is considered cooling for the body of a possessed individual, whose constitution is understood to become heated by virtue of the goddess's presence.¹²²

Suddenly, an elderly woman from the back of the group yells "Govinda!" (a name of Vishnu which is uttered as an indicator of divine possession) and charges toward the

¹²² The association of neem with local South Indian goddesses is ubiquitous, and largely relates to the belief that neem possesses cooling and medicinal properties. Interestingly, in addition to its use in the worship of local goddesses, neem is believed to repel demons; indeed, offering a possessed individual neem leaves and assessing his or her reaction to them is believed to be an effective way of determining whether the possessing spirit is a deity or demon. Neem is particularly employed in religio-medical therapies for pox-related illnesses (*ammai*), whose pustules are considered to be manifestations of the individual's bodily heat as well as the goddess's heated presence in a body. As was described in some of the personal narratives in Chapter Four, those who affected by *ammai* generally bathe with water mixed with neem leaves, and may sleep with neem under their pillows or on a bed of neem fronds, and/or ingest neem leaves. Those who suffer from pox often take a vow to the goddess that they will circumambulate her shrine wearing a dress made entirely of neem branches once they experience healing. See also Ahmed 1995; Amirthalingam 2001; Crooke (1894, 252-54); and Meyer (1986, 218) on these and other religio-cultural uses of neem.

karakam, pushing other devotees aside roughly. The lead *pampaikkārar* raises his hand and the resounding *pampai* beats, echoing off the temple's many stone surfaces, are immediately silenced. In the ensuing dialogue, the ritual musician is able to determine that it is indeed the goddess Nagattamman who has descended on this woman, and he asks the goddess to indicate whether she is satisfied with their ritual preparations and plans for the three-day festival. Speaking through her human host the goddesses assures the crowd that she is happy, and grants her permission for the festival to proceed. She issues lengthy and stern instructions to those who will walk on the fire on Sunday, telling them that they must remain "clean" after tying *kāppu*, the thread wristlet that all ritual participants will wear until the festival's conclusion, and that they must not venture beyond the boundaries of the *ūr* (place, village; here more aptly neighborhood) for the duration of the festival. When she finishes her divine monologue, the *pampaikkārar* wipes holy ash on this woman's forehead and she immediately grows limp, the kinetic tension in her limbs departs, and she collapses against a clutch of women from her temple group.

Tying *Kāppu*. Protection and Restriction

The Nagattamman temple priest has until this time been in the background, deferring to the ritual specialist-musicians he has retained to orchestrate the festival, but now he is called to stand near the *karakam* and tie the first *kāppu* onto the glittering foil snake hoods shielding the goddess's face, which flashes with the reflected glow from the many arrayed oil lamps. Following the transformative rituals that have been performed over the vessel and the goddess's acquiescence to reside in it for the duration of the festival, the pot is now completely identified with the goddess and considered an extension of her being. The *kāppu*, a turmeric-rubbed piece of thread with a chunk of turmeric root tied to it, is then fastened on the *karakam* itself, and the rest of the ritual participants line up to have *kāppu* tied on their wrists as well. Many of the women pour a bucket of water over their heads and return with dripping saris (which purifies them before they approach the *karakam* and cools them in preparation for bodily encountering the goddess's *śakti* there) to have *kāppu* tied, for which each devotee pays eleven rupees.

To tie *kāppu* (*kāppu kaṭṭu*) signifies the devotee's concession to particular restrictions and constitutes a binding contract between the devotee and the goddess.¹²³

Kāppu thus functions as a tangible symbol of the vow (*viratam*) that each ritual participant must take prior to their involvement in the *Āṭi* festival, and embodies a reciprocal protection which is believed to flow from the goddess to the devotee and to the goddess from the devotee. The devotee is protected by her adherence to the contours of the vow, and the goddess is shielded from contact with any polluting elements for its duration. One third-generation ritual drummer explained the meaning of *kāppu* in these terms:

We tie *kāppu* so that we will be clean. We must be without *tīṭṭu* [pollution, impurity]. We should not sleep on the mat or bed. The husband and wife should not be together [i.e., have sexual intercourse]. They should be *neat and clean.* They should not have [alcoholic] *drinks* or *kaviccī* [lit. the stench of fish or meat; i.e., they should not eat non-vegetarian foods] during those three days. On Sunday night they can have *non-veg.*

¹²³ Mines relates the wider class of protective amulets and strings called *kāppu* to the [*valai-kāppu*] ritual (discussed in the context of *Āṭi Puram* in the previous chapter) pregnant women undergo when other women squeeze glass bangles onto their wrists “in order to protect their pregnancy by a kind of associative magic, keeping the fetus bound to them” (2005, 38). Meyer’s interpretation of these ritual threads follows along similar lines as my own, although one of the *Ankalamman* devotees she interviewed also credited *kāppu* with protecting celebrants from having fights among themselves during the goddess’s festival (1986, 234-35). Other discussions of Tamil *kāppu* rituals are provided by Beck 1981; Foulston 2002; Hildebeitel 1991; Nabokov 2000; Whitehead (1921, 100).

As is generally the case with many vows in Hinduism, abstinence from non-vegetarian food, alcohol, and sexual intercourse is enjoined for ritual participants in the *Āṭi* festival. The prohibition against sleeping on a mat or a bed during the *viratam* has two dimensions: first, the votary is undertaking an austerity by denying herself this comfort, and second she avoids touching mats, mattresses, and bed sheets which might have been previously polluted through contact with menstrual or sexual fluids. One twenty-four-year-old woman whose family described their *jāti* as *Adi Dravida* (lit. original or indigenous people of the Dravidian/South Indian land, another name for those from the lowest caste, also called Dalits or “S.C.,” for Scheduled Caste) and who I met when she had a leading ritual role in an *Āṭi* festival at another snake goddess temple, told me, “After tying *kāppu* they should not stay overnight outside the neighborhood [*pakkam*]. They should be very *clean* and not get any *tīṭtu*, so it is best if they sleep in the temple. They can sleep in their home if they want to, but they should not sleep outside the area [*ūr*]. Keeping *clean* while having *kāppu* is a *must.*” Some of those who tie *kāppu*, especially males who will play central roles like carrying the *karakam* in procession, elect to sleep in the temple from Friday to Sunday, and will only eat food that has been prepared there by the priest or other ritual participants so that they can be assured of its

purity. One ritual drummer characterized this practice as a wise extra precaution, saying

“It is best not to take *risk.*”

Ritual Piercings for the Goddess: Power, Permanency, and Pragmatism

The *pampaikkārar* continue to play for a further thirty minutes, and nearly two dozen devotees experience divine possession and dance. One young man jumps energetically, slicing his arms through the air repeatedly, and falls dangerously close to the oil lamp that burns next to the *karakam*. One woman, on whom the goddess has come for the first time, weeps soundlessly as she bites into whole lemons and chews handfuls of neem leaves. Her hair has come loose from her braid in the course of her dancing, and her eyes are wild, swimming with tears. She identifies herself as possessed by MK Amman and speaks *aru! vākkū* in response to the drummer’s questions about whether the festival will proceed smoothly and if there are any flaws or defects (*kuṛai*) in the ritual arrangements. She demands *alaku*, declaring that her tongue should be perforated with a small silver trident, and that she wishes to be pierced nine times in total over the course of successive *Āṭi* festivals. The lead *pampaikkārar* has her kneel before the *karakam* and, as the drums are beat to a crescendo, he pierces her

tongue as the female devotees cry, “Govinda! Govinda!” and “Om Shakti! Om Shakti!” again and again. Indeed, most participants who are pierced with *alaku* experience possession and speak *aru! vākku* (see Flueckiger 2006, 228-32, whose interpretations of a similar piercing ritual among Sufi Muslims are very different).¹²⁴ Devotees who are in the midst of a cycle of *alaku* piercings often bring their own slender silver tridents, but a number of larger ones have been borrowed from the temple for the occasion. Lemons are slid onto the ends of some of the skewers that pierce devotees’ bottom lips and tongues, and the spears some devotees have piercing the flesh of both their cheeks are so long that they droop low enough to nearly touch the ground on either side.

Several ritual drummers converge on the half-dozen men who have donned harnesslike *kāvaṭi* (wooden arch-shaped structures carried on the shoulders as part of a vow or offering, most commonly for Murugan), and begin piercing each man with 108

¹²⁴ The fact that most of those who are pierced with *alaku* also embody the goddess through possession distinguishes this vow from the Muslim practice of piercing *zarab* (metal skewers or spikes) through disciples’ cheeks, eyelids, and chests described by Flueckiger in the context of annual remembrance rituals in honor of a departed spiritual guide (*pīr*) (2006, 228-32). While those who are pierced with *zarab* do not lose consciousness and appear to be fully aware of their surroundings, Flueckiger reports that some ritual spectators do enter trance during this ritual performance. *Zarab* piercings are meant to demonstrate the courage and spiritual power of the disciple, who should be able to sustain the entry of the *zarab* without the appearance of any blood, and those who undertake this practice are included in the remembrance rituals to cool the *pīr*’s heated, *jalālī* (fierce, angry) character.

skewer-type *alaku*.¹²⁵ Devotees are patient throughout this time-consuming process, and many of those who no longer display the vestiges of possession sit to rest before the *kāppu* begins. Each of these *alaku* is decorated with a hammered silver spear (*vē*) at its tip, another nod to the warrior-god Murugan, one of whose common appellations is Velmurugan. The *alaku* pass easily into the men's skin where the experienced drummer pinches it together and, as is customary with *alaku*, no blood is visible at the point of entry. The absence of blood is taken as proof of the devotee's *bhakti* and the deity's *śakti*; participants told me that if a vow-keeper had not kept his or her *viratam* faithfully then the votary would bleed, much as those who would walk over the hot coals on Sunday could expect to burn their feet if they had they defaulted on their vows.

The devotees' exegeses of *alaku* practices were principally concerned with the intensification of *śakti* a devotee experiences after putting *alaku*, the relationship between piercing and *aru/vākkū*, and the ways in which piercing renders the goddess's relationship with the *bhakta* permanent and/or functions as a strategy to circumscribe the goddess's interventions in a devotee's life. One female ritual specialist, who told me she

¹²⁵ Waghorne describes how in 1995 a clerk at MK Amman temple carried one of these *kāvaṭi* with 108 silver spears on the occasion of a milk pot ritual celebrated in the month of *Cittirai* (2004, 165-66). As Younger has shown for South Africa (2002, 150) and Baumann has recorded for Germany (2006, 137-40), *kāvaṭi* vows are also undertaken in diasporic contexts.

had been pierced in honor of the goddess more than thirty times, asserted, “The result of putting *alaku* is increased *śakti*.” In most cases devotees characterized *alaku* as something the goddess likes, desires, or demands, but some of them said that they committed to a cycle of piercings as an expression of devotion or simply because they wished to. A ritual drummer put it this way; “Sometimes they put *alaku* because the *ammaṅ* requests it and sometimes because of their desire [*viruppam*]. But to put *alaku* is an important thing because it unites the person with the goddess. *Alaku* is not a *must.* If we wish to put it we can. But if you want to join [*aikkiyam*] with the goddess then you put *alaku*.” Whether an outgrowth of the devotee’s desire or in response to the deity’s preference, *alaku* piercings enable the votary to forge connections with the goddess and to share in her essence, presence, and *śakti*.

I spoke about *alaku* with the mother and paternal aunt of a young woman who experiences goddess possession and who I had recently witnessed complete her third ritual piercing for the goddess:

ALA: Why do we put *alaku*?

Mother: *Alaku* makes what the possessed person says during *aru! vākk* absolutely true.

Aunt: *Alaku* gives us *śakti*, because *alaku* is given to the goddess and she is *śakti*. When the *ammaṅ* possesses somebody and the possessed person utters something, it is powerful. We put *alaku* to make that speech powerful.

Mother: Whatever she [referring to her daughter when possessed by the goddess] says will come true [*paḷi*] and so people come to consult with her. If one is not married for a long time, when she is possessed they give fruit to her and pray to her to give a married life. Those without a child pray to her for a child. Many have prayed to her. When she has the goddess on her they buy garlands for her. They buy her new clothes. They do everything for her.

Aunt: When she puts *alaku* the words will be powerful.

ALA: Why does she put *alaku* again and again, every year?

Mother: Because the goddess asks for it. That goddess asks her, “Will you put *alaku* for me this *Āṭi?*”

Aunt: The goddess is asking. We have so many *alaku* with us, in our *pūjā* room.

These women link piercings with the ability to speak powerful, unassailable prophecy, and to being worthy of other devotees' prayers and petitions. In their formulations, *alaku* piercings function both as pleasing offerings to the goddess, and embodiments of her *śakti*, which is shared by votaries who dance her presence, speak her prophecy, and ritually pierce their bodies. Another woman, who saved money over time so that she

could purchase her own small silver trident before her inaugural tongue piercing at the Mel Malaiyanur temple, said, “If I put *alaku* then the *cāmi* will not go away from me; the *ammaṇ* will be on me forever. The *aru!* *vāḱku* that I say will be true [*palikkum*]. The goddess has possessed me for the last sixteen years but I have only been putting *alaku* for the past five years. I do not speak *aru!* *vāḱku* every time I am possessed but if I do, definitely it will come true.” In addition to their associating *alaku* piercing with the veracity of oracular speech, devotees described how *alaku* cleans the tongue (*nāḱku cuttam*) and makes the possessed individual’s prophetic utterances clear, effective, and powerful.

While many devotees expressed the desire to mark their relationship with the goddess as permanent through ritual piercings, some spoke about the practical difficulties that spontaneous possession could create. One young mother described the following scenario: “One day I was in front of the house cooking over a fire when the *pampai* sound came from the temple. I did not know anything. The goddess came and I started to dance. I left that fire and I left my child in the lane. I only came to know all of this afterwards [i.e. after her possession had passed].” This woman told me that this incident led her to extract a “promise” (*cattiyavāḱku*, lit. true speech) from the goddess,

obtained in a dialogue led by a ritual musician, that in the future the goddess would only possessed her under certain circumstances. Under this arrangement the woman would commit to a cycle of nine ritual piercings, and the goddess would agree not to possess her every time she heard drumming, but rather would only descend if she was called, if there was a demon (*pēy*) nearby, if her family was threatened by sorcery (*pillicūṇiyam*), or in cases of “emergency.” Many of the ritual drummers told me that devotees could develop control over their possession events over time as they became more experienced, and that they prefer not to “block” (*taṭai*) the goddess from coming on an individual.¹²⁶ These musicians’ reasoning is theological in nature, and reflects their desire not to interfere with the power and proclivities of the goddess. The goddess’s female hosts, on the other hand, spoke more matter-of-factly about the threats to their modesty posed by spontaneous possession and the necessity of striking deals with the goddess to curb it. This pragmatism was especially true of women who worked outside

¹²⁶ Interestingly, another context in which the concept of “blocking” and interfering with the agency of a divinity surfaced was in conversations with priests who told me they “tied off” the anthills at their temples to block the divine reptiles who reside therein from exiting and thereby scaring worshipers. These priests usually represented themselves as courageous in the presence of slithering snake goddesses, and as participating in special relationships with them (whereby the snakes would appear if the priest meditated on them or summoned them with his mind), but described devotees at their temples as prone to becoming frightened if they saw snakes at the anthill because they lacked understanding about the true nature (*guṇam*) of these snakes.

their homes or had husbands who were less than approving of the social consequences of their wives' possession abilities. Other women evidenced concern about becoming the object of neighborhood gossip, as one woman said, "There may not be someone there to hold me. My sari may fly up. Neighborhood people may tease me or say something. It is respectful if the goddess comes only when we call her on me, not at any ordinary time."

"The Goddess Goes in Search of the Devotee:" Marking Boundaries in Festival

Processions

With the *karakam* built and enlivened with the goddess's *uyir* and the temple rituals of *kāppu* and *alaku* now complete, the ritual participants line up behind the *karakam* to go out in procession through the neighborhood. The Nagattamman temple *pūjāri* leads the procession, balancing the flower-swathed ritual vessel on his head, and the drummers flank him on both sides.¹²⁷ As they step over the high stone threshold to

¹²⁷ The issue of who is designated to carry the *karakam* is handled differently at different temples. I have rarely encountered a female *karakam*-carrier, but women regularly play other key leadership roles in these festivals, such as balancing baskets of offerings on their heads or carrying fire pots (*tīccaṭṭi*) at the front of the procession, and leading the procession with the *ārati* flame and dispensing holy ash from a wide brass plate. In some cases there is one main ritual

exit MK Amman temple, one of the temple priests steps forward for a final *ārati*, and circles a brass plate with a burning camphor flame around the *karakam* and its bearer's body. The procession moves slowly at first, as those who have had their cheeks pierced with long spears have to proceed sideways out of the temple doorway and negotiate the crowds carefully, and it halts first at its own Nagattamman temple. The *pūjāri* turns the *karakam* so that it faces the adorned and decorated snake goddess image in her

vessel which is infused with the goddess's divine energy (*śakti karakam*) and then several smaller flower-swathed ones (*pū karakam*), a system which effectively amortizes this privilege over a greater number of devotees. Instead of designating one of their own for this ritual honor, many of the Mylapore-area goddess temples choose to hire a male ritual specialist who is charged with the task of building and carrying the *karakam*. This individual operates independently; while he cooperates with the *pampaikkārar*, he is not a member of their troupe. One such freelance *karakam*-carrier who I came to know quite well over the course of my fieldwork dresses as, or takes the *vēṣam* (guise) of, the goddess on festival occasions when he has been hired to carry a *karakam*, and experiences possession when the goddess's *uyir*-filled ritual vessel is placed on his head. By wearing a sari, anklets, bangles, and a *poṭṭu* (round forehead marking), and dancing the goddess in possession sequences this ritual specialist performatively becomes the goddess in these festival contexts. Hildebeitel notes that during the *karakam* festival in the Kuttantavar cult, men take vows to "dress as women with blouses and sarees, and put on *tāḷis*" (1999, 288), and Flueckiger describes men in Tirupati who take the goddess's guises (*vēṣam*) in the context of the Gangamma *jātara* (2008). Nicholas J. Bradford discusses a class of "transgenderites" – female, erotic men, and male, ascetic women – who are "caught" by the goddess Yellamma in Karnataka and function as her human agents (1983). The system of hiring a freelance ritual specialist makes it much less likely that the *karakam*-carrier will come into contact with any pollution (a situation that would introduce *kuṛai* into the ritual proceedings and lead to negative consequences), because this man observes rigorous austerities for the entire month of *Āṭi* (including the weeks of *Āvaṇi* which are "counted" as part of *Āṭi*), sleeps in the temple, and prepares his own food there during the festival. Further, the choice of a professional for this coveted ritual role circumvents the potentially fraught decision about which devotee should receive this honor in any given year.

sanctum and, as the drumbeats accelerate and swell, the two forms of the goddess make eye contact in a moment of dual deity *darśan*. Someone cracks a coconut against the pavement, shattering it into many glistening white shards that devotees scramble for as *ārati* is performed, and then the procession is underway again, on what will be a several-hour-long journey around the neighborhood.

The entire entourage pauses at every intersection (*cantippu*), where the musicians smash a small lemon underfoot and twist another one in half, squeezing its juice around the *karakam*-carrier as he windmills his arms around in wide circles. This practice is intended to ward off the evil eye, for which crossroads are thought to be particularly vulnerable sites.¹²⁸ With the ritual drums signaling its arrival, the retinue also stops at each temple and roadside shrine along the way and waits for the priest to appear and offer *ārati* and holy ash to the priest bearing the *karakam*. All along the procession route people peer out windows, stand on rooftops, and hang off balconies to watch the spectacle and get a glimpse of the *karakam*-goddess, and many of those who are processing continue to experience possession. As the procession advances through

¹²⁸ Nabokov mentions *karakam* processions halting at crossroads but does not offer an explanation for this practice (2000, 135). See Flueckiger for analysis of the category of the crossroads (*caurāstā*) in Indian contexts (2006, 14-15).

the neighborhood, it is met at almost every home by devotees who emerge to have *darśan*, make *ārati* offerings, and bathe and anoint the feet of the *karakam*-carrier with turmeric water and vermilion. Some of them present key ritual participants with garlands, and others place their babies in the road for the *karakam*-carrier to step over in a gesture of blessing.

The procession achieves several interrelated ritual aims. First, in the words of the priest quoted above, “The goddess goes in search of the *bhakta*,” offering *darśan* to devotees in their own spaces and places on an auspicious *Āṭi* Friday. The performance of bringing the goddess in her *karakam* form to the devotees of the neighborhood also serves to announce the *tiruvilā* and invite people to attend the firewalking ceremony and other ritual events. Finally, the procession marks the boundaries (*ella*) of the *ūr*, a performance which demarcates the goddess’s territorial jurisdiction and indicates the borders within which those who have placed themselves under her divine protection in the *kāppu* ceremony should stay until the festival concludes. One man who walked with the procession that night told me, “We take the *karakam* to all four borders of the *ūr* – to the north, south, east, and west. We go to all four corners. ... This is called *kāppu* and *ellai-kāṭṭu* [tying the borders]. Nagattamman protects each house in her borders. She

makes a *round* and goes to each and every house and says to everybody that she is celebrating her festival.”

In many Tamil festival and ritual contexts, boundaries are marked by dispersing the proceeds of blood sacrifice at the *ūr*'s borders. This boundary-marking is most commonly accomplished by scattering “blood rice” (*ratta-cātam*), cooked rice that has been mixed with the blood of a beheaded sacrificial animal, often a chicken whose head is bitten off by a possessed (i.e., the deity, embodied by the sacrifice), to the four directions and at the borders of the village or neighborhood.¹²⁹ The distribution of blood rice at the boundaries marks off the territorial area that is under the deity's control, and is believed to attract evil spirits to the peripheries of this territory and give them something to feed on there, away from the ritual proceedings. In cases where blood sacrifice is abjured, homologous vegetarian offerings may be substituted. Rice mixed with vermilion achieves the same effect, as does slicing lemons and smashing green pumpkins whose juicy surfaces and fleshy insides have been smeared with this red powder. Beck notes that “sacrifices always mark a ritual boundary” (1969, 558), and several other scholars have also documented either the tendency for blood sacrifice to be performed at borders

¹²⁹ On similar practices involving blood rice, see Whitehead (1921, 56-57).

and/or the use of sacrificial antecedents (such as blood rice) to seal, protect or delineate borders in Tamil festival contexts (some examples include Biardeau 2004; Hildebeitel 1991; Meyer 1986).

In her ethnographic study of the intersections between social and ritual relationships in a Tamil village, Mines makes a similar point about the ways in which festival processions serve to demarcate interiors and exteriors, separating “an included inside (*uḷḷē* or *akam*) from an excluded outside (*veliyē* or *puṛam*)” (2005, 34). Drawing on ancient Tamil literary conventions (which no one I spoke with drew relationships to and which I discovered they were not conversant with), Mines identifies the inner part of the circle marked by procession as the *ūr*, and contrasts it with the outer part, which she identifies with the *kāṭu*, the wasteland space that is inhabited by demons, ghosts, and low-castes.¹³⁰ She categorizes the ritual procedures performed at borders and crossroads, such as throwing eggs and pumpkins marked with turmeric and lime paste “as sacrifices to feed and appease maleficent beings who linger outside the village and who want to but must not come inside,” and as “border-constituting actions,” (34) and

¹³⁰ For a detailed discussion of the associations between *pēys* and the *kāṭu*, see Nabokov (2000, 72-75).

explores the political ramifications and levels of social inclusion and exclusion inherent in procession events (40-46).

Sathianathan Clarke considers both the social-symbolic dimensions and the protective functions that are fulfilled through festival processions of a goddess's image to an area's boundaries where sacrifice is then offered. He emphasizes how social difference and caste identities are embodied and performed through these ritualized markings of the *ellai*, or borders, which serve to distinguish those communities that enjoy the goddess's protection from those which fall outside her purview (1998, 42-43).

Drawing on the opposition he sets up between caste Hindu understandings of the *ūr* and low-caste Paraiyar conceptions of the *cēri* (colony), Clarke suggests that sealing the boundaries of the *cēri* should be interpreted as a display of low-caste resistance to the encroaching influence of the dominant community and an affirmation of spatial distinctions between their respective locales.

By about 10 P.M. the *ūr*'s borders have been tied and closed, and the procession makes its way back to Nagattamman's temple. In all but a few cases the signs of possession have faded by this point in the procession; but as soon as they gaze upon the goddess's stone image in the temple itself she descends on some of the women

again and they begin to dance vigorously. Once the *karakam* is installed on a seat of uncooked rice next to the snake goddess's head-only anthropomorphic form in the sanctum the *pampaikkārar* make quick work of their remaining ritual tasks: using holy ash the ritual musicians call the possessing goddess off the remaining possessed women and entrust them to the care of neighbors and relatives, who revive them with cool water while the drummers deftly remove the various types of *alaku* from devotees' bodies and smear their perforations with more holy ash. The *pativilakku* will be tended overnight by a cadre of devotees who have tied *kāppu* and wish to sleep at the temple; the flame must not be allowed to burn out for the duration of the festival.

Carrying Milk Pots for the Goddess

By 7 A.M. the next morning 108 small "ever-silver" (stainless steel) pots have been decorated and arranged on the floor at MK Amman in advance of the Nagattamman *pāl kuṭam* (milk pot) procession. Each pot (*kuṭam*) has been partially filled with milk (*pāl*) and placed on a seat of uncooked rice mounded on a stitched-together dried leaf plate. The exteriors are smeared with turmeric and dotted with *kuṅkumam*, and small lengths of flowers and clusters of neem leaves are tied around

their tapered necks. This year, organizers have opted to cover each pot's opening with a piece of yellow cloth, but I have also seen the mouth wrapped in banana leaves and filled with an unbroken coconut. Every *pāl kuṭam* participant pays a 101-rupee fee and receives a numbered paper badge with an image of the goddess printed on it which they attach to their clothing with a straight pin. As is typically the case at *pāl kuṭam* ceremonies, female devotees vastly outnumber males on this occasion, and many women march along, dressed in the red and yellow saris that goddess devotees often wear on ritual occasions, with small children straddling their hips. Older children also carry milk pots of their own, usually with their mothers' assistance.¹³¹

Like tying *kāppu*, piercing with *alaku*, and other *Āṭi* ritual performances, Nagattamman's *pāl kuṭam* also begins at MK Amman temple. One non-Brahmin *pūjāri* pointed to MK Amman's status as a goddess who appeared "naturally" (*svayambhū*) in explanation for commencing his temple's *pāl kuṭam* procession there, and hinted that her *śakti* is absorbed by the milk and then transferred to how own local goddess who is bathed in that milk; "It is like this: if we want to take Ganga water we go to the ocean and

¹³¹ A.W. Van Den Hoek reports that during the performance of Cellattamman's festival in Madurai children from the non-Brahmin priestly family carry *pāl kuṭam* in procession, and that the goddess is thought to enter the children and the vessels, causing the milk to rise in the pots as her possession comes over them (1979, 125).

take it because the ocean is the source, where that Ganga water comes naturally. So for *pāl kuṭam* we go to MK Amman and take the milk from there. Her *śakti* flows into that milk. ... If we follow this procedure the *śakti* here [at his Bhavani Amman temple] will increase.” The *karakam* is carried back to MK Amman from Nagattamman’s temple and the *pampaikkārar* play and sing for a short while, inviting the goddess, employing a musical mode called *āṇantam* (bliss) to heap praise on her, and employing a genre of comparison to describe (*varuṇi*) her qualities. The goddess quickly descends on a few of the female ritual participants and some of the men are pierced with *alaku*, but the focus of today’s ritual event is rather different from the previous evening’s *kāppu*-tying and dialogues with the goddess.

Today the 108 ritual participants balance their *pāl kuṭam* on their heads as they traverse each of the neighborhood’s streets and lanes in a procession that displays personal and collective devotion as well as reconstitutes and defines the *ūr*. This ritual marking of the boundaries by processing ritual participants, like the previous day’s procession of the *karakam*, both defines the *ūr* to itself and to others, such as the ritual spectators from nearby *ūrs* who do not fall within the local snake goddess’s protective jurisdiction. The dynamics which animate the *pāl kuṭam* procession and inform the

larger context of the *Āṭī* festival resonate with William Sax's observation that "villages are created and re-created in ritual" (2002, 49). Several participants used the word "richness" to characterize what they wish for their procession to convey to onlookers, and one priest told me, "We celebrate the festival in a grand manner, and perform our *pāl kuṭam* beautifully. We do not add any water to the milk in the pots so that the goddess has *richness* pouring down on her on this day."

Finally, the procession returns to the Nagattamman temple, where devotees line up to enter the goddess's sanctum to pour the milk from their own pot over her stone image. At some temples this milk is drained off into a large metal vessel and devotees use steel glasses to scoop out portions, which they drink as *prasādam* and carry home to share with family members. Milk is the most common offering made to snake goddesses, and in the context of the *pāl kuṭam* festival, devotees speak of the milk as cooling and nourishing for the goddess. Female devotees emphasized that the opportunity to perform this ritual milk bath (*pāl abhiṣekam*) with their own hands constitutes the special significance of participation in a *pāl kuṭam* ceremony. Indeed, it is rare that *bhaktas* have the option of interacting directly with the enlivened deity's image enshrined in the inner sanctum rather than conveying their offerings through a *pūjārī*,

and this aspect of *pāl kuṭam* was the one they most consistently highlighted. One non-Brahmin priest whose small Mylapore goddess temple participates in ritual relationships with MK Amman characterized this special feature this way; “*Pāl kuṭam* is the only day when the people who come can perform the *abhiṣekam* for the *ammaṅ* themselves, with their own hands. Not on any other day; only on that particular day. So, many ladies come and do this.”

The predominantly female devotees display great concentration and focus as they pour their vessels of milk over the stone snake goddess, taking care to control the speed of the cascade of milk and to ensure that the entire image is bathed uniformly. During the *abhiṣekam* I spoke with one Hindu man who had small lemons sewn onto his flesh and had his cheeks pierced with a long *alaku*. His wife, who was born as and continues to consider herself a Christian, was in line near the sanctum, waiting for her turn to bathe the goddess. He spoke to me about his wife’s sense of the transformative power of embodied devotional practice:

Since our [love] marriage we worship both Hindu and Christian gods. They give proper support [*tuṇai*] to us. I have put *alaku* many times, but last year was the first time she carried *pāl kuṭam*. She said she felt something special and got goose bumps when she did *abhiṣekam* for the *ammaṅ*. It was because she

herself did it, with her own hands. She poured [the milk] and suddenly experienced a tingling feeling from her fingers and up to her whole body.

While *Āṭi* festivals at the local goddess temples where I carried out research seem to date to the 1960s, the inclusion of milk pot processions in these celebrations appears to be a much more recent phenomenon.¹³² A priest at MK Amman temple told me that *pāl kuṭam* began there in 2000, whereas a Brahmin gentleman I became acquainted with told me that *pāl kuṭam* started at a nearby *nāgāttammaṇ* temple in 1994 or 1995. I met this Brahmin man, who married into a family of passionate snake goddess devotees, when I approached him outside the temple after overhearing him discussing with a female devotee his recent possession by the snake goddess. He was unique in being the only Brahmin male who I encountered over the course of my fieldwork who embodied the snake goddess in possession, and one among a relatively small percentage of men from any caste who carried *pāl kuṭam* in procession. In a subsequent interview (in English) at his home with him and his wife, he narrated the following about his participation in the temple's *pāl kuṭam* ceremonies:

¹³² Waghorne describes a festival at MK Amman (which features both a milk pot procession and ritual piercings) as a “ritual process of gentrification” (2004, 163-68). For a recent discussion of milk pot vows and processions in a Tamil village, see Mines 2005.

Male Devotee: *Pāl kuṭam* started here thirteen or fourteen years ago. You could see very few male members [participants] there [in the early years]. You could count the number on one hand. But from day one I was there. This is only done in the month of *Āṭi* here. This is a type of thanksgiving we can give to the God. In Hinduism, we are purifying the deity by means of this milk. Milk, you can see, is a pure, white thing. Milk. So when you are purifying the goddess, we strongly believe that we also become pure. Because God is already pure; we need not purify God. But we believe that we get purified. We pour the milk on Nagattamman ourselves. We ourselves will do that *abhiṣekam*. [lengthy interlude in which we discuss his background and the experiences he has had at this snake goddess temple] ... At the moment I put this *pāl kuṭam* on my head, I forget what is happening around me for some ten minutes. Later they told me that Nagattamman has come on [possessed] me and she told something, of which I was not aware. I cannot explain this experience. Because it all suddenly blurred, and I did not know what is happening around me. There was a blurring and I did not know what was happening. And I had that experience two or three times.

ALA: You had this experience in previous years, too?

Male Devotee: Two times in previous years, and for the third time this year. Three times I had it. Three times. Three times I had. That is what she [the woman he was speaking with when I approached him in the street] was telling me about.

ALA: When I was eavesdropping! [we all laugh]

Male Devotee: Yes! She was telling me what was coming out of my mouth [when he was possessed], because I didn't know. She was explaining to me what this *ammaṅ* was telling through me.

ALA: What kinds of things were you saying?

Male Devotee: She told, "I will protect all of you, I will take care of all of you." In the general sense. I did not say anything about any specific person. But [wonderingly] I spoke *aruḷ vākkku*.

While this narrative is distinguished from many others I recorded in terms of the devotee's gender and caste (and the relatively rare phenomenon of a Brahmin male experiencing snake goddess possession), in important this devotee's perspective on and experiences with the goddess are exceedingly common. However, his viewpoints reflect an engagement with Brahminical categories, such as purity and purification of the self and the deity by means of *abhiṣekam*, that were not evident in non-Brahmins' descriptions of this practice. This engagement is balanced by the fact that he highlights how devotees have the opportunity to pour milk over the goddess's image themselves, the aspect of *pāl kuṭam* that non-Brahmins consistently tended to privilege.

Two recurrent motifs underlie and unite *pāl kuṭam* narratives: *bhakti* and efficacy.

Ritual relationships with a particular, local snake goddess are both motivated and

characterized by devotion, and are sustained by the belief that this devotion produces tangible, positive results in the life of the individual devotee. They are often characterized by the sense that the goddess “needs” the devotee in ways similar to, or even exceeding, the ways in which the devotee depends on the deity, as is the case with the Brahmin female devotee discussed in Chapter Four who has prepared daily food offerings for the snake goddess for twenty-five years, and believes that Nagattamman will literally “go hungry” if she fails to provide this daily sustenance. The convergence between *bhakti* and an abiding belief in the goddess’s efficacy is at the heart of the increasingly common crossing of social and caste boundaries that I have documented at this class of goddess temples, where Brahmin devotees are growing ever more visible and progressively taking on more active ritual roles in these traditionally non-Brahmin spaces. This Brahmin gentleman and his participation in *pāl kuṭam* and subsequent possession and prophecy experiences are but one example of these recent shifts, which will be discussed in more depth in Chapter Six of this dissertation.

Firewalking Vows and Ritual Foods

At some temples, the *karakam* again tours the neighborhood on Saturday evening, after the *pāl kuṭam* rites are completed, but this is not Nagattamman's custom. Instead, Saturday evening is consumed with ritual preparations for Sunday's firewalking (*tīmiti*) ceremony and a tense atmosphere pervades the small shrine as key participants fret aloud about the possible introduction of polluting forces that may derail the delicate ritual proceedings.¹³³ By early Sunday morning a sandy pit has been laid in the street in front of the Nagattamman temple and a low, sculpted mud retaining wall has been constructed around its periphery. The pit is divided into two parts; the first portion is about twenty feet long and will contain a bed of coals over which ritual participants will walk, and the second portion is approximately four feet in length and will be filled with cooling milk and neem leaves for votaries to step in after they have crossed the fire. By

¹³³ Hildebeitel devotes a full chapter to analyzing the *tīmiti* ritual that is performed at the climax of Draupadi's festival in Tamil Nadu (1991, Chapter 14: "Timiti, The Firewalk," 439-75), and provides an extensive bibliography of sources which treat firewalking ceremonies dedicated to particular Indian deities and firewalking rituals cross-culturally. For other discussions of firewalking in Tamil contexts, see Beck (1969, 564); Biardeau (2004, especially 275-84); and Meyer (1986, 242-44). Also see Lynn Foulston's comparison of firewalking rituals for the goddess in Tamil Nadu and Orissa (2002, 133-40) and Whitehead's descriptions of South Indian firewalking rituals (1921, 79-80; 93). Obeyesekere offers a detailed description of what he calls a "fire trampling" ceremony in honor of the goddess Pattini in neighboring Sri Lanka, where he says it is performed in an effort to control heat, including its manifestation as smallpox (1984, 41-42; 139-55; 220-22).

6 A.M. two enormous fires were blazing in the first section of the pit, with thick logs leaning against one another teepee-style and oily orange flames licking upward. During the hours that these logs will take to burn down, the ritual musicians, priests, and festival celebrants are occupied with preparations for the firewalk and the offering of *kūḷi* which will follow it.

Those who have taken vows to walk across the fire pit are required to tie *kāppu* and pay 108 rupees to the temple, and additional donations have been solicited from local homes, shops, and individual passersby. The combination of tying this protective wristlet (with all that wearing the ritual thread implies about cleanliness, dietary restrictions, and abstention from sexual intercourse) and faith are believed to protect each devotee who crosses the fire from suffering burns to his or her feet and to safeguard the temple and local community from experiencing any other misfortune during the firewalk. One priest described the ability to cross the fire without sustaining burns as evidence of the goddess's grace and of her protective *śakti*, but warned that attempting the firewalk without tying a ritual thread or without adhering to the contours of the vow to which it obligates the wearer would certainly result in negative consequences. A female devotee's reflections on this topic focused on the vow-keeper's moral, mental,

and physical preparation, saying, “When your heart is clean, nothing bad will happen to you. But if you walk carelessly, then your feet will get burned. If you do not have fear and do not keep clean at home, then you will suffer burns. Some people think, ‘That person is walking [on the fire]; why not me?’ They do it like a contest, not like a vow.”

Devotees here described how the goddess is pleased by the devotion and faith evidenced by their vows to cross the fire and also discussed their belief that each individual who walks across the coals is purified by virtue of being in contact with the fire. Many of them equated the fire with the goddess, and said that the *pūjā* is performed at the beginning of the firewalk transforms the bed of coals into the goddess. Fire, although personified by the male god Agni in the wider Hindu tradition, is here identified as a form of the goddess which is ignited by and imbued with her *śakti*. This correspondence is borne out by the fact that immediately after the inaugurating *pūjā* is complete, the priest carries a handful of glowing embers from the fire pit into the goddess’s sanctum and places them in a small heap next to her stone image. Devotees, too, embody this belief as they pause and bend three times to quickly touch their right hand to the fire pit, drawing the *śakti* from the coals toward their eyes much as they would interact with an *ārati* flame, before they begin their walk. Additionally, many of

them wrap smoldering cinders in the corner of their saris after the firewalk has concluded, and bring them to their homes where they keep them in their *pūjā* rooms.

The ritual musicians play their instruments and sing for a short while at the entrance to Nagattamman's temple and then their leader, assisted by the temple priest, conducts a *pūjā* at the side of the fire pit. A piece of camphor is lit in front of the ritual offerings – a coconut, some bananas, betel leaves and areca nuts, and an assortment of flowers – and the periphery of the fire pit is anointed with dabs of turmeric and vermilion. The burning logs are left in the care of young men from the neighborhood, and a devotee carrying the *karakam* on his head leads the ritual participants in their short procession to MK Amman. There the drumming and singing begins in earnest, and the goddess descends quickly on several ritual participants who begin to dance her presence. *Alaku* is performed for approximately 100 devotees here as the ritual musicians play and the possessed dance, and many more participants will be pierced once the firewalking gets underway. One of the drummers decorates six unglazed earthen pots with turmeric and vermilion powders and then arranges neem wood chips inside them; these oil-soaked shavings will be lit and the fire pots (*tīcaṭṭi*) will be carried by vow-keepers across the bed of coals during the firewalk. Working swiftly, the ritual

specialists make their way down the line of devotees waiting to be pierced with *alaku*, checking to make certain that each individual has a protective *kāppu* wristlet before they perforate his or her tongue or cheeks. In addition to signifying that the devotee has been fasting and maintaining purity in anticipation of the firewalk, the presence of the *kāppu* also ensures that the individual is under the goddess's protection and will not suffer burns or other difficulties during the ritual performance.

In the hours it has taken to complete the piercings and ritual procedures inside MK Amman, the stout logs in road between the two temples have burned down considerably, and the young men who have been tending the fire have removed any remaining large pieces of wood and raked the coals down so that they are level and even. The entire road has been barricaded off and a unit of khaki-clad police has arrived to control the swelling crowds that fill the street. The balconies and rooftops overlooking the fire pit are overflowing with spectators, and children have taken up positions in the branches of nearby trees. Led by the *karakam*-carrier, the procession emerges from MK Amman and a small retinue of key ritual participants begins circumambulating the fire pit with offerings. Nagattamman's *pūjāri* leads, carrying an almost featureless clay image representing Ganesha; he is followed with *alaku*-pierced ladies carrying plates of

offerings, young men carrying green pumpkins which they smash at the four corners of the fire pit to avert the evil eye, and a man carrying a small flower-covered ritual vessel (*pū karakam*). The *pūjāri* installs this Ganesha, the deity who is always worshiped first in any ritual sequence and before undertaking any new endeavor, on a small pedestal at the side of the fire pit. The offerings are placed inside Nagattamman's temple and one of the ritual specialists shakes purifying turmeric powder onto the coals, which glow and smoke as the fine particles settle on them.

The first person to walk across the fire pit has the *karakam*, which has been encircled with fresh garlands, balanced on his head, and the thousands of spectators surge forward as it passes before them, their hands folded together reverentially. The *karakam*-carrier takes up position at the end of the pit, where the vow-keepers will cool their feet in a pool of milk strewn with neem leaves, so that devotees will have uninterrupted *darśan* of the goddess in her *karakam* form as they cross the burning coals. Members of the *pūjāri*'s family cross the fire next, followed by a succession of three women wearing "dresses" fashioned from many neem branches. The vow to wear neem dresses or saris is usually undertaken by individuals who have recovered from serious cases of pox, and is increasingly rare at urban temples. The six men carrying

flaming fire pots cross the fire next, and some spectators clasp their hands together respectfully as they pass while others cheer in admiration of their vows.¹³⁴

One by one, more than 200 devotees walk across the fire for Nagattamman this Sunday morning. The ritual participants are overwhelmingly women, but many men walk as well, as do children. Numerous adults carry infants and children in their arms or on their hips as they cross the coals. Some of them display signs of possession, such as the bulging eyes and extended tongues associated with the bodily presence of a fierce goddess, but many walk calmly and exhibit none of the markers of divine descent. Some dance theatrically across the burning embers, wearing flower garlands or chains of limes around their necks. Most of the devotees are dressed in red and yellow saris and sarongs and carry cooling green neem fronds in their hands; almost all are pierced with *alaku*. Several participants have lemons sewn onto their skin, and one man has heavy, green tender coconuts suspended from the flesh of his chest and back with

¹³⁴ Mines' ethnography of a Tamil village discusses *ticcatti* as a men's vow which involves cross-dressing (2005, 35-37; 44-45), a practice that I did not observe in this context. See, however, fn. seven (above), for my discussion of a professional male *karakam*-carrier dressing as the goddess in *Āṭi* festival contexts. In his description of a ten-day festival dedicated to Mariyamman that is celebrated in April at the Samayapuram temple in Tamil Nadu, Younger notes that devotees carrying sacred pots with charcoal fires on their heads or in their hands dance with possession and "tell fortunes" (1980, 510).

sizable silver hooks. At the conclusion of the seemingly endless procession, a dozen male devotees carrying *kāvaṭi* (here, the harnesslike metal apparatuses through which *alaku* piercings threaded) and pierced with 108 spearlike *alaku* cross the fire. The last devotee to walk across the coals is a man who carries a unique kind of *kāvaṭi*: its structure is studded with numerous metal bowls from which orange flames strain upward. Aware that he is the firewalk's finale, he twirls and dances, seemingly impervious to the many flames leaping around him, the coals beneath his feet, and the 108 skewers piercing his skin. Once this final devotee has completed his walk across the glowing ashes, the *karakam*-carrier leads a procession of the ritual participants around the neighborhood, retracing the route they followed on Friday evening and thus re-marking the boundaries of the *ūr*.

Devotees generally take a vow to cross the fire a specific number of times over a specified number of years, usually in return for some blessing obtained from the goddess, especially healing. In response to my question about her motivations for perforating her tongue with *alaku* and walking on the bed of coals, one ritual participant said, "I requested the goddess, 'If you keep me well and prevent me from becoming sick, I will walk on the fire. I have pain in my legs and I have sickness. If I get cured I will put

alaku and I will walk on the fire.’ Some people request, ‘My family is facing difficulties and there are lots of problems. If you do good [for us] I will put *alaku*, I will walk on the fire [*pūmiti*].’¹³⁵ Interestingly, this devotee described her walk across the embers as the goddess herself crossing the fire; she explained, “After they brought the goddess on me the goddess herself started to walk on the fire.” In her interpretation, since she regularly embodies the goddess through possession (including during the firewalk), this bodily identification constitutes the goddess performing the firewalk. Considered alongside the prevailing perception that the burning embers are themselves the goddess, these understandings suggest that an embodied goddess walks across burning coals which are in fact an extension of her self, smoldering as they do with her *śakti*. Taken together, these identifications illustrate indigenous understandings of how the goddess operates on multiple levels simultaneously; in this festival ritual context the goddess can be identified as the stone image in the nearby sanctum, the *karakam*, the glowing coals, and the possessed devotee walking across the fire.

Most festival celebrants return to their homes in the congested settlement behind the temple at the conclusion of the procession, and a short while later *kūḷi*, the millet

¹³⁵ This woman uses the term *pūmiti* (lit. flower-trampling) to designate the firewalk; it is a common euphemism to substitute *pū* (flower) for *tī* or *neruppu* (fire) in this context.

porridge offering that was described in Chapter Four, is distributed at the thresholds of individual homes. Because the firewalk occupies center stage at Nagattamman's festival, *kūḷi* is considerably less prominent than it is at Naga Mariyamman, where *kūḷi* is ritually offered at the temple in great quantities and those who have experienced possession are honored with the privilege of being the first to receive this ritual food.

After *kūḷi* is offered, most of those who have participated in the firewalk rest at home for the remainder of the afternoon. At around 8 P.M. a procession featuring Nagattamman's festival image sets off from the temple followed by a sizable entourage. The ritual musicians play as the retinue makes its way through the neighborhood, once again marking and reinforcing the boundaries of the *ūr*, and locals gather for to have *darśan* of the goddess as she makes her rounds. This is the third and penultimate procession of Nagattamman's annual *Āṭi* festival, distinguished from those that precede it by the fact that the goddess's *karakam* form remains at the temple and only her movable, anthropomorphic festival image is carried throughout the area. The performance of processions is a central feature of this temple's festival celebration, a ritual expression which stands in contrast to Naga Mariyamman's *tiruvīḷā* (described

below), in which the only procession performed is to a nearby river to submerge the *karakam* and thereby signal the festival's conclusion.

By the time the extended procession returns to the temple, the key devotees who stayed behind in the surrounding streets to orchestrate the evening feast, called *kumpam*, have arrangements well underway. *Kumpam*, which literally means "heap," refers to the mound of food offerings that are piled on green banana leaves and then consumed in the final hours of the *Āṭi* festival late on Sunday night. At most festivals the *kumpam* offerings are arrayed before the *karakam* in the temple itself, but at Nagattamman these non-vegetarian preparations are not brought into the temple's sacred precincts and do not come into contact with the goddess's ritual vessel. Rather, here this spread is arranged and eaten in the neighborhood behind the temple.¹³⁶ The delicacies featured are drawn from a repertoire of distinctly non-Brahmin non-vegetarian preparations that devotees would have refrained from indulging in for the period of their

¹³⁶ All of those whom I asked about the location of the *kumpam* outside the temple explained this arrangement in terms of space constraints, but, although I have no ethnographic evidence for these speculations, I wonder whether the non-vegetarian feast was previously offered inside Nagattamman's temple or presented to the goddess there (as they are at most other temples) and this custom was discontinued at some point, either due to increasing discomfort with offering non-vegetarian items to the deity, desires to attract high-caste devotees to the festival, or some other factors.

vows and which are considered particularly satisfying to this class of local goddesses.

The main dish in the *kumpam* is a savory, flavorsome dry fish curry, and other items include boiled eggs, chicken and mutton curries, fried beans, and dark, cooked greens.

One priest described the nighttime food offerings in this way:

We offer *kumpam* in the night of the day we pour *kūḷ*. We make dry fish curry, chicken, mutton, and egg. We light rice flour lamps [*māviḷakku*] and call the goddess and ask her to come [possess], and the goddess mixes the foods together and gives them to the people [i.e. someone who is possessed by the goddess will mix the food offerings together and distribute them]. The people wait for this food because the goddess's *śakti* is in it.

The many varieties of food are aesthetically arranged on heaps of white rice and a *pūjā* is performed by the lead ritual musician. Hand-rolled rice balls are offered in woven winnowing fans, and after the *pūjā* they are distributed to devotees as *prasādam*. The *pampaikkārar* play and sing for a short while in praise of the goddess and to thank her for conceding to bless their festival celebration. Through the movements of the flame of the small brass lamp (*pativiḷakku*), which is periodically supplied with oil so that it burns continuously throughout the festival, the goddess communicates that she is pleased with the festival offerings and arrangements. The ritual musician, who interprets the signs encoded in the flickering flame, announces that the goddess is ready to depart and, as

the drums surge to a crescendo, the lamp's flame is extinguished. All of the ritual participants remove the protective threads they have worn on their wrists since Friday, and these *kāppu* are collected and taken along with the *karakam* in procession from the temple to the Bay of Bengal, about fifteen minutes' walk from Mylapore. The number of devotees who join this convoy is much smaller than it was on Friday night or in either of the day's previous processions, but a number of the main ritual participants do make the journey to the ocean, where the *karakam* and the wristlets are immersed. It is near midnight when the group returns to the temple. The *kumpam* is portioned out among the devotees, priests, and ritual musicians; this shared ritual meal marks the completion of Nagattamman's *Āṭi* festival performance.

Difference, Absence, and Presence in Naga Mariyamman's *Āṭi* Festival

Significant differences exist between the performance of the *Āṭi* festival at Nagattamman, described above, and the Srī Nākamāriyammanṅ Purrukkōyil (Naga Mariyamman Anthill Temple; hereafter Naga Mariyamman). Though these differences may be most appropriately characterized as matters of relative distinction and emphasis rather than categorical differences, especially in light of my larger argument that ritual

grammars shift over time and respond to new sources of social and economic anxiety, the absence of entire genres of ritual events in Naga Mariyamman's *Āṭi* festival repertoire is both instructive and revealing. Specifically, these differences signal how a temple's local geography, social setting, and the presence or absence of ritual relationships with other temples shapes its ritual repertoire. The absence of a firewalking ritual at Naga Mariyamman is not particularly surprising, since *tīmiti* is the exception rather than the rule in urban *Āṭi* festival celebrations.¹³⁷ The omission of other, more standard elements is, however, more striking, such as the absence of any ritual piercings, fire pot vows, milk pot ceremonies, or even a single procession around the local neighborhood.

I argue that many of the differences (or absences) we can note in Naga Mariyamman's festival are linked to the fact that this snake goddess temple does not participate in an established set of ritual relationships with other goddess temples, as Nagattamman does, and it is a few years behind Nagattamman in terms of offering *nāga*

¹³⁷ I am not suggesting, however, that the firewalking ceremony at Nagattamman is a unique festival event among urban goddess temples. I attended firewalking rituals at a number of goddess temples scattered around Chennai, from the roadside Renuka shrine in Mylapore, to the large goddess temple in Tambaram, to the one conducted along the East Coast Road at a goddess shrine in the hamlet of Palavakkam.

dōṣam ritual therapies. The portrait of Naga Mariyamman captured here, then, is of a snake goddess and anthill temple that is in an earlier stage of development and still in the process of becoming linked with the *nāga dōṣam* ritual circuit and a network of local goddess temples. In important ways Naga Mariyamman's story is of a modest, rather out-of-the-way snake goddess and anthill temple of limited financial means that has taken advantage of its association with *nāga dōṣam* to amass new donations and devotees and rise to a new prominence.

Between the *Āṭi* festivals of 2007 and 2008, extensive renovations were undertaken at Naga Mariyamman; adjacent land was cleared and the temple's wall was extended to annex this additional square footage, tiles were laid in the courtyard, and new raised platforms were constructed around the temple's sacred trees to accommodate multiple *nāga* installations. Several new deities were installed, including a large Kali image, two Shiva *lingams*, and smaller statues of Saraswati and Lakshmi, and an additional plinth had been placed where a Ganesha image would be established when it was completed. In addition, a new sign was erected and the entire temple was freshly painted. The priest explained to me that since the *Āṭi* festival has been attracting greater numbers of affluent devotees in recent years, he determined that it was

important to improve the temple's facilities. He implied that he saw the recent death of the lead *pampaikkārar* whose troupe had played during the *Āṭi* festival for many years as an opportunity to move away from the way the three-day festival had traditionally been celebrated under this ritual musician's direction, and introduce some new elements of his own devising. Additionally, Naga Mariyamman is poised to become a "big sister" temple in the near future, as a smaller local goddess temple is under construction just a few minutes' walk from it and will likely take up the "little sister" role in a local arrangement similar to what we see in Mylapore's local circuit, a shift that will also raise this temple's profile and augment its already growing reputation.

As is often the case in Indian traditions, absence is offset by presence, and we can identify a set of ritual elements that are present at Naga Mariyamman that either find no place in Nagattamman's festival repertoire or which assume additional prominence here. In contrast to Nagattamman, where the offering of *kūḷi* in the neighborhood behind the temple amounted to a tangential aspect of the festival's performance, at Naga Mariyamman the ritual cooking of and offering of *kūḷi* to the goddess takes place in the temple space and is the festival's most important and defining event. Indeed, the ritual preparation of *kūḷi* and the performative identification of devotees with the goddess in

extended possession sequences which precede *kūḷ* together constitute the central ritual acts performed on Sunday. These are followed closely in significance by the elaborate non-vegetarian *kumpam* feast that is offered late on Sunday night. While *kumpam* was somewhat peripheral at Nagattamman, relegated as it was to an adjoining street rather than offered at the temple itself, at Naga Mariyamman the spread of ritual foods is arrayed directly in front of the *karakam*, which stands just outside the goddess's sanctum sanctorum. Devotees there described how these non-vegetarian food offerings satisfy particular appetites that the goddess develops over the course of the festival, and how while *kūḷ* pleases her in the afternoon, by the final hours of the festival she acquires a "taste" for non-vegetarian preparations. Their commentary about the goddess's hunger referenced her causative relationship with fevers and pox, and described how while offering *kūḷ* "cools" the goddess's body and reduces the likelihood of her manifesting as *ammai*, *kūḷ* is not sufficient on its own (i.e., without non-vegetarian foods) to satisfy the goddess's "desire" (*ācai*).

Physical location and geographic setting are important factors that appreciably influence how each temple celebrates its *Āṭi* festival. Whereas Nagattamman is situated in a thickly populated area in the temple-dense Mylapore neighborhood, Naga

Mariyamman is located on a wide, leafy street in a more upscale locale which sees little foot traffic. The temple is proximate to a private country club where members arrive by car, and faces several sprawling bungalows nearly concealed behind high concrete walls, as well as an upper-middle class apartment building which offers private, off-street parking. In some ways this setting appears to be an incongruous location for a snake goddess/anthill temple, but an unmarked opening in the brick wall that stretches out on both sides of the temple leads into a warren of narrow lanes that zigzag across a crowded lower-class residential colony (*cēri*), from which Naga Mariyamman draws most of her devotees. A busy neighborhood teems behind these enclosing perimeter walls, made up of non-Brahmins who work in the informal, daily wage sector with jobs that include construction workers, servants, and coolies at Chennai's port. A compound wall surrounds the modest temple, which prevents the goddess within from gazing out onto the street and also precludes passing devotees from partaking in quick, unpremeditated *darśan* en route to some other destination, as is the case at Nagattamman. No other "big" or "main" goddess temple is near Naga Mariyamman, so this temple operates independently, outside the web of ritual obligations and relationships that characterize Nagattamman's association with MK Amman. Collectively, these factors establish Naga

Mariyamman as a destination unto itself, rather than a temple pedestrians regularly pass or one that participates in a wider network of neighborhood shrines.

Whereas Nagattamman's festival exhibits certain Brahminical or Sanskritizing tendencies – which might more aptly be described as Kapaleeswararizing, given the temple's proximity to and emulation of particular traditions of Mylapore's great Shaiva temple (which include offering festival musical programs, borrowing characteristically Brahminic ritual accouterments from Kapaleeswarar's vast stores, and staging new rituals, such as the ladies-only *viḷakku*, or oil lamp, *pūjā*) – there is an unambiguous “village” cast to Naga Mariyamman's festival. Examples of this festival's more village flavor include the fact that the *pūjāri* becomes possessed by the fierce Tamil deity Kattavarayan, a somewhat liminal minor god who does not enjoy widespread worship in urban Tamil Nadu (see Masilamani-Meyer 1989 and Shulman 1989 on this Tamil god). His regular possession during the three-day festival, coupled with the occasional possession of the lead ritual musician, stands in contrast to the festival proceedings at Nagattamman, where neither the musicians nor the priest embodies any deity over the course of the celebrations. Additionally, where vegetarian offerings have entirely replaced animal sacrifice at Nagattamman, blood sacrifice still occurs on the premises of

Naga Mariyamman's temple and retains a special significance. Two or more chickens are offered to the goddess annually during the *Āṭi* festival, and the blood from their severed necks is poured into the holes and furrows at the base of the anthill behind the sanctum, which are believed to be the entries and exits of the divine reptiles that live with. Finally, the use of ritual items like large iron tridents (on which lemons are impaled by possessed devotees), thick rope whips, and machetes connote village associations, as does the pantheon of fierce village gods and goddesses that devotees "dance" at this temple.

The description and analysis of the *Āṭi* festival at Naga Mariyamman that follows, then, primarily focuses on the special emphases of this festival as compared to its celebration at Nagattamman's temple. Taken together, these two temples' festival performances encompass *Āṭi*'s range of most significant and representative ritual elements.¹³⁸ In addition to my focus on the distinctive features of Naga Mariyamman's

¹³⁸ These two celebrations do not, however, encompass all of *Āṭi*'s ritual elements. One noteworthy ritual performance which finds no place in this discussion but which I observed in other *Āṭi* goddess festival contexts is hook-swinging (*ceṭi*), a practice that involves male devotees being suspended from poles, stakes, or revolving wheels by metal hooks inserted into the flesh of their backs in a ritual grammar shared with *alaku*.

festival I also include and analyze an excerpt from the narrative of one of Naga Mariyamman's most committed female devotees, Solliyamma.

Naga Mariyamman's Temple and Her Servants

Naga Mariyamman takes on several distinct forms at this temple: she is manifest in the two stone anthropomorphic images in the inner sanctum, and the duo of anthills, one hulking and one smaller, located at the rear of the sanctum. She also takes another form, about which I heard a great deal but which I did not personally see, that of a snake which lives inside the anthill. At her temple the *navagrahas* are housed in a separate shrine, as are several other stone images, including Shiva *lingams* on round bases, a statue of Hanuman, and some other forms of the goddess. Sacred trees, marked by the signs of worship (such as circles and dots made with turmeric and vermilion powders, and ritual threads tied as part of vows) , stand in various places on the temple's premises, and clusters of snake stones have been installed beneath them. One unique feature is the presence of a finely carved stone image of Vishnu reclining on his cosmic serpent and attended by his consorts, notable because local goddess temples are loosely Shaiva in orientation and do not commonly feature avatars of the great god

Vishnu. Devotees pointed out Vishnu's image to me early on in my visits to this temple, and confided that the blood sacrifice that occurs during the *Āṭi* festival has to be performed near the anthills behind the sanctum so that Vishnu cannot "see" it.

Over the course of many conversations with Naga Mariyamman's *pūjāri*, Maniraj, who hails from a southern coastal district of Tamil Nadu and is a member of the Thevar caste (designated a "most backward caste" by the state government), details about the temple's history and his life story gradually emerged. When Maniraj was young and unmarried, he witnessed a man from the washerman caste beating his wife, and the two men had a violent physical altercation. Seeking revenge for Maniraj's humiliating intervention, the washerman approached a sorcerer (*mantiravāti*), who cast spells against Maniraj. As a result of this black magic (*pillicūṇiyam*) Maniraj told me that he suffered from severe dysentery and "had fire flowing from [his] mouth." Emaciated and unable to keep any rice in his stomach, he came and sat by the anthill at the place he would later develop into Naga Mariyamman's temple. There he pleaded with the goddess to let him die and thereby end his suffering. A shiny, golden plate appeared at the edge of the anthill and, calling him "my son," a disembodied voice instructed him to start walking south. He followed the voice's directives for a long time until he was cured

from the ailments caused by the sorcerer's incantations and then, a year after his love marriage to a Christian woman from the Pillai community, he returned to the anthill and began conducting *pūjā* there. In detailing the legal and personal disputes concerning access to the public land on which the temple now sits (which adjoins the Adyar River and was administrated by the government's public works department), Maniraj displayed an extraordinary way of marking time, in relation to the growth and destruction of old, flowering trees.¹³⁹

When I sat under the anthill, weak and sick, the trees were tall and offered cool shade. While I was building this temple I had a case before the courts for four years and I won. After I won the case government officials came and cut all of the old trees; now they are all dead. There was a huge peepal tree here, and a jacaranda tree, and one other flowering tree. Right after they cut the trees down I came and started performing proper, daily *pūjā*. I have planted new trees, but their trunks are not yet thick like those old ones were.

In the intervening decades, Maniraj dedicated himself to the temple's development: he raised funds and commissioned sculptors to carve images of the deities that were then installed at the temple, and oversaw the construction of gateways, small pavilions,

¹³⁹ For an oral history that examines themes of historical memory over against environmental change, see Ann Grodzins Gold and Bhoju Ram Gujar (2002).

shrines, and temple towers.¹⁴⁰ Maniraj explained that the *Āṭi tiruviḷā* is the only festival he celebrates at the temple, and identified fashioning the *karakam*, tying *kāppu*, offering *kūḷ*, and “the goddess coming on [possessing] ladies” as its main features. It is likely that his son, who also experiences possession and plays an active role in the temple’s *Āṭi* festival, will eventually succeed him as Naga Mariyamman’s *pūjāri*.

One distinctive feature of the *Āṭi tiruviḷā* at Naga Mariyamman’s temple is that a discrete, core group of ritual participants plays key roles in the festival every year. These women were easy to identify when I attended for the first time in 2005; they greeted me and conversed with me about the temple and their involvement there while they went about their ritual preparations, and during the possession sequences they were the individuals who Maniraj and the ritual musicians relied on to serve as the goddess’s human hosts and mouthpieces. I include an excerpt from the narrative of one of these women, a devotee named Solliamma, because she vividly depicts her

¹⁴⁰ Between the *Āṭi* festival of 2007 and its celebration in 2008, Maniraj invested considerable financial resources to underwrite a major upgrade to and an overhaul of the temple facilities. The temple’s layout was streamlined, which involved moving shrines and rearranging deities’ images, new tiles were laid, the compound wall was augmented and elongated, and every surface received fresh coats of paint. This infusion of funds combined with Maniraj’s vision and initiative had, in effect, transformed the modest snake goddess temple that I discovered in 2005 into a strikingly more prosperous, developed, and flourishing site with significantly expanded horizons and prospects for continued growth.

relationship with and somatic experiences of the goddess, as well as succinctly

characterizes the reasons devotees approach this snake goddess.

After I started going to Nagattamma's temple I got her grace on me. She possessed me and has not left me since. ... I go to her temple every Friday to worship, and I go on new moon and full moon days. If for some reason I do not go there to worship, my whole body will ache and I will get a fever. When I have that burning sensation on my skin it is because of her *śakti*. I pour cold water on my body and think of her and then I will be alright. Sometimes she calls to me in my dreams and tells me to come and worship. My head will rush with images of her and my dreams will be flooded with bright lights even though it is midnight and the world is dark. ... Because I went regularly to her temple Nagamma desired me and came on [possessed] me. She showed that she liked me and so she came on [possessed] me. She doesn't come on [possess] each and every person. She should like that person in order climb up them. Only people who have her luck and blessing will get her on their bodies. When people have difficulties or losses in their family, they make requests [*vēṅṭuta*] of her. When they have diseases they ask her and she will cure them. The ladies who want babies come to her; they offer cradles. When the goddess possesses on someone, she distributes fruits to the people who have no children. Whoever gets the fruits are the lucky ones. The person who gets the fruit she gives from her mouth will definitely get a child. After giving birth they come back and make offerings. The person who is not getting married will come and tie yellow cords on the tree. Have you seen them there? There are lots of these [cords]. They tie them as a petition to the goddess and after three months they will get married. After marriage they will come and cook *porikal*, they offer [it] and they also offer a goat or a chicken. They also do full-body rolling circumambulation [*aṅgapradakṣiṇā*]. I do some work at the temple and he [Maniraj] gives me whatever extra things are donated, like rice and millet.

While Solliamma carefully describes how women who are motivated by desires for marriage and children approach and worship the goddess to propitiate her to grant their requests, Solliamma does not include herself in these categories. She believes that, pleased by her devotion and attention, Naga Mariyamman expressed a preference and a fondness for her. Describing her possession to be indicative of their ongoing and intimate relationship, Solliamma also notes that this closeness is accompanied by some ancillary benefits, such as the food items she receives from the temple priest in recognition of her service. Solliamma played a prominent role in each of the four *Āṭi* festivals I participated in at Naga Mariyamman; in addition to consistently embodying the goddess through possession she also spoke *aruḷ vāḱku* and was the one among the goddess's several hosts who the *pampaikkārar* singled out for the customary dialogue in which they attempt to divine the goddess's wishes and gauge her satisfaction with the ritual proceedings.

Temple as Center: Dancing, Speaking, and Feeding the Snake Goddess

Naga Mariyamman's *Āṭi* festival is inaugurated with *karakam*-building and *kāppu*-tying ceremonies on Friday evening, which are presided over by a troupe of

pampaikkārar whose leader retains the hereditary right to play for functions at this temple. Here the temple is unambiguously the center of the festival ritual performances (in contrast to Nagattamman, where many of the temple's rituals – such as building the *karakam* – are actually performed at MK and processions carry the ritual throughout the *ūr*); all ritual activities are performed in the temple's tiled forecourt, and the *karakam* is built within direct sight of the anthropomorphic snake goddess image enshrined in the temple's sanctum sanctorum. Because space is not at the same premium here as it is at Nagattamman or MK Amman, and ritual participants are not shuttling back and forth between the proximate temples of the “big sister” and “little sister” goddesses, festival celebrations give the impression of being self-contained and autonomous. The absence of procession performances reinforces this sense and in effect sets the festival off from the neighborhood rather than including or incorporating the local area into the celebrations. In short, the festival is more about reconstituting the temple and its boundaries than it is about the *ūr*; and the ritual events are performed in the temple's interior, most sacred spaces, directly in front of the sanctum sanctorum and at the anthill.

Social setting and local geography offer clues about why there is relatively less movement (including processions) and interaction with the local area in Naga

Mariyamman's *Āṭi* festival than there is at many of her counterparts. Since the performative goals of processions include announcing the festival to devotees, inviting them to attend, marking local boundaries, and the goddess going "in search of" her *bhaktas*, offering them *darśan* in their own spaces on this special occasion rather than their coming to see her in the temple as they do on ordinary occasions, it follows that Naga Mariyamman would go out in procession where her devotees reside. It would, however, be logistically impossible to lead a procession down the exceedingly narrow lanes (most of them dead ends) of the lower-class housing settlement behind Naga Mariyamman's temple. The only feasible alternative would be to process her in the wide, tree-lined streets of the upper-middle class neighborhood she faces, but just a tiny percentage of the residents of this world count themselves among Naga Mariyamman's devotees. I imagine that Naga Mariyamman's procession performance (and her possession performances) would be greeted very differently in the goddess's front neighborhood than they would be in her back neighborhood.

Although Friday's ritual progression is similar to that of Nagattamman's festival, one notable difference is that ritual authority is more decentralized at Naga Mariyamman. This more democratic environment is evident as participants assume

leadership roles according to their abilities and inclinations throughout the weekend-long festival. These roles are not assigned by Maniraj or the *pampaikkārar*, and the mostly female devotees demonstrate initiative in undertaking a variety of ritual tasks, including sweeping and cleaning, drawing auspicious decorative patterns at the temple's entrance and near the anthill, decorating the temple's sacred trees with turmeric powder and vermilion, and gathering bunches of neem leaves for use in the possession sequences that will follow. They also do most of the ritual work of cooking food offerings, both vegetarian and non-vegetarian, and lay these offerings out in aesthetically pleasing arrangements before the *karakam* and the main goddess image in the sanctum. Except for Maniraj and his son, all of those who embody deities in possession performances at this festival are women.¹⁴¹ In addition to dancing the goddess, these women also speak the goddess through *aru! vāḱku* and thus provide festival participants with crucial access to the goddess through their bodies and voices.

¹⁴¹ The fact that lay possession is so starkly gendered at this temple's festival is somewhat anomalous, because at many *Āṭi* festivals a small number of young men are groomed to channel the goddess on behalf of the temple. These men keep rigorous fasts in advance of the festival and signal these austerities on the evening of *kāppu* by appearing in ochre sarongs and with their body hair shaved, but despite their preparations I have observed that they are often unsuccessful in achieving possession.

While the temple rents large speakers to broadcast recorded devotional music (and, later, the ritual musicians' playing) throughout the area, Naga Mariyamman's festival is decidedly less upscale than Nagattamman's and far fewer goods are purchased or rented, and fewer professionals are hired, for this festival's performance. In the absence of firewalking, piercing with *alaku*, or a milk pot procession – which require costly wood, rented skewers, spears, and tridents, and large quantities of milk – ritual celebrants are not required to pay any fees to participate in Naga Mariyamman's *Āṭi tiruviḷā*. The pared-down ritual agenda and the relatively smaller number of ritual participants at this temple distills a focus on the *kāppu*, the *karakam*, possession by and communication with the goddess, and the offering of two ritual meals on the final day. In this festival context, the ritual preparation of *kūḷi*, the millet porridge that is cooked at the temple and distributed on Sunday, assumes special significance and prominence, and constitutes the central ritual act of the three-day festival. Overall, the festival environment at Naga Mariyamman is less formally organized and the diffusion of ritual authority foregrounds the participation of particular female devotees who have no structural role or defined role, but whose presence, dedication, and possession experiences are crucial.

The female ritual participants remain occupied with cleaning and other arrangements, while the *pampaikkārar* build the *karakam*, and everyone gathers in front of the sanctum once the ritual vessel has been constructed and decorated. The ritual musicians begin with songs that invite Ganesha and his brother Murugan before they segue into a repertoire of songs that describes Nagattamman and other local goddesses, evoking their powers with lavish detail and invoking their gracious presence. One by one the female devotees, all of whom are wearing yellow and red saris, begin to sway, dance, breathe heavily, or otherwise display signs of possession. One woman, who embodies the snake goddess Nagattamma, slithers around on her belly with her tongue flicking out rhythmically, until someone places half of a coconut shell filled with milk before her. She laps up this offering with her darting tongue and continues to glide sinuously among the other devotees' feet as other women dance with the presence of other goddesses on their bodies. The *pampaikkārar* play and sing for a full hour, during which time they conduct short dialogues with some of the possessed women and attempt to meet their demands for lemons, neem leaves, sacred ash, and turmeric water. The devotees' possession ebbs and flows in relation to the song cycles, and the drummers try at certain points to calm some of the women whose dancing becomes

especially wild. Neither Maniraj nor his son have exhibited any signs of the deity's descent by about 11 P.M., when the lead singer holds up his hand to signal his drummers to stop playing and addresses Solliyamma, who immediately identifies herself as the snake goddess Nagattamma. She requests neem leaves, which she eats slowly as their dialogue progresses. The ritual specialist questions her to make certain that she is satisfied with the preparations and that she will stay and witness the entire festival with them until its conclusion on Sunday. At the close of their conversation, he ties *kāppu* on her wrist, then on the *karakam*, and then on each of the assembled ritual participants' wrists, including Maniraj's. The last ritual thread is tied on the goddess's black stone image in the inner sanctum, and then Maniraj smears sacred ash on Solliyamma's forehead and presses his hands on her head until her body goes slack, indicating that the goddess has departed from her host.¹⁴²

Without time-consuming piercings and lengthy processions, Naga Mariyamman's Friday night *kāppu* concludes relatively quickly, and Saturday is for the most part taken up with shopping, decorating the temple and the goddess, and making preparations for Sunday's *kūḷ* and *kumpam*. In order to avoid the two inauspicious periods of the day,

¹⁴² On the use of holy ash to "remove" possession or effect an exorcism, see Mines (2008, 205).

which are ruled by the shadow planet Rahu and Yama, the god of death, the *kūḷ* ceremony has to begin before noon, and it commences when the ritual musicians send out their first staccato drumbeats over the loudspeakers. Possession follows promptly, and the ensemble sings energetically as the devotees dance around the temple's open courtyard. They punctuate their songs by questioning some of the possessed women, who identify the various deities who have descended on them. One woman, part of the temple's core group of devotees, embodies a veritable procession of divinities: she dances three goddesses and one god in the space of an hour, with the appearance of a new deity heralded by different movements, speech patterns, and requests.

Draped in a red sarong, Maniraj's son embodies a fierce village form of Munisvara with clenched fistfuls of neem leaves. Solliyamma, who is covered in sweat from her extended dancing of the goddess, repeatedly calls for her "older brother" to descend and join the festival celebration. In response to the ritual musicians' interrogations, she eventually identifies this brother as the fierce god Kattavarayan and repeats his name over and over while stretching her hands out toward Maniraj, who soon begins to show signs of possession. He cocks his head to the side and appears to be listening to some voice or sound from the neem trees overhead and then abruptly

grabs the thick rope and machete that have been kept near the goddess's trident and starts snapping, cracking, and brandishing them. He emits a series of terrifying screams and races around the temple premises; the female devotees shrink back and run from his frightening, frenzied perambulations, but Solliyamma's face registers happiness and she calls out "older brother" multiple times as he runs by with his whip and machete.

The kin relationship she invokes in this possession context is rather differently inflected than the hierarchical ritual relationships between Nagattamma and her elder sister MK, particularly in that here at Naga Mariyamman these familial relationships are performed within the interior, bounded, and contained space of a single temple, rather than requiring movement back and forth between interior and exterior spaces.

With Kattavarayan still on his body, Maniraj seizes the two roosters which have been tethered near the anthill and, closely trailed by Solliyamma, who continues to dance with Nagattamma on her, he and the troupe of ritual musicians head for the anthill. Most of the ritual participants hang back rather than following them, and two men extend a length of red cloth to partially obscure the ritual action about to take place there. Trembling with the force of the deity on his body, Maniraj cuts each rooster's throat with his machete and Solliyamma angles their gushing necks so that the spurting

blood drips down into the tunnels and passages at the anthill's base. As the flow of blood slows to a trickle she falls down against the anthill, seemingly unconscious.

A few days later I asked Solliamma why they sacrifice chickens during the *kūl* festival. She responded emphatically that the goddess asks for and expects blood sacrifice on this occasion, and also introduced the interesting element that a remedial rite is required to atone for killing the roosters.

We have to give, we have to *cut!* We *cut* because she [the goddess] asks for a life, so we do a *parikāram* for that and offer. When we have a request [*vēṇṭuta*] we *cut.* Sacrifice [*kāvu*] is suitable for her. She asks for sacrifice and she asks for blood [*rattam*]. They take this blood and mix it with rice and distribute the blood rice [*ratta-cōru*] to the people. This Amma is a fierce one and a kind one – she is everything.

I also asked Maniraj to explicate the logic underlying the sacrifice and to explain why the sacrifice takes place near the anthill, in relative secrecy.

We should not cut it here [near the sanctum sanctorum]; we should only cut it there [near the anthill]. Perumal, Vinayaka, and Anjaneya [Vishnu, Ganesha, and Hanuman] are here. We should not show this [sacrificial act] to them. We can *cut* behind, near the anthill; we always do our sacrifice there. ... We put up a *screen* to prevent the people and the deities from seeing the sacrifice. Even before a drop of blood falls to the earth the *nāgāttamma* is ready to take it – she will share it with her brothers, Karuppanasamy, Pavadaraiyan [fierce, village gods], like that [i.e. etc.]. As the blood falls it is licked up by the *nāgāttamma* inside that anthill.

In Maniraj's description, it is not only the pan-Indian vegetarian deities who should not witness blood sacrifice, but also the people attending the festival. When I pressed him to explain why ritual participants should not observe the chicken being offered, he invoked notions of "firstness" and hierarchy related to who is entitled to receive the initial share of the sacrifice; "They watch us offer the *kūḷ* to the goddess and after she drinks some, they also get their share. But this blood is very much desired by the goddess and this kind of food is not to be shared. Their gaze should not fall on her blood; they will get chicken later [in the *kumpam*] but this first portion, this first taste, belongs to her." In the *pūjāri's* view, the snake goddess within the anthill waits in anticipation of the blood offering, and once she receives it, she apportions her share out among the fierce, male, local deities who are imaged as her brothers.

When the sacrifice is complete, the ritual musicians reconvene in front of the sanctum and sing and play a while longer. Most of the possession has quieted down, and for about half an hour they sing melodious songs that cycle through the goddess's names and attributes. During this time, some of the men in attendance carry the enormous vessels full of *kūḷ* to the front of the sanctum and arrange woven winnowing fans full of rice balls around the *karakam*. When everything is ready, Maniraj tells the

drummers to call the goddess and they respond by accelerating their tempo and singing more vigorously. Solliamma leaps to her feet and begins to dance forcefully, with her hair swinging loose around her and perspiration darkening her sari blouse. The lead ritual musician attempts several times to initiate a dialogue with her, but she continues to dance for several minutes before she will concede to speak.

Lead Ritual Musician: Mother, who are you?

Solliamma: Nagattamma!

Lead Ritual Musician: Thank you for coming! We are so happy you came to dance. Have we done everything *correct*[ly]?

Nagattamma: Give neem to me! When will you pour *kū̄* for me?

Lead Ritual Musician: [hands neem branches to her] Now, Mother. We will pour *kū̄* for you.

Nagattamma: You should give *kū̄* to me.

Lead Ritual Musician: We have made it all for your satisfaction. [sings] You have come as our mother, so please tell us all of your desires. Come quickly to our *pū̄jā*, Mother.

Nagattamma: I am here! I am Nagattamma!

Lead Ritual Musician: We are happy that you have come. Bless your children, Mother [she screams, speaks what seems to be another language]. Are you happy?

Nagattamma: Happy! Satisfied! I am Nagattamma! I have come!

Lead Ritual Musician: [sings] Nagattamma, please come. Come and dance and bring us all success.

Nagattamma: I want to drink *kū̃*.

Lead Ritual Musician: We have prepared a big pot – three pots – full of *kū̃*. You can drink as much as you want. [Nagattamma eats handfuls of neem leaves and writhes, snakelike, on the ground] Are there any defects in our festival?

Nagattamma: No. Everything is good.

Lead Ritual Musician: Then why is the crowd smaller this year?

Nagattamma: When you pour my *kū̃* they will all come. I will bring them here and they will see me and pray.

Lead Ritual Musician: Will you fulfill all of our requests? Will you give rains for our crops?

Nagattamma: Whatever you ask for, I will give it to your hand. Within three days you will get good things. Next year you should make my festival famous.

Lead Ritual Musician: I know that you will. You always do that for us. Can we make all our offerings to you now?

Nagattamma: Give! I am satisfied with all your work. I am hungry for *kū̄l*. Pour it for me. All the goddesses from the sky and from the earth and from below are coming to drink [*kū̄l*], too. You should pour it out for them.

Lead Ritual Musician: We will pour it freely, without hesitation.

As the musicians sing lyrics that call all goddesses to come and drink *kū̄l*, the lead ritual specialists and Maniraj wave a camphor flame around the food offerings. Solliamma steps forward and is the first to receive a portion of *kū̄l*, which is ladled into her cupped hands. All of the other women who have experienced possession are fed next. Other ritual participants and spectators are then served, and finally the vessels and cups of individuals who appear from the surrounding neighborhood are filled with the porridge. One of the ritual drummers tells me that those who have danced with possession must eat first, and must be offered enough to satisfy the “terrifying hunger” that accompanies their embodiments of the goddess. Those who have been at the temple since morning linger over their ritual meals, but most of the others return home for the remainder of the afternoon while preparations for the *kumpam* and the evening rites are undertaken. The evening’s ritual meal can only be started once the vessels that were used for the *kū̄l* are

cleaned, and the core group of female devotees, all of whom seem depleted by their possession experiences, turn quickly to these tasks.

It takes until about 9 P.M. to prepare the large quantities of rice, dry fish curry, cooked greens, green beans, chicken, and eggs that comprise the *kumpam* offerings.

One of the drummers described the mediating role the *pampaikkārar* play between the goddess and the offerings that are presented to fulfill her appetites on the final day of the festival:

Again on Sunday we *pampaikkārar* invite and praise the goddess and let her dance. Then we feed her and make her peaceful. We offer the leaves from seven gardens of drumstick trees [i.e. a huge amount of drumstick tree leaves are cooked as greens] and make an enormous vessel of *kūḷ*, enough to feed [all the residents of] an apartment building. We pour it out into coconut shells for the goddess; these small shells never overflow and the vessel of *kūḷ* never runs out. The goddess drinks it all, and she says to us, “My hunger is insatiable, however much *kūḷ* you can pour I will drink.” We ask her what else she wants and she says, “Give sacrifice for me. Only then my stomach will be *full.*” So in the night we lay out the *kumpam* and we put all the *non-veg* on the leaf and the goddess eats. Only then she will go back to her place in the Gangai [lit. the Ganges, here the Adyar River].

He suggests that vegetarian offerings of *kūḷ* and greens on their own fail to satisfy the goddess’s appetite, and that she requires the cooked antecedents of blood sacrifice

before her hunger can be sated and she will concede to return to the waters, one of the

places where she is believed to dwell. Significantly, the women who experienced goddess possession on this occasion and who were served the first portions of both *kūḷi* and *kumpam* articulated very similar ideas about their own fullness and hunger; one female devotee said, “I can only return home after eating dry fish, rice, and curry. If I don’t eat [these items] I am too hungry and that hunger won’t go [away] for days.”¹⁴³

Solliyamma concurred, saying,

During *kumpam* the drummers call each goddess by name – Nagattamman, Vempulli Amman, Draupadi Amman, all big sisters / little sisters – and they come and eat the offerings. Different goddesses possess on different *ladies* but each must come forward and eat from the *kumpam*. People will give offerings [*kāṇikkai*] and ask questions about their own problems, like court case or marriage or family disputes. They show the camphor in front of her [gestures to indicate the circular motion of *ārati*] and she eats the chicken, mutton, egg, and

¹⁴³ The notion that the goddess cannot forego her cravings for non-vegetarian offerings during the *Āṭi* festival receives support from the narrative I recorded from a female devotee from a Mylapore-area local goddess temple that draws worshipers from a variety of caste groups, both Brahmin and non-Brahmin. She told me that when the elderly, non-Brahmin priest retired a few years ago people from the neighborhood decided to appoint a Brahmin priest in his place. Since Brahmin priests typically will not preside over or be involved in sacrificial offerings, his selection raised the problem of how to handle the chicken and goat sacrifice that was traditionally performed for the goddess on the final night of the *Āṭi* festival. They consulted the goddess about this dilemma and, through signs communicated in the flame of an oil lamp, she expressed her continuing desire to receive animal sacrifice in *Āṭi*. A new festival arrangement was reached, under which the Brahmin priest leaves the temple after receiving the *karakam* when it returns in procession from MK Amman, and the son of the former, non-Brahmin *pūjāri* handles the animal sacrifice and oversees the *kumpam* offerings.

dry fish curry. I need a taste of each item before I can go home. We must give all these for the goddess, and I must have a taste of each.

Following the *pūjā*, in which the non-vegetarian *kumpam* items are offered to the goddess, Solliamma and her cohort of female devotees offer *aru! vāṅku* to a few of the remaining ritual participants. Then, with Maniraj balancing the *karakam* on his head, the devotees set out for the sloping bank of the Adyar River just a short distance away from the temple. Some of them experience possession at the river's edge and the *pampaikkārar*, who are playing and singing less forcefully now, attempt to remove the possessing deity with a swipe of holy ash across the individual's forehead. Maniraj and a few of the ritual specialists wade out into the inky river and slowly submerge the flower-draped *karakam* while Maniraj's son removes each participant's ritual thread and casts it into the lapping waters.

In contrast to the effort that was invested in building the *karakam* on Friday evening and the attention that was dedicated to tending it over the course of the weekend, ritually dismissing the goddess and immersing her ritual vessel only takes a few minutes accomplish. The now subdued group returns to the temple where the *kumpam* feast is distributed; once again Solliamma and members of the core group of

female devotees are offered the first portions, and others are served only after the appetites of these women, who have embodied the goddess, spoken her prophecy, and conveyed her wishes during the course of the festival, have been satisfied. The festival ends with this shared, ritual meal.

Conclusions

Together, Chapters Four and Five of this dissertation consider the vibrant and public festival expressions of snake goddess worship that occur during the month of *Āṭi* in contemporary Tamil Nadu, and argue that the significant expansion of this festival in recent years can be partly attributed to the growing popularity and visibility of *nāga* traditions. This expanding festival context in effect serves as one ritual response to the challenges of modern times and the modern problems of late marriage and infertility. This chapter offered a focused, performance-centered analysis of the *Āṭi tiruvilā* at two markedly different Chennai snake goddess temples which, I have argued, are at different stages in their development and significantly influenced by the absence or presence of an established network of ritual relationships with other goddess temples. These temples – one established and one emerging – have both successfully harnessed the

rising tide of devotional interest resulting from their associations with *dōṣam*-removal to attract new devotees and new donations, and to develop and expand their *Āṭi* festivals.

In the broadest sense, and bolstered by the financial proceeds of the surging interest motivated by concern about *nāga dōṣam*, I argue that these religious sites are repositioning themselves and recontextualizing their identities as snake goddess/anthill temples in ways that are most dramatically performed during the *Āṭi* festival.

Relying on specific ethnographic instances of the *Āṭi* celebrations in two temple contexts I know well, here I provided a detailed portrait of the festival's constitutive ritual events and evoked the relationships among them, their underlying logic, and their overall progression. My analysis of the *tiruvilā*'s individual ritual elements – such as tying protective ritual threads, building the goddess's ritual vessel, undertaking ritual piercings and other vows, staging various processions, and preparing and offering particular ritual foods to the goddess – collectively serve to illuminate indigenous perceptions about the festival's intentions and goals. This focus on the festival's ritual repertoire also illuminates the goddess's powers and suggests how these might be circumscribed or limited by the ritual action of her devotees, as well as how the boundaries of the areas under her jurisdiction might be ritually defined and marked. Differing local geographies

shape key festival performances; whereas Nagattamman's festival processions, which take place in the lanes of her traditional neighborhood, mark and reconstitute the boundaries of an established *ūr*; Naga Mariyamman's *Āṭi* rituals are performed almost exclusively within the temple's interiors rather than along the wide avenues of her newer, upscale enclave. By highlighting the presence and absence of certain elements at each temple I have not only outlined the fuller repertoire of the three-day *Āṭi* festival, but have used my analysis of each festival's ritual emphases to assess how the temples' ritual relationships, traditions, and priorities as well as geographic and physical settings appreciably influence each festival's observance. I argue that juxtaposing these particular examples enables us to identify specific sites of religious change, flexibility, and innovation at a moment when these traditions are sites for significant expansion and ritual innovation by virtue of their links to *nāga dōṣam* and to indigenous formulations of the challenges associated with modern times.

This chapter includes narrative excerpts from key female devotees and ritual specialists in order to construct a culturally-grounded account of the festival's traditional and shifting significances, many of which concentrate on the goddess's desires, proclivities, and characteristics. I explore particular devotees' physical relationships with

and embodiment of the goddess through possession, along with a range of other relationships with the goddess that devotees perform, maintain, and extend through vows, processions, and ritual work (such as cooking for and feeding the goddess). My examination of specific *Āṭi* festival expressions illustrates how individual devotees, ritual musicians, and other ritual specialists perform, articulate, and embody their relationships with particular Tamil snake goddesses, and further advances the argument that this complex of ritual practices is a site for contemporary change, innovation, and shifting emphases. These themes will be further explored in light of the changes associated with modern times and their attendant ritual anxieties in Chapter Six, which considers three examples of innovation – one diagnostic, one social, and one ritual – in the context of broader social shifts in contemporary South India.

CHAPTER SIX

DIAGNOSTIC, SOCIAL, AND RITUAL INNOVATION IN AN EVOLVING TRADITION

Snake goddess worship and the ritual performances surrounding *nāga dōṣam* in contemporary Tamil Nadu can be interpreted both as traditional, ritual responses to modern challenges, as well as modern articulations of traditional beliefs and practices. In this chapter I discuss three specific sites for innovation in *nāga* traditions – one diagnostic, one social, and one ritual. Where the innovations that I have discussed up until this point are more aptly characterized as recontextualizations and reconfigurations of existing sites of authority and ritual practice, those described in this chapter are more explicitly new or “invented.” I use these specific examples to demonstrate that both the repertoire of what “counts” as a legitimate *nāga dōṣam* diagnosis and the repertoire of ritual therapies that may be employed to counter this condition are expanding. I argue that rather than the trajectory of innovation only moving “forward” – such as in adding additional new ritual remedies for *dōṣam* – it is also moving “backwards” in terms of opening up new possibilities for what constitutes a *dōṣam* diagnosis. Further, at all stages, the changing demographic of devotees who are participating in these traditions

is indigenously marked as new and described as one of the hallmarks of the modern times to which these traditions stand in response.

Subtle *Dōṣam* and Presumptive Diagnoses

Using the case study of a man whose horoscopic planetary positions did not clearly signal *nāga dōṣam* but who was, nevertheless, diagnosed with this blemish and treated for it, I demonstrate that new diagnostic categories are emerging in contemporary Tamil Nadu. Whether these innovative and relatively subjective diagnoses should be considered legitimate and acceptable remains a matter of debate among astrologers and ritual specialists, who articulate different perspectives about the roles of intuition and interpretation that their professions entail. In many cases ritual specialists characterized these new kinds of diagnoses as appropriate to – and even mandated by – the perplexities of the Kali Yuga and the vicissitudes of modern times.

Sachin was diagnosed with *nāga dōṣam* on his thirtieth birthday. Although the astrologer who pronounced this opinion was the third to appraise Sachin's chart, he was the first to raise the specter of *dōṣam*. Sachin's mother told me that although Rahu and Ketu were not in the standard positions in Sachin's chart to indicate *nāga dōṣam*, the

astrologer felt that her son had either a “subtle” (*sūkṣma*) case of *dōṣam* or one that had not fully manifested itself in his current birth. The astrologer told her that many clients have the sort of *dōṣam* that appears “faintly” in this lifetime’s birth chart but will be more obvious in subsequent births. According to this specialist, Sachin’s “modern” ideas and lack of interest in marriage pointed to the possibility of “subtle” *dōṣam*.

Financially comfortable, with a company-provided apartment in a nice Chennai enclave and an expensive motorcycle, Sachin indeed led a very “modern” lifestyle: he wore foreign jeans, spoke primarily in English, spent his weekends in nightclubs, traveled the city in his friends’ new Hondas and Hyundais, and dated women of his choosing. For the last few years his widowed mother and his aunts had been encouraging him to find a suitable girl to “settle down” with or to submit to their efforts to arrange a marriage for him. Sachin’s mother finally visited this third astrologer after she heard that he possessed intuitive powers as well as deep astrological knowledge.

Following her consultation, Sachin’s mother became utterly convinced that *nāga dōṣam* was to blame for his lack of progress toward marriage, and she quickly arranged for them to go to Kalahasti to perform a *nāga dōṣam pūjā*. In his mother’s opinion, Sachin’s complete indifference to the subject of marriage was itself a byproduct of the

dōṣam's effects, and a *dōṣa-nivartti pūjā* at Kalahasti would both catalyze his interest in the matter and clear obstacles standing in the way of him finding him a partner.

According to her son, however, he acquiesced to the Kalahasti trip only to secure a reprieve from his mother's increasingly frequent tearful pleas to consider his future.

When he returned from Kalahasti, Sachin's report about the trip focused on what he interpreted as thinly disguised greed among the temple priests, and his hopes that he had effectively mollified his mother and could enjoy a respite from her attempts to fix his marriage.

A few months after the Kalahasti trip, however, Sachin agreed to an engagement with a woman his aunt had arranged for him to meet at a fashionable bakery. The two shared a frosted pastry and twenty minutes of halting conversation, and by the time Sachin reached home on his motorcycle, the young woman had already conveyed her interest in a marriage proposal through several layers of intermediaries. Their marriage date had to be postponed when the young woman's mother died unexpectedly, and Sachin's mother told me she was afraid that this unfortunate incident signaled that they had not effectively "cleared" the negative effects of her son's *nāga dōṣam*.

Although the rescheduled wedding went off smoothly, a year later Sachin told me that his mother was concerned that the couple had not yet conceived and faulted *nāga dōṣam* for their delay in producing a child. He reported that his wife was indulging his mother by making weekly offerings at an anthill temple and praying for their fertility, even though the couple was using contraception and had decided to wait before starting a family. Sachin said that his mother intended to bring his wife's horoscope to the same astrologer who had diagnosed his own *dōṣam*, to see whether she might have a similarly "subtle" case. He explained that although he remained skeptical about these religious matters, his wife believed it was better they perform all the *pūjās* "in case" she did have some hint of *dōṣam* in her chart.¹⁴⁴ According to Sachin, "My wife says, 'What is the harm in praying for fertility and going to the anthill temple? One day we will want a baby, and we should not be denied then because we refused to believe now.' So I have agreed that we should be on the safe side, and they are going to the temple every Tuesday."

I encountered other cases like Sachin's, where *nāga dōṣam* was identified by only one astrologer among several who were consulted about a particular horoscope, or

¹⁴⁴ Goslinga observes that the distinctions drawn between faith in "scientific" versus "spiritual" cures are frequently gendered (2006, 148).

where *dōṣam* diagnoses seemed to be read “back” into a horoscope after an astrologer heard narratives featuring vanishing marriage proposals or infertility. In the medical profession, this type of diagnosis is called “presumptive” (or “empiric”), because treatment is prescribed on the basis of an individual’s symptoms, taken to be a certain indication of the particular afflicting condition even though that condition has not itself specifically identified. Once the probable cause has been ascertained, treatment is initiated and therapeutic models take over.

Several astrologers confirmed that it is possible for *nāga dōṣam* to reveal its unfavorable effects in an individual’s current lifetime even if the planetary configurations associated with *dōṣam* do not show up at the same time. They explained that since delayed marriage or infertility and *nāga dōṣam* are so inextricably linked, even in the absence of clear planetary indicators of this malignant condition, the manifestation of its symptoms can be taken as sufficient cause to diagnose and ritually treat it. One Brahmin astrologer said, “When you go more deeply into astrology, you become aware of many limiting aspects and you discover that these situations are possible.”

Some non-Brahmin astrologers suggested that this scenario, where the malicious effects of *dōṣam* manifest ahead of its planetary signifiers, is limited to situations where

the individual has committed a sin which is immediately realized as *dōṣam* in the current birth, such as a woman who is careless with her menstrual cloths. In formulations involving instant karmic fruits, the planets will only “catch up” with an individual’s condition in his or her next lifetime, at the moment of birth when the individual’s planets are fixed and his or her “head-writing” is inscribed.

A Brahmin astrologer who also serves in the rotation of priests at Rahu’s temple in Thirunageshwaram explained the appearance of *nāga dōṣam* in a different way:

Sometimes things that are there are invisible, and sometimes things that have been removed can still be seen. Isn’t it? In some horoscopes *nāga dōṣam* is invisible, but still its evil effects are plain to see in the horoscope-holder’s life. In other cases, they have done the remedial rituals here with me and so their *dōṣam* has been eliminated, but still Rahu and Ketu are in the same positions in their horoscope as they were before the ritual. It is like this: you have a problem in your stomach and I cure you with an injection; does your stomach itself disappear? Similarly, sometimes *nāga dōṣam* is invisible to my eye, but we can see that its effects are there, and so we must prepare rituals as the medicine for it.

In addition to suggesting that these more subtle diagnoses require a deeper level of intuitive astrological knowledge and hinge on the specialist’s ability to see beyond plainly visible phenomena to those that are hidden and yet fully present, astrologers and priests who signaled an openness to presumptive diagnoses emphasized that these

innovations are not only appropriate for, but are indeed demanded by, these modern times.

Other ritual experts, however, denied that a person can have *nāga dōṣam* without the supporting planetary alignments being evident in his or her horoscope. All of those who took this position characterized astrologers who pronounce diagnoses without the relevant planetary configurations as frauds, poorly trained, or motivated by greed. In the context of a larger condemnation of astrologers who undertake horoscope consultations without sufficient background in Sanskrit astrological texts and a knowledgeable guru, one Brahmin astrologer said, “As astrologers we should not have blurry vision about matters that will affect our client’s future. We should tell them clearly whether they have *dōṣam* or not. There is nothing casual or random about *dōṣam*. There is *dōṣam*, and no *dōṣam*. There should not be any *doubt.*” Although this astrologer also invoked metaphors of “seeing” and visualization in his comments on diagnosing *dōṣam*, he arrived at a very different set of conclusions about whether this malignant condition can ever be subtle, hidden, or otherwise invisible to the trained eye. Collectively, the insights of astrologer-priests who see the matter of arriving at a *nāga dōṣam* diagnosis as a starkly black-and-white matter and those who suggest that the

issue is more intuitive and that they see many shades of gray, resonate with Nabokov's suggestion that the animating logic of many Tamil ritual contexts is that the way to combat suffering is for the ritual specialist to help the patient "see" the negative force that is affecting him or her (2000, 54).

Whether presumptive diagnoses fit with the spirit or the letter of astrological traditions notwithstanding, this diagnostic category shares an intimate connection with several of the particularly "modern" phenomena that are consistently associated with *nāga dōṣam*. First, as in Sachin's case, we have the assumption that what are indigenously perceived as "modern" or "selfish" lifestyles may signal *dōṣam*. These lifestyles are typically characterized by relatively less traditional divisions of labor and gender roles (such as women who continue their educations after marriage and/or who work outside the home, and men who bear increased responsibility for domestic affairs), and new ideas about what constitutes a satisfying and appropriate life progression (such as a move away from the ideals of marrying younger and conceiving within a year of marriage). Second, we have references to the adjustments necessitated by the Kali Yuga, during which presumptive diagnoses and other innovations are warranted as ritual specialists struggle to adjust traditional wisdom to meet its challenging circumstances.

Finally, we find contemporary riffs on religious belief and ritual performance, where the younger generation describes an unwillingness to tempt fate or God by eschewing *nāga dōṣam* rituals altogether, even though many admit that they do not fully believe that *dōṣam* is “real” or that it bears on their particular situations.

Because this innovative type of *nāga dōṣam* diagnosis is crafted in direct and explicit dialogue with indigenous formulations about what constitutes modern times, it suggests that Hobsbawm’s invention of tradition model might, at least in some cases, be extended in a new direction. As was noted in Chapter Three, Hobsbawm defines invented tradition as “a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past” (1983, 1). It is incontrovertible that continuity with the past was overwhelmingly emphasized in many of the Tamil-language booklets and pamphlets concerning *nāga dōṣam* and the oral narratives I recorded. Indeed, one astrologer repeated several times that *nāga dōṣam* is “a very, very ancient belief,” for which remedial measures took shape in India before the birth of Christ and which has in the last twenty-five years “extended to the whole world.” Not only do these sources assume some correlation between “antiquity”

and “authenticity,” they also imply that *nāga dōṣam*'s long history endows this tradition with a special sanctity and weight. Practices and traditions that are understood to be old and authoritative are also imagined to be uniquely powerful and efficacious, as will be discussed below in the context of the tree marriage ritual.

In the case of presumptive *nāga dōṣam* diagnoses, however, we are presented with an invention of a different order than an expanding ritual repertoire that features borrowing, reformulation, and innovation. While identifications of *dōṣam* in horoscopes that do not display the standard planetary configurations associated with this malignant condition are, at least in some formulations, tantamount to transgressing the inviolable laws of the ancient science of Indian astrology, in other opinions these diagnoses are appropriate to and even demanded by modern times. Rather than cloaking this new type of diagnosis in language and symbolism that implies continuity with the past, ritual experts who discussed subtle *dōṣam* and presumptive diagnoses were explicit about the novelty of these approaches, and characterized these strategies as indexed to and dictated by contemporary times. Many of them described being confronted with increasing numbers of individuals who seem to be suffering from the unfavorable effects of Rahu and Ketu, and how they find themselves called upon to pronounce diagnoses

and prescribe ritual remedies under challenging circumstances. As one temple priest told me,

We have people who come to us because they have difficulties. They see many horoscopes, but they cannot get their daughter married, or they go to many temples, but cannot have a baby. The astrologer has told them to come to us. Should we check their horoscopes to confirm their *dōṣam* before we perform *nāga pratiṣṭhā* or accept their offerings? Our knowledge is stretched in the Kali Yuga.

This priest asserts that when confronted with suffering devotees who wish to perform *dōṣam*-removal rituals at his temple, he does not regard it as his responsibility to ascertain that they are indeed suffering from verifiable *nāga dōṣam*. Further, his comments signal a new iteration of the old dictum, “Desperate times call for desperate measures,” in that they indicate a potential openness to presumptive diagnoses of *nāga dōṣam* in the current, degraded times. This priest implies that novel diagnostic approaches may be warranted in these troubled Kali Yuga days, when so many individuals face late marriage and conception. Thus, in these challenging contexts we see situations where the repertoire of what “counts” as *dōṣam* is expanding to include presumptive diagnoses, and the trajectory of innovation is also moving “backwards” to open up new possibilities for what constitutes a *dōṣam* diagnosis.

“Everything has gone and changed”: Shared Religious Spaces in Contemporary

Chennai

The class of snake goddess temples and the repertoire of *nāga dōṣam* rituals on which this study focuses are increasingly socially diverse spaces, where a growing number of Brahmin devotees are worshipping alongside non-Brahmins. In these changing religious landscapes social and religious boundaries are being crossed in ways of which devotees from all castes are aware and commenting on, and which are indigenously marked as “new.” In their personal narratives, devotee familiar with these snake goddess and anthill temples describe this social innovation as an outgrowth of and a response to modern contexts, in which *nāga dōṣam* is on the rise and ritual needs are consequently shifting and growing. Indigenously, this class of goddesses is perceived as particularly attuned to a range of contemporary afflictions and uniquely efficacious for combating the modern problems of delayed marriage and infertility, predicaments which have spread well beyond the non-Brahmin communities from which these goddesses traditionally drew most of their devotees. Because of their recent associations with *nāga dōṣam* and the new spectrum of *dōṣam*-related ritual offerings

available there, these goddess temples hold new appeal to a growing audience of high-caste devotees who find themselves in need of these goddess's interventions and ritual therapies.

One of MK's most committed devotees is Gajalakshmi, the Brahmin medical doctor whose Naga Chaturthi *pūjā* I described in Chapter Four. On many of the visits we made to MK Amman together she pointed out that, although of late more and more Brahmins could be counted among the temple's worshipers, she had been praying there "from the early days" when Brahmins were infrequently spotted at temples where *nāga* and related goddesses featured as the main deity. In her opinion, it had recently become "fashionable" for Chennai's Brahmin women to worship at temples they would have steered clear of a decade ago, and to take on increasingly visible ritual roles there. Gajalakshmi was dismissive of these women's motivations, and said that their presence might be intimidating to women from the adjacent lower-class and lower-caste colony (*cēri*) who previously dominated the ranks of the goddess's worshipers. "The goddess does not care for fashion," Gajalakshmi said. "She is satisfied by sincerity and a clean heart that is filled with *bhakti*."

Writing about the changing social contexts of Hindu temples in Chennai, Waghorne argues that, “Modern temples also challenge caste as the major social signifier. Significant cultural-religious changes occur in these temples – they are the laboratory for an emerging reconfiguration of Hinduism, with social and cultural consequences” (2004, 16). In her observations about MK Amman in particular, Waghorne extends her discussion beyond caste to also include class, and reports that she was confronted by such “social ambiguity” at this temple that her developed skills for reading a temple space for “signs of caste and class faltered” (164). Specifically, she mentions the “mixed metaphors” of dress and jewelry that confounded easy generalizations about class, such as the young man wearing a checked shirt in “a style favored by working-class teenagers” but paired with a “green-and-gold-bordered white dhoti [that] would place him squarely in the middle class” (164). While my experiences at MK Amman confirm that old aesthetic vocabularies and cues are no longer sufficient to “translate” the dynamic worship population into fixed social categories, it is important to point out that caste and class do not consistently correlate in contemporary Chennai

(or elsewhere in India) and that although there are swelling numbers of Brahmins worshipping at MK Amman, that does not mean that they are all upper- or middle-class.¹⁴⁵

Devotees and priests alike agreed that the increasing presence of Brahmin women at MK Amman was a new phenomenon, marking a shift that had taken place within the last generation.¹⁴⁶ Unsurprisingly, however, their perspectives about the underlying motivations for these social innovations varied widely. Some individuals explained these increasingly shared religious spaces in terms of the gradual erosion of caste barriers, especially in cities, as this non-Brahmin devotee did; “Everything has gone and changed. Nowadays, Brahmins come to worship in our temples. People don’t recognize caste like they used to in those days. Brahmins even marry other castes.” Others framed these transformations in terms of shared devotion and common human nature, like this non-Brahmin ritual specialist, “Brahmins believe; they have faith. They have longings, just like you and me.”

¹⁴⁵ For a nuanced ethnographic treatment of class mobility in Madurai, Tamil Nadu, see Dickey 2002.

¹⁴⁶ Although the increasingly multi-caste constitution of Chennai’s local goddess temples is indigenously articulated as a relatively recent development, it is important to note that we find evidence of shared spaces in other ritual environments as well. Recent ethnographic studies of temple and domestic sites associated with particular healing genres have demonstrated that religious boundaries are regularly crossed in these contexts (e.g., Bellamy 2007; Flueckiger 2006; Narayanan 2006; Raj 2006).

In one of our conversations, a well-educated Brahmin woman in her forties described how, even a generation ago, caste and religious identities were more narrowly and rigidly drawn. She told me that although she grew up very close to MK Amman and visited and played at the temple often as a child, her mother would neither enter the temple nor take any of the sacred ash her daughter carried from there because it was a non-vegetarian temple. This woman told me that their Brahmin neighbors likewise would not cross the temple's threshold, and that in her mother's time orthodox Brahmin families like hers only prayed at temples where Brahmin priests officiated. She suggested that the composition of MK Amman's worshipers had changed in recent years and that a new awareness of astrology was connected with these shifts, since she felt that many Brahmins were visiting the temple to rectify flaws in their horoscopes or mitigate unfavorable planetary influences. When I asked whether she believed that these concerns were of recent vintage she emphatically agreed that they were, but told me that I would have difficulty finding priests or astrologers who would concur because authority is conferred by positing a tradition as "original," and establishing its antiquity.

Speaking in English, a Brahmin woman a decade older began our conversation by telling me that even a generation ago Brahmin families did worship at MK Amman.

Her narrative then became more nuanced, however, and revealed some ambiguity about which household members actually went there to make offerings.

What our family used to do, and what many other Brahmin families used to do, was that in the Tamil month of *Āṭi* and *Tai* we would go there [to MK Amman] and make that *porikal*. “We” in the sense that my mother would not go, and we girls would not go, but we would send our servant. She would cook the *porikal* and bring it, according to the circumstances. So, every year we used to do that. She would take everything from our home: a mud pot, to be used only one time, for this *porikal*, and a cow dung cake. We would not just buy it [the dung cake] on the streets – it would be from our cow. The cow dung cake used to be available here and she would take everything from here, and go there and cook it. You might have seen it [people cooking *porikal* at MK] – on Fridays *lots* of people would be there doing this. So Brahmins also did that, or they sent their servants to do it for them.

This woman almost equates dispatching their servant to cook *porikal* at MK Amman with members of her own family going there. It seems that initially she remembered that her family did go, but when she herself interrogates her recollection further she clarifies that her family members sent their servant on their behalves instead. She made a point of noting that a regular pot from their own kitchen was not used to cook the *porikal* in, presumably because of pollution concerns. This woman said she could not remember if they ate the *porikal* after their servant returned home with it, and suggested that maybe they sent it to the servant’s family to eat as *prasādam*. For her, and for other Brahmin

women who told me similar stories about sending ritual surrogates to these goddess temples during *Āṭi*, it seemed important to communicate that they recognized this goddess's power and that they acknowledged it by sending a proxy to her temple to make offerings in their stead.

Two of MK Amman's hereditary priests explained that after they had ceased offering animal sacrifice at the temple, more Brahmins began appearing for *darśan*. The temple clerk, who was standing nearby during this conversation, shook his head at their answer and offered only a single word, "*śakti*," to suggest that Brahmins are attracted by the goddess's extraordinary power. A young Brahmin priest who served at a small Shiva temple nearby told me that Brahmins are offended by the smell of the eggs that are offered at MK Amman and that as long as so many eggs are placed near the anthill there, the temple will never appeal to very orthodox Brahmins. Another Brahmin priest, this time from a proximate Ganesha temple, maintained that most Brahmins do not even consider eggs non-vegetarian foods anymore, and that many in his community are no longer "strict" about dietary matters. He also said that he only noticed swelling numbers of Brahmin worshipers at MK three or four years ago; "Earlier they had *bhakti* and they

worshiped God, but they avoided coming here. This change is because the nature of their belief has changed. It now includes powerful goddesses, such as this one.”

For many, the presence of Brahmins at local goddess temples hinges on matters of efficacy and faith. In their view, if a goddess successfully delivers what her petitioners request of her, then more worshipers, regardless of caste and class, will be drawn to her with their wishes. The priest of a small Mylapore Mariyamman temple, who is from a Scheduled Caste, observed,

Mostly, Brahmins did not like our ferocious gods [*tuṣṭatēvatai*]. They thought all our goddesses were ferocious. ... But then one *lady* asks, “Let my son get the *manager* post.” And he does, and now she has faith, and she tells other *ladies.* They all have requests, and so they come here and make vows. This goddess gets results, and so her fame spreads. The question you asked is *one hundred percent correct;* earlier they [Brahmins] were not worshiping here, but now, because of their faith, they are coming.

A Brahmin priest, whose Gangai Amman temple is located in the midst of a low-class housing colony, explained the changing dynamics at MK Amman and similar local goddess temples this way:

In due course of time, everyone started worshiping the goddess, but they in earlier times worshiped her in different ways. Many Brahmins chose Karpagambal [the form of Parvati at Shiva’s Brahminic Kapaleeswarar temple in Mylapore]. Non-Brahmins chose Karumariyamman, Periyapalaiyatta,

Mundakkanni Amman, and Kolaviti Amman [goddess temples typically served by non-Brahmin priests]. ... They classify [these goddesses] in terms of whether they are in a calm form [*śānta rūpam*] or a fierce form [*ukkira rūpam*].

This was earlier. But now, we have so many problems, and so many people have *nāga dōṣam*. The astrologers say, “You go and circumambulate Mundakkanni Amman temple and pray there and your *dōṣam* will be all right.” What will they [Brahmins] say? Will they say, “No, I don’t like that place?” Or, “I will never go to that place?” Karpagambal has no power over *nāgas* and no power over *dōṣam*.

There is the belief that *nāgas* are present wherever these [fierce] goddesses are present. She is the *nāgāttammaṅ*, the *nāgakkāṇṇi* [snake maiden]. She is Mundakkanni. The *nāga* is very dear to this *ammaṅ*; she appears in the form of the *nāga* and the two are always seen together.

If they [Brahmins] want to see an end to their suffering and some relief from their *dōṣam*, then they go and worship at Mundakkanni Amman. When they get married or have a baby then they get faith and, little by little, this change comes and more Brahmins come to pray there. That is the *situation* we are facing now, where *dōṣam* is excessive and Brahmins have realized that only these fierce goddesses can remove it.

This priest’s narrative is significant because it places shifting social dynamics in

Chennai’s temples spaces in dialogue with the current rise in *nāga dōṣam*, and suggests

that Brahminic goddesses are incapable of addressing the needs of *dōṣam*’s growing

body of sufferers. It categorizes the social innovation at these goddess temples and the

expanding numbers of devotees they are attracting in terms of the exigencies of this contemporary moment, in which goddesses who exercise “power over *nāgās*” and “power over *dōṣam*” appeal to new populations of worshipers who are perceived as uniquely powerful to address their most pressing concerns.

Taken together, many of these local analyses suggest that religious and caste boundaries are being crossed as a consequence of a growing “culture of need” that springs from *nāga dōṣam*’s expansion at this historical moment, since these local goddesses are understood as best positioned to mediate these concerns. In Waghorne’s words, “Tamil ammans are fomenting new solidarity that *somehow* cuts across caste lines, crosses class distinctions, and bridges the urban-rural divide” (2004, 133). Regardless of caste, worshipers are approaching the class of goddesses that is known for efficacious healing of these specific afflictions and for granting the precise kinds of requests that she has recently become associated with. Similar to how diagnostic categories for *nāga dōṣam* are being expanded and innovated upon in response to the demands of the times, so, too, are the social landscapes at many snake goddess and anthill temples shifting in relation to indigenous formulations about what needs characterize this ritual moment. Intent to impress on me that it is the

distinctiveness of this goddess when compared to the many other deities at surrounding Mylapore temples and suitability for the concerns of these times that draw new devotees to her, one of MK's temple officials explained, "She is not bound by *Āgama* rules. But Kapaleeswarar, Parthasarathy [gods from nearby Brahminic temples] – they are different. She is not like them. Anybody can pray to her, irrespective of their caste or religion, be it a Hindu, a Muslim, or anyone else. She is the goddess for this time."

Tree Marriage as Ritual Remedy

The final class of innovation that I analyze in this chapter is ritual innovation, which I explore through an analysis of the ritual marriage between two trees that was performed as a remedy for an individual's *nāga dōṣam*. Building on my discussion of social innovations at snake goddess and anthill temples in the previous section, here I demonstrate that in some cases these increasingly shared spaces may extend to collaborations between ritual specialists, such as in the tree marriage rite, which was performed jointly by a Brahmin and a non-Brahmin priest. This ritual therapy is more explicitly "new" than the range of recontextualized rites discussed in Chapter Three, and seems to constitute a self-conscious ritual invention that draws on, but significantly

refashions, the bank of symbols related to the broader *nāga* worship and *nāgāttammaṇ* traditions. In addition to being quite self-consciously innovative, I argue that this ritual performance stands in direct dialogue with what are indigenously understood as modern concerns and dilemmas: here, *dōṣam* is believed to have accrued because ritual duties were neglected, which is considered a key characteristic of contemporary times and/or the Kali Yuga. Further, I argue that this ritual innovation repurposes traditional resources to respond to the modern problem of delayed marriage, and serves as a specific example of how – much as its diagnostic repertoire has demonstrated flexibility with respect to presumptive diagnoses – *nāga dōṣam*'s ritual repertoire is still in the process of expanding and assimilating new ritual remedies.

On the leafy premises of Mylapore's Tiruvalluvar temple¹⁴⁷ on an *Āṭi* Sunday in 2006, two intertwined trees – a female neem tree and a male peepal tree – were married in an elaborate wedding ceremony. Identified with the goddess Parvati, the female neem tree was offered to her groom, Shiva (the male peepal tree), by her brother

¹⁴⁷ This temple marks the birth place of Tiruvalluvar, the fifth-century Tamil poet who is credited with composing the didactic, rhyming couplets of the *Tirukkura!*. In addition to Tiruvalluvar, who receives worship in the temple's sanctum sanctorum, this temple also has subsidiary shrines dedicated to Shiva (as Ekambeswara) and his consort, the goddess Kamakshi, in the forms they take in the magnificent temple complex at Kanchipuram, further south in Tamil Nadu. Waghorne discusses the history and design of this temple (2004, 120-25).

Vishnu, here represented by the male fig tree¹⁴⁸ that grows between them. During the extended ritual performance, a young Brahmin priest kindled a sacred fire (*hōmam*) in front of the trees, over which he chanted wedding mantras while the ritual's female sponsor fed its flames with a succession of offerings. The temple's non-Brahmin priest, who had called in his Brahmin counterpart for the fire sacrifice and Sanskrit mantra portions of the ceremony, expertly handled the rituals focused on the three trees. He draped a sacred thread across each of the two male trees, dressed them in silk wedding sarongs (*vēṣṭi*), and used sandalwood paste to mark the peepal tree with a *lingam* to indicate its identification with Shiva, and the fig tree with the U-shaped symbol (*nāmam*) that identifies it with Vishnu. He then tied a shimmering, red wedding sari around the neem tree, and anointed it with the round forehead marking (*poṭṭu*) worn by auspicious women.

On a small platform in front of the trees stood two ritual vessels, each with a coconut crowning its tapered neck. These pots had been dressed and adorned with auspicious markings, and ritually seated on a green banana leaf heaped with uncooked rice, a potent symbol of fertility and abundance. With their exteriors crisscrossed in

¹⁴⁸ Fig (or country fig) tree, Ta. *atti maram*; botanical name *Ficus glomerata*.

cotton twine said to represent the veins of the human body, and with coconuts as their heads, these vessels stood as signifiers for the human bride and the groom whose marriage would be successfully arranged as a result of performing the sacred marriage (*tirukalyāṇam*) between these trees. The decorated pots and holy trees, combined with the visually stunning array of colorful and aesthetically arranged ritual offerings (which included trays of fruits, fried snacks, sweets, glass bangles, nuts, coconuts, cloth pieces, and flowers), gave the overwhelming impression of a human marriage. At the conclusion of the ritual, the non-Brahmin priest adorned each ritual vessel and each of the three trees with a fragrant flower garland, and then tied a gold wedding pendant around the neem-tree bride to mark the marriage as complete. A cluster of auspicious married women sang wedding songs, and then all of the ritual participants partook of a lavish wedding meal in the temple pavilion and received small gifts from the bride-to-be's female relatives before departing.

Sponsored by the prominent Chettiar family of a twenty-three-year-old woman whose family astrologer had recently diagnosed her with *nāga dōṣam*, the performance of this tree marriage was intended to remove the obstacles her *dōṣam* had been posing to successfully arranging her marriage. This young woman's grandmother told me that

although they had considered numerous horoscopes and grooms, nothing was “setting” for this young woman and their family was growing concerned. Their astrologer determined that the inauspicious planetary alignments in her horoscope causing *nāga dōṣam* were the result of her relatives having neglected to offer appropriate worship to an interlaced pair of neem and peepal trees on their ancestral lands. The causative relationship between the failure to perform ritual duties – including neglecting to worship one’s house snake, family or lineage deity, or to make ongoing ceremonial offerings to deceased ancestors – and *nāga dōṣam* has been discussed in preceding chapters of this dissertation and, in local analyses, is described as characteristic of contemporary and/or Kali Yuga times. In this young woman’s case, her astrologer recommended that these trees be identified and immediately be ritually married. When the trees could not be located anywhere on the family’s expansive properties, however, he conceded that the girl’s grandmother and aunt could arrange a marriage of similarly entwined trees at a local temple. When an appropriate temple was found, the grandmother paid its non-Brahmin priest 3,000 rupees (about \$70 in 2006) for all of the ritual supplies and his fees, and they fixed an auspicious date for the ceremony. Neither the young woman nor

her mother attended the tree marriage, and no one from their family visited the temple again in subsequent weeks and months.

I learned in a follow-up interview that when the young woman was still not engaged nearly a year after the remedial tree marriage had been performed, their astrologer insisted that the family's landholdings be searched again for the pair of trees, at which time a proximate neem and peepal tree were discovered. The grandmother told me that they would arrange a marriage for these trees as soon as possible, but that she would use local priests from the town in southern Tamil Nadu closest to their property because, as she put it with some irritation, "we can't be carting everyone from Madras."

I include the comparatively rare *nāga dōṣam tirukalyāṇam*, which I observed only once over the course of my fieldwork, because an analysis of this elaborate and quite beautiful ritual bears out my argument that at least some rituals that are being performed today to counter *nāga dōṣam* are, in fact, borrowed from other contexts and refashioned to suit new ritual aims. The inclusion of this self-consciously new ritual within the repertoire of therapies performed for *nāga dōṣam* illustrates how the trajectory of innovation continues to stretch "forward" at the same time we can see it moving

“backwards” to include new diagnostic models. Further, this ritual demonstrates the extent to which *nāga* worship in general, and these remedial rites in particular, are opening up new sites for inter-caste ritual collaborations and shared religious spaces. Finally, the performance of this *tirukalyāṇam* illustrates how concerns about the impediment *dōṣam* poses to a young woman’s marriage prospects (a particularly modern problem that this innovative ritual seeks to respond to) were sufficiently urgent to motivate her family members to take unfamiliar, expensive, and potentially socially uncomfortable (in terms of compromising their family’s reputation, or even the potential marriage opportunities of this woman) ritual steps.

Although the priests referred to this tree marriage as a *tirukalyāṇam*, a holy or sacred marriage, this term is most commonly applied to ritual marriages between deities, typically festival images, that are annually performed at some of Tamil Nadu’s grander temples in the context of Brahminical festivals (see Harman1992 on the sacred marriage of the goddess Meenakshi in Madurai). Other than the non-Brahmin priest who arranged the *tirukalyāṇam* at his temple, I found that most astrologers, priests, and devotees knew little or nothing about marriage between holy trees, and that even those who were vaguely aware of this ceremony could not explicate any correlation between it

and *nāga dōṣam*. In fact, the Brahmin priest who performed the sacrificial rites and chanted the Sanskrit mantras at the tree marriage described above initially denied that this ceremony bears any relationship to *nāga dōṣam*. Although he reconsidered his unequivocal assertion in the middle of his narrative, this priest's uncertainty demonstrates the on-the-ground realities involved in ritual innovation and the application of rituals to new contexts.

There is no connection between *nāga dōṣam* and *tirukalyāṇam*. There is nothing like that. This [tree marriage] is a *śubhakāriyam* [auspicious deed], not a *dōṣa-nivartti* [solution for *dōṣam*]. It is not a *prāyaścitta* [expiatory rite] for anything. ... But, where there is a snake there is *śakti*, so maybe this is why they are doing *tirukalyāṇam* for *nāga dōṣam*. Maybe if we do the *tirukalyāṇam* then *nāga dōṣam* will decrease – I am not sure. I understand that if you marry these trees, which are deities, then good effects will result and the person may get married. But this is a *śubhakāriyam*, so far as I know.

In this priest's view, tree marriage is an auspicious rite, a *śubhakāriyam*, and while he is willing to orally trace out the logic that might potentially establish some relationship between performing it and relieving an individual's (inauspicious) *dōṣam*, his doubt signals that this is new territory.

Tree marriage was characterized as a *śubhakāriyam* by other respondents, too, but only one priest articulated any link between this rite and *dōṣam*. He told me that the

tirukalyāṇam between trees is performed infrequently because it is a costly rite to stage, but that when it is performed, it is to remove *puttira dōṣam* (lit. son *dōṣam*, described in Chapter Two), the blemish that renders a woman unable to conceive or carry her fetus to term. He said,

All of the goddesses are present in the neem tree, and the three gods – Brahma, Vishnu, and Rudran [Shiva] – are present in the peepal tree. By marrying them we worship these gods. To explain it scientifically, the air surrounding these holy trees has *śakti*, and by breathing it her *puttira dōṣam* is removed and she will soon get a baby in her womb.

In his formulation, this rite may be performed as a ritual remedy for infertility, and has the added dimension of possessing a scientific basis.

Several temple priests, Brahmin Sanskrit scholars at area academic institutions, and astrologers described the generalized merit (*puṇya*) that is generated by performing this ceremony, which they categorized as a custom (*paḷakkam*), but said that tree marriage is not a textually prescribed remedy for *nāga dōṣam* and is thus devoid of authority to counter it. While one scholar stated that it is dangerous to import religious acts into new contexts and apply them as ritual solutions to problems they were never “intended” to resolve, one priest indicated that he was willing to allow for extra-textual ritual innovation in light of evolving ritual needs. He declared, “If we only perform rites

according to the texts, we cannot do anything.” In our extended conversation he spoke at length about the challenges posed by the Kali Yuga, in which so many people do not perform their religious duties and do not suffer consequences, while others who are seemingly sincere in their observances experience a range of blemishes. I understood him to be saying that ritual specialists, too, need to keep pace with the times, and, rather than remaining entirely bound by the texts, evolve in their ritual approaches to *dōṣam*. His attitude communicates the precise kind of context-sensitivity that makes self-conscious ritual invention possible in *nāga dōṣam*'s ritual frameworks and repertoires.

It is significant that the Tamil-language literature (which includes lengthy books and shorter pamphlets) on *nāga dōṣam* is similarly silent on the matter of tree marriage as a remedial measure for this blemish. Here absence speaks loudly; in the range of detailed vernacular discussions of the *parikārams* for *nāga dōṣam* that I surveyed (some of them indexed specifically to the Kali Yuga), tree marriage is not referenced a single time. Only one Tamil-language source mentions a related practice (namely, planting neem and peepal saplings together and worshiping them) as having the power to relieve *dōṣam*, although it does not specifically refer to a neem-peepal *tirukalyāṇam*. In the context of a broader discussion of how worshiping the peepal tree is equivalent to

honoring Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, and how snake stones may be installed at the base of either peepal or neem trees as a fertility offering, this booklet says, “A peepal sapling and a neem sapling should be tied together and planted in the ground on any day in the months of *Kārttikai*, *Mārkaḷi*, or *Vaikāci* [November-December, December-January, and May-June, respectively]. They should be garlanded and worshiped, and then the person will be relieved of *nāga dōṣam* and be blessed with offspring (Vidyadaran 2003, 45-46). The absence of any mention of tree *marriage*, specifically, as a ritual solution for *nāga dōṣam* in this literature, then, corroborates the narratives of local experts analyzed above, and suggests that the *tirukalyāṇam* I saw ritually performed is a new rather than a recontextualized rite, and that it constitutes a self-conscious ritual invention.

There is also very little to help us interpret this rite in the scholarly literature on South Indian practices. The category of tree marriage finds mention in a handful of colonial-era sources (Crooke 1896, 2:115-21; Hodson 1921), but it refers to marriage between a human and a tree, rather than marriage between two trees. The former scenario recalls the symbolic marriage performed between a young couple and a banana stalk that was discussed in Chapter Four, and which is more explicitly linked with

nāga dōṣam. The goal of these ceremonies, which were more familiar to those with whom I spoke, is to transfer a specific astrological flaw (or more generalized inauspiciousness) onto the inanimate “spouse.” The ritual scapegoat is then severed and cast aside, thus cancelling the *dōṣam*. Writing about Kerala in an article published in 1946, Bala Ratnam takes the custom of marrying peepal and neem trees with snake stones installed below them as a “relic of the ancient tree-and-serpent-worship” and describes it as an effective means of propitiating the deities associated with the individual trees (which he identifies as Vishnu and Mariyamman, respectively) and the *nāgas* simultaneously (639-40). In his 1926 discussion of childless women installing snake stones under peepal and neem trees in connection with vows to obtain offspring, Vogel mentions that “these two trees are often planted together and ‘married,’ as the saying goes” (270). These brief references do not establish any relationship between tree marriage and *nāga dōṣam*, and are thus unable to fill in the gaps in the narratives of indigenous experts and interpreters, or in the Tamil-language literature on *dōṣam*.

The inclusion of tree marriage within the repertoire of *nāga dōṣam parikārams* thus signals that the trajectory of ritual innovation is continuing to move forward and that this flexible category remains in the process of being revised and reshaped. The tree

marriage rite invokes a culturally meaningful bank of symbols, and seeks to refashion them to fit growing contemporary needs and increasingly urgent ritual objectives. Even if we leave aside indigenous questions about authority, authenticity, and the wisdom (not to mention the ethics) of amending rituals and traditions to new uses, we are confronted with other uncertainties about what the next stages of these ritual practices might look like. By virtue of their invocations of the past and some pure, original tradition, will new ritual and invented traditions become established genres in an emergent ritual repertoire? Will they be accorded this status “by repetition,” as Hobsbawm (1983, 1) implies they might, or only if they develop a reputation as efficacious, as many indigenous analyses of rituals emphasize? Although in the case of the young woman cited above, the serendipitous location of a pair of trees on her family’s property at least temporarily forestalled the dilemma about what might constitute an appropriate next remedial ritual if tree marriage did not work and she remained unmarried, we are left with larger questions about how, in the absence of an established ritual progression or hierarchy, an innovating ritual tradition might respond to apparent ritual failure. In light of this tradition’s demonstrated propensity toward adaptation and even more explicit invention, it is more than conceivable that further recontextualized or “new” rites would

be developed to fill evolving ritual needs. In addition to progressive innovations within the *nāga dōṣam* idiom, individuals confronting continued delays in their marriage or a sustained inability to conceive might also draw on complementary ritual and healing practices from other therapeutic repertoires.

In addition to demonstrating ritual innovation, this tree marriage ceremony also exhibits a striking ritual collaboration between a young Brahmin priest, who has received formal Vedic training, and an experienced non-Brahmin priest, who told me that his work relies on the knowledge passed on to him through the embodied examples of his father and other male religious teachers. Their joint performance demonstrates that the social innovations in the populations of devotees worshiping at Chennai's snake goddess and anthill temples in recent years may also be seen at the ritual specialist level. Because the *tirukalyāṇam*'s sponsors arranged the ritual with the non-Brahmin priest, it was his decision to retain the Brahmin priest (and how much remuneration to offer him) to chant the mantras and preside over the sacrificial portions of the tree marriage ceremony. The non-Brahmin priest in effect called in a sub-contractor for the ritual sequences that require Sanskrit knowledge, a decision he took due not only to his inability to chant these mantras, but also after considering what might happen if he tried to and made errors.

He explained that if there was some deficiency or omission in his recitation, those poorly pronounced or missing mantras may not only pervert the ritual aims of the ceremony, but may engender a harmful consequence for him personally.

This priest also reflected eloquently on some of the differences between verbal and non-verbal knowledge, and formal training and embodied practices; “What I do is based on my own learning. I have not taken any classes, and I have not learned to recite the mantras fluently. I have learned by observation, and by watching carefully. For me, my work is one-quarter mantras, and three-quarters intellect (*matī*). Had I asked my father all the questions like you are asking me, I may have learned more, or learned differently.”

The priest’s insight about the dialectical nature of, and the ineffable differences between, these forms of knowledge and practice point toward the hybrid and negotiated spaces in which ritual traditions are created, reformulated, innovated, and invented. In these encounters – at every stage from diagnosis to ritual therapy – tradition is creatively approached by ritual specialists and worshipers who are seeking structure and meaning in the face of uncertainty inspired by the Kali Yuga and by modern Tamil social life. In response to perceptions about *nāga dōṣam*’s prevalence and gravity, new diagnostic

models are emerging for this condition, new populations of Brahmin devotees are worshipping at goddess temples associated with its rituals, and explicitly new remedial ceremonies are being annexed into its therapeutic repertoire. These diagnostic, social, and ritual innovations illustrate that the boundaries of what may be identified as *dōṣam*, what castes will regularly worship at temples reputed to be powerful for relieving this condition, and what ritual performances are offered as efficacious for eliminating it, are each in the process of being revised and extended in contemporary Tamil Nadu.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

“NEW” DIRECTIONS AND LOCATIONS

This dissertation has analyzed how specific religious practices and ritual traditions associated with *nāga* worship in contemporary South Indian Hinduism are serving as modes of response to problems and challenges that are indigenously understood as particularly “modern” afflictions. My focus on the trajectories of religious change demonstrates how individuals are employing “traditional” religious frameworks and ritual repertoires as resources to creatively negotiate this remarkable historical moment, in which rapidly shifting social and economic contexts engender new anxieties as well as new aspirations.

Taking *nāga* worship as a specific example of a traditional idiom that is in the process of expanding in dialogue with indigenous perceptions about what constitutes “modern times,” I propose that these innovating *nāga* traditions represent a distinctively local, culturally inflected “vernacular modernity” (Knauff 2002). Drawing on traditional indigenous associations between snakes and fertility, *nāga* traditions and the worship of *nāgāttammaṅṅ* are currently understood as particularly appropriate for the crises of this

modern moment, specifically those related to marriage and conception. As a diagnostic and ritual model, *nāga dōṣam* has emerged as a locally meaningful category for a spectrum of ills associated with these changes and the perceived erosion of ideals, norms, and values that have accompanied them. Knauff observes that “the way people engage the ideologies and institutions of a so-called modernizing world provides a valuable vantage point for understanding contemporary articulations of culture and power” (2002, 4), an insight that fits well with the negotiations of gender and religious meaning that we see in evolving Tamil *nāga* traditions.

In light of the current potency and cachet of *nāga* traditions, it is worth considering how we might expect these traditions to evolve and develop over time. Much as the class of goddesses who are now associated with *nāga dōṣam*, fertility, and marriage were once primarily entreated for healing from poxes and related illnesses, rain, and agricultural fertility, it is plausible that these deities will continue to find new contexts within which to which to apply their considerable powers and ritual resources.

Hindu traditions other than the snake goddess and *nāga dōṣam* have also been recontextualized or assumed new tasks in response to the changes experienced in late twentieth-century India. Environmentalists and others concerned by the ecologically

polluted conditions of India's rivers have sought to reframe some elements of the mythologies and symbolism associated with the river goddesses Ganga and Yamuna so as to underscore the need to protect them from human excesses and to cast these divine rivers in relationships of reciprocity and dependence with the human community (Alley 2002; Haberman 2006). And as smallpox became less prevalent in India, the smallpox goddess Sitala's repertoire has shifted to incorporate HIV/AIDS and other new assignments (Egnor 1986; Ferrari 2007; Harman 2004; McDaniel 2004).

In addition to demanding an expanded range of divine responsibility, the vicissitudes of modern times may also position certain deities as particularly relevant. Joanne Waghorne hypothesizes about a potential middle-class affinity for animal-deities whose power emanates from the "tension of opposites, from uncertain status, [and] from earthly beginnings" that is particularly indexed to these contemporary times, as well as to the Kali Yuga more broadly (2004, 27; see also Lutgendorf 2007 and Courtright 1985 for similar conclusions about Hanuman and Ganesha, respectively). Her insight could apply equally well to snake goddesses, who also mediate between disparate categories, embody numerous forms, and hold multiple identities in creative juxtaposition. I have argued that *nāga* traditions, with their abiding associations with fertility, have proved

amenable to addressing the challenges of contemporary Tamil social life, particularly the modern problems of late marriage and infertility. Indeed, the *nāga dōṣam* tradition has emerged as a distinctly modern religious preoccupation. In conjunction with recent media attention and the self-conscious interventions of a range of religious specialists, the narrative, ritual, and symbolic resources of older *nāga* traditions are being marshaled and reshaped in response to these modern dilemmas.

In recent years, *nāga dōṣam* has emerged as an indigenously meaningful interpretive framework by which to classify and treat certain types of misfortune and particular kinds of modern problems. At a moment characterized by sweeping change, and in a world age (i.e., the Kali Yuga) defined by degeneracy and suffering, *nāga dōṣam*'s ritual repertoire functions as a powerful mode for attempting to exert some control over one's destiny and fate. Given the recent and rapid expansion of the *nāga dōṣam* idiom, it is worth reflecting on whether there are constraints on this tradition's growth and innovation. Although these traditions have demonstrated a remarkable tendency toward self-conscious ritual invention and – at every level from diagnosis through remedial practice – are expanding in response to modern contexts, I argue that some limits do exist. These limits are related to what “counts” as “traditional.” *Nāga*

traditions have always entailed a finite bank of symbols, stories, and practices that includes snakes and their multiforms, anthills, milk, eggs, trees, blood, and fertility. This bank of symbols is exhibited in temples and religious sites with mythic links to these phenomena, the shadow planets Rahu and Ketu, as well as the class of goddesses who have iconographic associations with *nāgas*. Indeed, the temples, goddesses, and rituals that are inviting attention from *bhakti* magazines and the media and attracting commentary and patronage from devotees are those that have sufficiently close associations with *nāga* traditions, broadly conceived, and share in their symbolic, mythic, and ritual grammars. In short, while these innovating *nāga* traditions are continually stretching the definition of what “counts” as legitimate worship of the snake goddess or practices associated with the *nāga dōṣam* repertoire, they are bound by its traditional symbolic vocabulary.

Although there are other “modern” problems that globalizing India is already confronting and which will grow to be significant challenges in coming years, many of them fall outside of what I would identify as the snake goddess’s (and *nāga dōṣam*’s) purview. I maintain that the old associations between *nāga* traditions and fertility remain the crucial limiting factor for what issues the snake goddess may be called upon to

resolve as this tradition continues to innovate in coming years. Thus, while I can imagine a number of problems that may provide new ritual “work” for some subset of deities, without some discernible association with fertility, for either humans or the land itself, these conundrums seem unlikely to be subsumed under the snake goddess’s jurisdiction. Such “modern” problems may include the growing population of elderly individuals whose lives have been extended by medical technology but whose families find it increasingly difficult to care for them at home, particularly as it becomes less common for extended families to live together in contemporary India. Another “modern” problem might be pollution, climate change, and environmental degradation.

What, then, are some of the new questions and afflictions that snake goddesses and *nāga* traditions may take up in coming years? Given their pervasive association with fertility and the fact that *nāgāttammaṅṅs* are considered particularly receptive to women’s concerns and petitions, *nāga* traditions seem best poised to address new iterations of marriage, fertility, and gender issues. For example, it is conceivable that *nāga* traditions could be extended to speak to the needs of women pursuing medically assisted reproductive technologies such as in-vitro fertilization, artificial insemination, and other infertility treatments. Spurred on by changes in diet, the rise in obesity and

diabetes, lower sperm counts (due to the switch to western-style men's briefs), and later marriage ages, the array of fertility concerns that might be brought before the snake goddess seems likely only to expand in coming years. Rather than receding from importance as medical treatments for infertility become more affordable, acceptable, and accessible, I can imagine that the snake goddess will be of continued and even renewed relevance for individuals who embark on these courses of therapies. As is the case with other South Asian healing practices, we can expect many of those who undertake medical treatments for infertility to simultaneously pursue ritual remedies for these problems, pairing indigenous and allopathic healing therapies in creative dialogue and combination. This phenomenon would not be new; rather, it is predicted by the characteristic and well-established cultural practice of operating in two (or more) healing repertoires simultaneously (Bellamy 2007; Flueckiger 2006; Goslinga 2006).

A second, related set of challenges which may emerge and which could conceivably fall under the snake goddess's purview are those linked to an imbalanced sex ratio. While Tamil Nadu has a relatively high ratio of all females to all males (987 females for 1,000 males, according to the 2001 Census of India) compared to the national average (933 females per 1,000 males), many districts of the state are seeing a

sharp drop in their child sex ratios. In fact, according to a 2001 *Frontline* article written by Venkatesh Athreya, “Tamil Nadu's child sex ratio – defined as the number of girls per 1,000 boys in the age group of 0 - 6 years – shows a decline from 948 in 1991 to 939 in 2001.” Lower child sex ratios suggest that in certain districts of the state, despite being illegal, sex-selection tests continue to be performed and in some cases lead to abortions of female fetuses, and that female infanticide also persists. If the imbalance in the sex ratio begins to affect marriage in direct, observable ways (e.g., if there are not enough appropriate potential brides for the number of grooms seeking to marry¹⁴⁹) then these difficulties could be indigenously understood as a form of marriage-blocking *dōṣam* and fall within the snake goddess’s repertoire. Delays in and problems getting married are already issues that this goddess deals with, and – because marriage is understood as a precursor to conception – an imbalanced sex ratio would by extension bear on fertility. As such, it seems logical that she may eventually be called upon and employed to combat this complex knot of issues.

I am also interested in identifying those new geographic and “virtual” locations into which we can already see *nāga*, *nāga dōṣam*, and *nāgāttammaṇ* traditions moving,

¹⁴⁹ The Census of India website reveals that males in India already outnumber females by 35 million (http://censusindia.gov.in/Census_And_You/gender_composition.aspx).

taking root, and flourishing. *Nāga* traditions are being transported into, and will potentially be further transformed by, the far-flung diasporic contexts in which transnational Hindus now live and worship. While a detailed investigation of *nāga dōṣam* rituals beyond India's geographic borders falls outside the boundaries of this dissertation, anecdotally I am aware of two first-generation young Hindu women who traveled back to India from the United States for *dōṣam*-removal *pūjās* (Joyce B. Flueckiger, personal communication). In both cases, these women embarked on their ritual therapies at the behest of parents and following the advice of spiritual guides, astrologers, or religious specialists. For many transnational Hindus, India continues to be regarded as the locus of tradition and authority, and ritual and temple culture as it is practiced there remains the idea and authentic model. As such, they are motivated to return to India to visit a particular religious healing site or local network of sites to perform rituals aimed at expunging their *dōṣam*. Others, however, find the convenience afforded by or personal relationships available at Hindu temples closer to home to be sufficiently powerful motivators for undertaking *dōṣam*-elimination ceremonies more locally. For them, the "local" is now "here," in whatever country or city they now live,

where ritual therapies for *nāga dōṣam* are increasingly available and understood to be efficacious.

In her 2006 book *The Goddess Lives in Upstate New York: Breaking Convention and Making Home at a North American Hindu Temple*, Corinne Dempsey writes about witnessing a *sarpa dōṣam* ritual performed for a young woman in her twenties and her younger brother at a Hindu goddess temple in Rush, New York (49-50). Aiya, the priest who performed the ceremony that Dempsey observed, emphasized that these rituals cannot work without faith, and reported later that he could sense the young woman's reluctance to participate in the *pūjā*. He correlated her attitude with the fact that many temple priests do not explain rituals to participants and thus do not draw them into the ritual logic and power of particular ceremonies and noted that other devotees adopt a strictly utilitarian approach, where they understand the temple only as a clearinghouse for ritual transactions that they expect to "fix" whatever ails them. Aiya's characterizations resonate with the perspective articulated by the priest from Kalahasti quoted in Chapter Three, who described how, in the Kali Yuga, devotees look to the temple to provide "quick-fix" solutions for their suffering.

Whereas the *sarpa dōṣam* rite documented by Dempsey demonstrates that some North American temple locations are now offering these rituals, numerous current and archived threads from the online discussion board www.IndusLadies.com indicate that many transnational Hindus remain convinced that traveling to sites in India itself, like Kalahasti and Thirunageshwaram, to perform *dōṣam*-removal rituals – or designating a proxy to sponsor them on their behalves at these Indian temples and send them *prasādam* by mail – are preferable options. In IndusLadies posts exchanging logistical information, offering general advice on how to fit these temple visits into short trips to India, and sharing personal stories of ritually assisted attempts to conceive, their female authors characterize *nāga* rituals performed in person in India as the unquestioned ideal. Taken together, these examples demonstrate that *nāga dōṣam* traditions are being discussed, debated, performed, and perpetuated across many landscapes, in physical and virtual locations, as part of a process that we can expect to continue as this tradition adapts to new contexts and innovates in response to additional modern problems.

My speculations about the potential limits to the growth and innovation of *nāga* traditions and about new concerns that *nāgāttammaṅṅs* may come to embrace underscore the fact that these ritual traditions are still in the midst of being configured,

recontextualized, and reinterpreted. This ethnographic study documents a religious idiom whose full articulation is not yet complete and whose canon is far from closed. Change, innovation, and invention are occurring at every level of this tradition: in individual temples and local networks, in popular Tamil media and print genres, in the aesthetic dimensions of daily worship and festival programs, in the claims of myths and place histories, in astrological categories and trends, in ritual grammars and therapies, and in the repertoires of diagnoses and causes. Indigenously, devotees and ritual specialists alike are acutely aware of how very fluid and open-ended this moment is, and how much, despite expert diagnoses and therapeutic interventions, remains unclear in these modern times. In a reflection that crystallizes the ambiguity and uncertainty of the Kali Yuga – and which, intriguingly, echoes the rhetorical questions about the creation of the universe contained in *R̥g Veda* 10.129 – one temple priest told me,

If you ask me when the planets will become favorable and horoscopes will be *clear,* I cannot say. If you ask me when will people get married easily and not suffer to get a child, I also cannot tell you that. If you ask me when a simpler time will come, when all the problems we face in life will be diminished, that, too, I cannot answer. In these times, we have to *face* *nāga dōṣam* and all its many difficulties. For now we must suffer under the planets. I am not a clairvoyant. If you want to know when we will experience relief, you will have to ask Rahu. Only Rahu knows. Or perhaps he does not.

At the intersection between “these times” and cosmic time – and in dialogue with planetary forces, astrological deities, and *nāgas* and their blemishes –we see an innovating repertoire of embodied, vernacular ritual practices drawing on traditional structures, forms, and meanings in an effort to interpret and respond to the “modern” challenges and gendered hierarchies of contemporary Tamil social life.

APPENDIX ONE

Tamil Months with Corresponding Gregorian Months
(beginning with *Cittirai*, the month of the Tamil New Year)

<i>Cittirai</i>	mid-April – mid-May
<i>Vaikāci</i>	mid-May – mid-June
<i>Āṇi</i>	mid-June – mid-July
<i>Āṭi</i>	mid-July – mid-August
<i>Āvaṇi</i>	mid-August – mid-September
<i>Puraṭṭāci</i>	mid-September – mid-October
<i>Aippaci</i>	mid-October – mid-November
<i>Kārttikai</i>	mid-November – mid-December
<i>Mārkaḷi</i>	mid-December – mid-January
<i>Tai</i>	mid-January – mid-February
<i>Māci</i>	mid-February – mid-March
<i>Paṅkuṇi</i>	mid-March – mid-April

APPENDIX TWO

Overview of Sanskrit Textual Sources on Snakes, Anthills, and Fertility

Snakes appear in mantras, myths, and ritual manuals throughout the Sanskrit textual tradition. They feature perhaps most famously in Janamejaya's snake sacrifice (*sarpa sattra*) and the events surrounding it, which commence at the opening of the *Mahābhārata* (c. 300 BCE – 300 CE). While out hunting in the forest the king Parikshit loses sight of a wounded deer and asks a meditating sage if he has seen it pass by. Irritated that the sage does not respond to his query, Parikshit drapes a dead snake around his neck, a disrespectful act which greatly angers the sage's son, Shringi. Shringi pronounces a curse that the perpetrator of this sin against his father will die by the bite of the mordacious *nāga* Takshaka within seven days. Although Parikshit takes numerous precautions and heavily fortifies his palace, Takshaka successfully enters the king's chambers in the form of a tiny worm in a piece of fruit and Parikshit succumbs to the *nāga's* fangs. After Parikshit's death rites are completed, his young son Janamejaya

is coronated and vows to undertake a snake sacrifice, declaring that as his father burned with Takshaka's poison so will the *nāgās* burn in the sacrificial fire.

In his search for preceptors to perform this complex ritual, Janamejaya encounters several characters who also nurse grudges against particular *nāgās*; one of them is Uttanka. At the conclusion of his education Uttanka is on his way to his guru's hermitage with a pair of earrings that he wishes to present to his teacher. When Uttanka places the earrings on the ground for a moment, a mendicant snatches them and runs away. The mendicant suddenly reverts to his original form, that of the *nāga* Takshaka, and disappears into a hole in the ground. Uttanka pursues Takshaka into the hole and finds himself in Nagaloka, the underground world of the *nāgās*, whose delights and beauty he extols. Uttanka ultimately recovers the earrings from Takshaka and, after presenting them to his guru, departs with a mind occupied with avenging Takshaka's theft. A related narrative focuses on the vendetta that the Brahmin Ruru carries against the *nāgās* after his fiancée is bitten by a snake. It is only by transferring half of his life span to his betrothed that Ruru is able to restore her vitality, and thus he, too, swears to exact revenge on the afflicting *nāga*.

The interactions between Jaratkaru, a young sage engaged in spiritual discipline, and his *nāga* interlocutor are of a different character than Janamejaya, Uttanka, and Ruru's. Where these three males all encounter male *nāgās* who deprive their loved ones of their lives or attempt to trick and cheat them, Jaratkaru reluctantly becomes involved with a *nāga* princess named Ulupi. Jaratkaru happens upon tiny beings hanging upside down from trees in the forest and learns that they are his ancestors, unable to secure their liberation because he has failed to produce offspring and continue their lineage. He concedes that he will father a child if a woman with a name identical to his presents herself. The snake king Vasuki offers his sister, Jaratkaru,¹⁵⁰ to the unenthusiastic sage, and together they beget Astika, the half-Brahmin, half-*nāga* who is fated to redeem the serpent race.

Together the sage Kashyapa and Kadru, one of his wives, beget thousands of *nāga* children. As they stand near the milky ocean one day Kadru and her co-wife, Vinata, make a wager about the color of a horse that is flying overhead; Vinata correctly identifies it as white, while Kadru contends it is black. Kadru orders her *nāga* offspring to wind their black bodies around the horse's tail to make it appear black and thereby trick

¹⁵⁰ The female Jaratkaru is identified as Manasa, the snake goddess who is worshiped in northeastern India, especially in Bengal and Assam.

Vinata, but most of the snakes refuse. One snake, Karkotaka, breaks ranks with the other *nāgas* and participates in his mother's treachery. Triumphant Kadru wins Vinata as her servant, and curses her uncooperative offspring for their failure to aid her in deceiving Vinata, proclaiming that they will all die in a fire sacrifice.

The eagle Garuda soon hatches from a wondrous egg. The mighty bird resents being forced to serve his *nāga* half-brothers, a fact which serves as the source for Garuda's enduring antipathy towards the snakes. The drama between Garuda and the *nāgas* is played out over the course of the eagle's quest to obtain a pot of nectar from the gods and thus secure his mother's release from service to Kadru. When the eagle returns to the *nāgas* with the coveted nectar he dupes them into freeing his mother even before they consume it; their tongues become forked (*dvijihva*) as they desperately lick sharp grass, vainly searching for some spilled drops of nectar, and victorious Garuda devours many of the snakes. In this myth the *nāgas* are imaged as powerful and also quite enlightened: Vinata is envious of Kadru's powerful and numerous *nāga* offspring, and the snakes exchange opinions about how to evade their mother's curse in a civilized council. Ultimately, however, the *nāgas* are condemned to death, both by their mother's pronouncement and their half-brother's prodigious appetite. Far from being imaged as

divine creature deserving of reverence, the *nāgās* are represented as worthy of being consigned to the flames or consumed by their enemies.

In the opening stages of the *sarpa sattra* an enormous variety of *nāgās* is offered, and the remaining snakes are terrified that they will soon fall victim to the fire. Fearing that his death is imminent, Takshaka takes refuge with Indra, while Vasuki requests that Astika fulfill his destiny and save the *nāga* race. Under the exhortation of powerful mantras Takshaka is pulled from the heaven toward the fire at the same time as Astika travels there and speaks impressively to Janamejaya, who offers Astika a boon. With Takshaka suspended in mid-air over the sacrificial pit Astika appeals to the king to halt the sacrificial proceedings. Although Janamejaya initially suggests that Astika be satisfied with riches or cows instead, at Astika's insistence the king suspends the *nāga* oblations and Takshaka is spared.

We encounter Takshaka again at the close of the *Ādi Parvan*, in an expansive narrative that describes Agni enlisting the assistance of Krishna and Arjuna in his mission to burn the Khandava Forest. Because he is suffering from indigestion from excessive ghee oblations, Agni wishes to consume this forest, wherein Takshaka resides. Agni assumes his brilliant fiery form and ignites the forest, while Arjuna sends

out a thick blanket of arrows that prevents the rain clouds Indra – Takshaka’s ally and protector – assembles overhead from extinguishing the blazing fire. Chaos ensues as the various forest creatures are incinerated by the advancing flames, and Indra and an entourage of semi-divine beings wage war against Krishna and Arjuna. Through the selfless efforts of Takshaka’s wife their son, the *nāga* Asvasena, is saved from the fire, although he is the only snake who successfully escapes. A divine voice declares that Takshaka is not within the forest and that Indra should concede defeat; he withdraws, and Arjuna and Krishna claim victory, while Agni emits a sated glow. Much like the episodes involving Garuda’s *nāga* fare and Janamejaya’s sacrifice, the Khandava forest myth portrays snakes as expendable without any mention of sins or curses that may be incurred by those who are responsible for their deaths.

In addition to Uttanka’s visit to Nagaloka, several other *Mahābhārata* episodes offer glimpses of this subterranean snake kingdom. Under the influence of poison administered by a jealous Duryodhana, Bhima is dropped, bound and nearly dead, into the waters of the Ganges. He sinks down to Nagaloka, where he is immediately surrounded by deadly serpents, which begin to bite him. Their venom neutralizes the poison already present in his body, and Bhima regains consciousness and battles these

nāgas, who appeal to Vasuki for help. Vasuki knows Bhima and greets him warmly; the *nāgas* then entertain Bhima and offer him pots of a liquid distillation of their powers. After honoring him with food and rituals, the *nāgas* guide him back to the surface of the river, where he rejoins his brothers. Here the depiction of the *nāgas* shifts mid-episode; where the snakes were depicted as venomous and quick to bite the incapacitated Bhima, once Vasuki appears they morph into the consummate hosts, even willing to share their potent extract.

Also in the *Ādi Parvan*, Arjuna is dragged down to Nagaloka by the serpent maiden Ulupi, who becomes infatuated with him while he bathed in the Ganges before his rituals. She entertains him there and convinces him to abandon his vow of celibacy in favor of one night with her, during which she conceives the son who will be called Iravan (Aravan). Ulupi accompanies Arjuna to the river's surface the next morning, and the two do not meet again until much later, during the *Mahābhārata* war. Similar to the short-lived affair between Jaratkaru and Vasuki's sister, in this episode some element of manipulation is at play in the union of a conflicted human male with a *nāga* princess.

In the *Vana Parvan* the effects of a curse have left the *nāga* Karkotaka immobilized in a forest. He meets Nala, who is destined to release him, and the *nāga*

shrinks to the size of a thumb and asks Nala to carry him to safety. Trapping Nala in a pun, Karkotaka then bites the one who has rescued him, leaving Nala disfigured from his poison. Although Karkotaka declares that his bite is actually advantageous to Nala, as his changed appearance will conceal his identity from others he meets, the reader is left with the impression that the *nāga* has acted unethically and is attempting to justify it *post facto*. These shape-shifting and trickery motifs are reminiscent of Uttanka's encounter with Takshaka and Karkotaka's involvement in Kadru's ruse against Vinata.

At the culmination of an extended chain of disrespectful acts perpetrated by the Nahusa (including repeatedly propositioning Indra's wife), this arrogant man is cursed by the sage Agastya to spend 10,000 years as a snake for daring to touch Agastya with his foot. Nahusa's punishment entails him being banished from heaven and forced to subordinate himself by moving around on the earth as a snake. In this episode, drawn from the *Udyoga Parvan*, becoming a snake is levied as a harsh penalty for Nahusa's disrespectful gesture; deprived of his aerial chariot and heavenly amenities, Nahusa is compelled to slither on his chest on earth.

A well-known myth from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* details Krishna's triumph over the *nāga* Kaliya in an episode that develops themes similar to those we encountered in the

Mahābhārata. Because Kaliya is poisoning the waters of the Yamuna, and causing cattle that drink there to die, Krishna drops down into the venom-infused waters from the branch of a tree and battles Kaliya, who bites Krishna multiple times. Unfazed, Krishna dances on Kaliya's hoods, and the humbled snake seeks Krishna's refuge. The *nāga's* wives praise Krishna and beg him to spare their husband, which Krishna concedes to do. Far from being a divinity, here the *nāga* serves as a trope to demonstrate the Lord's ability to successfully subdue and then arouse *bhakti* in even the most poisonous creature, to whom Krishna then extends his grace. Kaliya says of his *nāga* race that their inherent nature (*svābhāva*) is wicked, prone to anger, and ignorant, and the text reveals that the merits of listening to or chanting this myth at twilight is freedom from the fear of snakes (10.15).

Significantly, in the preponderance of *Mahābhārata* episodes related to snakes, human characters hold grudges against particular *nāgas* who have bitten or disrespected them or their loved ones. These *nāgas* are fully developed characters, with personalities and proclivities of their own, and they are the targets of the vengeful designs of those who have been affected by their mordacious and/or deceptive natures. These narrative themes are markedly distinct from the ways in which snakes are imaged

elsewhere. For example, in the *Dharmaśāstras* we find *nāga pratiṣṭhā* rites that establish and enliven *nāga* images for worship and in the *Atharva Veda* mantras addressed to serpents invoke their blessings in bids for protection and freedom from the fear of snake bites. Nibandha texts (e.g., Lakshmidhara's *Kṛtya Kalpataru*) describe the festival of Naga Panchami, which is performed to obtain prosperity and deliver the performer from the fear of snakes and from snake bites. Other, related rites aim at securing passage to heaven for individuals who have been fatally bitten by snakes and who might be lingering in some betwixt and between space because their deaths were untimely. In the contemporary traditions that are the focus of this dissertation *nāgās* are credited with the power to grant fertility and are also entreated for a range of more generalized blessings. Additionally, atonement rituals propitiate *nāgās* for offenses or harms that may have been caused to them, whether knowingly or unintentionally, establishing *nāgās* as powerful creatures worthy of veneration.

Laurie Cozad (2004) argues that we can discern a marked shift in the depiction of snakes from late Vedic texts to the *Ādi Parvan* of the *Mahābhārata*. In the late Vedic texts, including the *Atharva Veda*, some sources from the *Brāhmaṇas* (both c. 900-600 BCE), and the *Gṛhya Sūtras* (c. 600-400 BCE), the powers of supernatural snakes are

lauded and valorized by the redactors, who record rituals in which Brahmin priests are able to share in snakes' wondrous abilities. In Cozad's view, the orthodox redactors of the texts wield context as their weapon as they wage a war against the grass-roots religious movement of snake worship.

At the crux of this battle is a desire to shore up Brahminic authority and dominance, especially against the democratizing tide of the assemblage of myths and rituals related to snakes from the late Vedic texts that "position the snake as a powerful nature deity accessible to all" (3). By the time of the *Ādi Parvan* the epic redactors are engaged in invalidating and reconfiguring snake-centered rituals and exerting exclusive control over the snake, its ritual territory, and the ritual formula to ward off snakes (which were not exclusive to Brahmins in earlier texts) in an effort to "thereby divert its powers to the brahmin class" (17). Cozad concludes, "Thus, using context as a weapon to dethrone, supplant, and incorporate the snakes and their associated ritual practices, the redactors of the *Ādi Parvan* launch a narrative assault directed toward stamping out a rival tradition of snake worship and simultaneously elevating Brahmins and Brahminically sanctioned forms of worship" (32).

In sources beyond the *Mahābhārata*, the *Atharva Veda* is particularly significant in terms of passages relevant to this project. Included among its spells and incantations are prayers for an easy labor and delivery (1.11), countermeasures against demons, sorcery, and disease (1.16; 1.28), and discussions of mantras and amulets powerful for counteracting snake poison (5.13; 6.12). Some of the mantras in these hymns are directly addressed to the snake and to snake charmers who can control them (and possibly their poison). *Atharva Veda* 3.23 is a prayer for fecundity that essays to guard against barrenness that arises from defects and sins (*doṣa* and *pāpam*, respectively). Like 6.11, this hymn seems to be especially focused on securing the birth of a male child. Another hymn offers salutations to snakes, and also seeks to bind their mouths through the recitation of mantras, thus disabling them from biting (6.56). In these magical rites snakes are called upon for blessings and entreated to exercise restraint, but there is no implication that they should be killed or that if, properly worshiped, they cannot be counted on to curb their fangs or withdraw their poisons.

It is worth considering a small selection of other textual sources on related issues that stand close to the heart of this dissertation, such as fertility, the ability to produce viable offspring, anthills, and *dōṣam*. The *Atharva Veda* references a class of female

demons that enjoy snatching away infants and drinking their blood (1.28.3). These creatures are reminiscent of the wives of some of the seers who approach Skanda in the *Mahābhārata's Vana Parvan* and request that he assign them permanent positions in the heavens. They assume the roles of stars and minor planets and win the right to consume children, from embryos to age sixteen, as their food. Some of these female planets, collectively called the Skanda Grahas, afflict children in the form of disease, while others display a preference for newborns, and still others scoop fetuses from their mother's wombs. In addition, *R̥g Veda* 10.162 is chanted to protect the fetus against a demon with similar tastes, and whose interventions might result in miscarriage.¹⁵¹

Puṁsavana, the post-conception *saṁskāra* (life cycle rite) performed to consecrate the child and cause it to be male, is outlined across the *Gṛhya Sūtras*, in the *Atharva Veda*, as well as in some *Purāṇas*.¹⁵² Although most accounts of this rite specify that it is to be conducted some months into a woman's pregnancy to produce a male child, the *Śrīmad Bhāgavata Purāṇam* (6.19) does not seem to limit its performance to expectant mothers, and includes unmarried women and widows among

¹⁵¹ For an analysis of this hymn (and other late Vedic texts which concern miscarriage) see Patton 2002.

¹⁵² On the *puṁsavana* and on the entire genre of *saṁskāras*, see Pandey (1969).

those who can have wishes (e.g., to gain a good husband or to attain liberation at death, respectively) fulfilled through its execution. Indeed, this text's vision about the desires that may be fulfilled through this *pūjā* is expansive and inclusive, covering longevity for the husband's of married women, wealth, offspring, and fame.

The *Brahma Karma Samuccayaḥ* recommends performing the *puṁsavana* ritual to ward off a range of *doṣas* – defects, disturbances, and impediments – that may harm the embryo. According to this ritual manual the *puṁsavana* may be conducted independently, or combined with two other pre-natal *saṁskāras*. These rites are characterized as capable of purifying the woman and powerful to eradicate any demons or ghosts that may interfere with the embryo's growth.

A small handful of passages from disparate sources link anthills and snakes in ways that suggest that snakes were believed to reside in anthills during their periods of composition. In each case, snakes and anthills appear together in the context of a comparison. The first example distinguishes between the dead body, which is subject to decay, and the *ātma* which is eternal. In the context of an explication of a mortal becoming immortal (i.e., attaining *brahman*) in this world by banishing all desire, *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.4.7 says, “As a snake's slough, lifeless and discarded, lies

on an anthill, so lies this corpse.” (Olivelle 1996, 65). This verse implies that much as the *ātma* casts off old, worn out bodies and moves on, so does the snake discard its worn out skin.¹⁵³

The next two examples compare the speed of discharged arrows to a snake entering an anthill. In the *Mahābhārata*, arrows shot by Bhima enter the earth like the powerful snakes enter into the anthill (*Drona Parva* 136.16). A strikingly similar simile is found in *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa*; in the context of a threat issued against Rama, one of Surpanakha’s brothers declares that Rama will soon see the sharp and golden arrows that he releases tear at Rama’s body and then enter the earth just like a snake entering the anthill (*Āraṇyakāṇḍa* 29.11).

Anthills are encountered in a few additional passages in the textual tradition, though not in connection with snakes. In the *Mahābhārata*’s *Vana Parvan* (Chapter 122) we meet the sage Cyavana, around whom an anthill grows while he is immersed in deep meditation. His eyes are pierced by the young and beautiful Sukanya, who becomes his bride to remedy her evil act. She later prevails on the Ashvins to restore

¹⁵³ In *Bhagavad Gītā* 2.22 Krishna invokes a similar analogy: “Just as one throws out old clothes and then takes on other, new ones; so the embodied self casts out old bodies as it gets other, new ones” (Patton 2008, 22).

her husband's youth and attractiveness.¹⁵⁴ Valmiki, too, was so engrossed in chanting Ram's name that he was unaware that ants had built a towering earthen mound over him. Because the seven seers freed him from this *valmīka* (anthill), he was christened Valmiki. Additional references to anthills occur in the several hymns of the *Atharva Veda* where anthill soil is mentioned as a potentially medicinal substance with curative properties. These capabilities may include the ability to drive away demons and counteract poisons, of which snake venom is one (e.g., 2.3; 6.100; 7.56).¹⁵⁵

Finally, in *Ṛg Veda* 8.91 the husband of Apala returns her to her father's house on account of her skin disease (*tvac doṣa*). Seeing a remedy (*parihāra*) for her situation, Apala praises Indra and presses Soma with her teeth to attract him. Desirous of the Soma juice, Indra comes arrives and accepts the extract directly from Apala's mouth. She describes her *doṣa* and requests that Indra make three places worthy of growth, or fertile: her father's head, which is bald and thus a barren field; her concealed or secret place, which is bare due to her *doṣa*; and her stomach region. Apala has her skin

¹⁵⁴ See *Ṛg Veda* 1.116.10 for a brief reference to the Ashvin twins granting Cyavana a youthful appearance.

¹⁵⁵ Anthill sand is not the only substance that the *Atharva Veda* recommends for this purpose; see 7.88 and 10.4.

disease peeled away until her beauty glows like the sun. This hymn relates the removal of *doṣa* with a chance at fertility, and though opaque in some verses, the implication that at this early stage embodied defects were portrayed as potential obstacles to fertility is certainly suggestive of historical continuity.

GLOSSARY

<i>abhiṣekam</i> (Ta. <i>apiṣēkam</i> , Skt. <i>abhiṣeka</i>)	ritual bathing of a deity's image with substances including milk, water, and honey
<i>ācai</i>	desire, wish
<i>aḷaittal</i>	invitation rituals, particularly to install deceased relatives (i.e., <i>pūvāṭaikkāri</i>) as protective household deities
<i>alaku</i>	any of a variety of types of piercings (e.g., skewers, tridents, spears, or small hooks) that devotees have put through their cheeks, tongues, or the skin of their backs as part of a vow to a deity
<i>amāvācai</i> (Skt. <i>amāvāsya</i>)	new moon day, typically ritually auspicious
<i>ammai</i>	a generic term for pox-related viruses, such as smallpox, chicken pox, and measles
<i>ammaṅ</i>	goddess; generic and most common term, often appended to the end of a particular goddess's name (e.g., Ankalamman)
<i>ampāi</i>	goddess; generally a more Brahminical designation than <i>ammaṅ</i>
<i>aṅgapradakṣiṇa</i> (Ta. <i>aṅkappirataṭciṇam</i>)	full-body rolling circumambulation, usually around the inner pathway of a temple in fulfillment of a vow
Ankalamman (Ankāḷammaṅ, also	one of the local goddesses with whom MK Amman participates in ritual relationships, both within the Mylapore-

<i>Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvāri</i>)	area network and more widely within Tamil Nadu; her most important temple is at Mel Malaiyanur
<i>ārati</i> (Ta. <i>āratti</i>)	waving a camphor flame around a deity in a circular motion as a component of
<i>arccakar</i>	temple priest
<i>arccaṇai</i>	worship, often involving the recitation of mantras or the deity's names
<i>aruḷ vāḱku</i>	"spoken grace;" prophecy or oracular speech uttered by devotees during possession experiences
<i>Āṭi</i>	the fourth Tamil month, which runs from mid-July to mid-August
<i>bhakta</i> (Ta. <i>paktar</i>)	devotee
<i>bhakti</i> (Ta. <i>pakti</i>)	devotion, especially to one's chosen deity; an intimate relationship
<i>brahma-hatyā dōṣam</i>	the sin of killing a Brahmin
<i>cāmi</i>	a general term any deity
<i>caṇṇi</i>	shrine at a temple
<i>cāpam</i>	curse; often used interchangeably with <i>dōṣam</i>
<i>cēri</i>	densely populated settlement or lower-class neighborhood in which some dwellings may be permanent and others may be constructed from woven thatch and bamboo poles; many

(especially from higher classes) refer to these areas with the English word “slum”

<i>cevvāy</i>	the planet Mars
<i>ceyviṇai</i>	sorcery, black magic
<i>chāya graha</i>	shadow planet, namely Rahu and Ketu
<i>cilai</i>	stone or statue, also refers to an image of a deity
<i>cīr-varicai</i>	ritually displayed gifts presented by the bride’s side to the couple on their wedding day and then on successive festival occasions (such as the first <i>Āṭi</i> after their marriage or the pregnancy bangle ceremony)
<i>cittirāṇṇam</i>	a mixed rice preparation characterized by contrasting tastes that is offered on Ati Perukku
<i>cūlam</i>	trident, one of the goddess’s emblems
<i>dakṣināyana</i> (Ta. <i>taṭciṇāyaṇam</i>)	the sun’s six-month southward passage, which begins in <i>Āṭi</i> and lasts until <i>Mārkaḷi</i> , or mid-July to mid-January
<i>darśan</i> (Ta. <i>taricaṇam</i>)	auspicious sight; the reciprocal seeing that occurs between deity and devotee during worship
<i>dōṣa-nivartti sthala</i>	“ <i>dōṣam</i> -removal place;” a site reputed to be powerful for removing <i>dōṣam</i> through ritual performances
<i>dōṣam</i> (Ta. <i>tōcam</i> , <i>tōṣam</i>)	blemish, flaw, or defect, especially associated with unfavorable planetary arrangements in an individual’s horoscope

<i>ēval</i>	command or order, particularly as a result of black magic directed against someone
<i>hōmam</i>	sacrificial fire
<i>jātakam</i>	horoscope, particularly a birth chart
<i>jāti</i>	caste, type
<i>kāla sarpa dōṣam</i>	variously, snake death <i>dōṣam</i> , snake time <i>dōṣam</i> , and black snake <i>dōṣam</i> ; a condition associated with delayed marriage and infertility and believed to occur when Rahu and Ketu “hem in” all of the other planets between them in an individual’s horoscope
<i>kaḷattira dōṣam</i>	“wife <i>dōṣam</i> ,” faulted for delayed marriage
<i>kaḷippu</i>	a removal, ejection, or expulsion rite
<i>kāppu</i>	turmeric-rubbed ritual thread tied around the wrists of vow-keepers
<i>kāppu-kaṭṭu</i>	to tie <i>kāppu</i>
<i>karakam</i>	ritual vessel, usually decorated with flowers, into which the goddess is temporarily installed in festival contexts
<i>karpu</i>	chastity, typically of a married woman, which can manifest as extraordinary powers
<i>katai</i> (Skt. <i>kathā</i>)	story or narrative, sometimes recited in ritual contexts

<i>katāṇi viḷā</i>	ear-piercing ceremony wooden arch-shaped structures carried on an individual's
<i>kāvaṭi</i>	shoulders as part of a vow or offering, most commonly for Murugan
<i>kāvu</i>	animal sacrifice
Keezhapperumpallam (Kīlapperumpallam)	a Tamil temple near Kumbakonam that is dedicated to Ketu
<i>Ketu</i> (Ta. <i>Kētu</i>)	the descending lunar node, which is regarded as one of the nine planets but which has no zodiacal house of its own; along with Rahu, Ketu is believed to exert unfavorable influences in an individual's horoscope
<i>koḷukkaṭṭai</i>	dumplinglike snack stuffed with either grated coconut and jaggery or a savory filling
<i>kūḷ</i>	millet porridge, considered a “cooling” food
<i>kumbhābhiṣekam</i> (Skt. <i>kumbhābhiṣeka</i> ; Ta. <i>kumpāpiṣēkam</i>)	temple reconsecration ceremonies usually performed once every twelve years and/or following a renovation
<i>kumpam</i>	“heap” or mixture; specifically, a mixed, vegetarian and non- vegetarian feast offered to the goddess during the <i>Āṭi</i> festival
<i>kuṛai</i>	deficiency, defect, fault, or flaw
<i>kūṭam</i>	round-bottomed pot, used to carry milk in procession for the goddess

<i>kuttuviḷakku</i>	tall, pedestal-style oil lamp
<i>lagna</i> (Ta. <i>lakkiṇam</i>)	the zodiacal sign that is ascendant, or literally rising above the horizon at the time of an individual's birth
<i>liṅgam</i> (Skt. <i>liṅga</i> ; Ta. <i>liṅkam</i>)	the emblem or mark that represents Shiva
<i>Mahābhārata</i>	classical Indian epic composed somewhere between approximately 500 BCE – 500 CE
<i>makimai</i>	power or special feature
<i>maṇ</i>	earth, soil
<i>mañcaḷ</i>	the color yellow; turmeric
<i>mañcaḷ kayiṛu</i>	yellow cords or strings tied in ritual performances, usually as symbols of the marriage necklace (<i>tāḷi</i>)
<i>mantiravāṭi</i>	sorcerer (“one who pronounces mantras”)
<i>maṭi</i>	folded part of a sari near the belly; state of ritual purity
<i>māviḷakku</i>	oil lamp fashioned from flour, often offered to the goddess by female devotees as part of a vow
Mel Malaiyanur (Mēl Malaiyaṇūr)	Tamil town near Gingee where an important temple to the goddess Ankalamman is located
<i>muḷaiṇṇipāri</i>	pot containing nine types of newly sprouted seeds, usually offered as part of a vow or in a festival celebration

MK Amman / Mundakakkanni Amman (Muṇṭakakkaṇṇi Ammaṇ)	popular local goddess temple in the Mylapore neighborhood of Chennai where the goddess is understood to be “self-manifest” (<i>svayambhū</i>)
<i>nāga</i> (Ta. <i>nāka</i>)	snake
<i>nāgāttammaṇ</i>	snake goddess, both the generic snake goddess and, as Nagattammaṇ, one of specific snake goddesses
<i>naivēttiyam</i> (Skt. <i>naivedya</i>)	offering presented to the deity, particularly cooked foods
<i>nakṣatram</i> (Skt. <i>nakṣatra</i> ; Ta. <i>naṭcattiram</i>)	the twenty-seven asterisms or lunar mansions, also called constellations or stars
<i>nāḷ</i>	day, but also may refer to a time or period
<i>nalanku</i>	turmeric-anointing ritual ceremony
<i>navagrahas</i> (Ta. <i>navakkirakam</i>)	the nine planets
<i>nivartti</i> (Skt. <i>nivāraṇa</i>)	relief atonement, remedy; a remedial ritual or ritual solution
<i>pāl kuṭam</i>	“milk pot,” also refers to the milk pot processions that devotees undertake as part of vows to the goddess
<i>pampaikkārar</i>	all-male troupe of musicians who also act as ritual specialists during many Tamil festivals and rites of passage
<i>pāmpu</i>	snake

<i>paramparai</i> (Skt. <i>paramparā</i>)	lineage; hereditary succession from father to son or guru to disciple
<i>parikāram</i> (Skt. <i>parihāra</i>)	a remedial ritual or removal ritual
<i>pārvai</i>	gaze, glance, sight
<i>pativiḷakku</i>	an oil lamp whose flickering flame is interpreted as signs of the goddess's wishes
<i>paurṇami</i> (Skt. <i>pūrṇima</i>)	full moon day, often considered ritually auspicious
<i>pāvam</i>	sin
<i>pēy</i> (< Skt. <i>preta</i>)	demon, possessing spirit
<i>pillicūṇiyam</i>	sorcery, black magic
<i>piṇṇal</i>	plait or braid (especially a woman's hair)
<i>pirārttaṇai</i> (Skt. <i>prārtana</i>)	petitionary prayer
<i>poṅkal</i>	boiled rice and lentil mixture, often cooked and offered at goddess temples
<i>poṭṭu</i>	round mark worn by ladies on their foreheads, traditionally made with vermilion powder but increasingly a velvety sticker that provides the same visual effect
<i>prasādam</i> (Skt.	blessed substance infused with the deity's grace and

<i>prasāda</i> , Ta. <i>piracātam</i>)	redistributed to devotees
<i>pratimā</i> (Ta. <i>piratīma</i>)	effigy, figure, statue
<i>pratiṣṭhā</i> (Ta. <i>piratiṣṭa</i>)	enlivening rite; rites of consecration that establish a deity's presence and kindle life-breath in its image
<i>prāyaścitta</i>	expiation, act or rite of atonement
<i>pūccuṭṭal</i>	ritually adorning a woman's hair with flowers at the time of her first pregnancy
<i>pūjā</i> (Ta. <i>pujai</i> ; <i>puca</i>)	worship, honoring; making offerings to a deity
<i>pūjāri</i> (Ta. <i>pūcāri</i>)	Hindu priest, typically a non-Brahmin temple priest or ritual specialist
<i>puṇya</i> (Ta. <i>puṇṇiya</i>)	merit
<i>purru</i>	an anthill (or termite hill or white-ant hill)
<i>purru maṇ</i>	the soil of an anthill, to which healing powers are attributed
<i>pūvāṭaikkāri</i>	“the woman who wears flowers;” spirits of the deceased which are called back in invitation rituals (<i>aḷaitta</i>) and installed as protective household deities
Rahu (Ta. Rāku; Irāku)	the ascending lunar node, which is regarded as one of the nine planets but which has no zodiacal house of its own; along with Ketu, Rahu is believed to exert unfavorable influences in an individual's horoscope
<i>rūpam</i> (Skt. <i>rūpa</i>)	form (e.g., of a deity)

<i>śakti</i> (Ta. <i>cakti</i>)	feminine power
<i>śānti</i> (Ta. <i>cānti</i>)	expiatory rites or rites of atonement to avert or clear evil influences
<i>sarpa</i>	snake
<i>śāstras</i>	holy texts
Shani (Skt. <i>Śani</i> ; Ta. <i>Caṇi</i>)	the planet Saturn
<i>śrāddha</i>	a class of death ceremonies and ongoing offerings to deceased lineage members)
<i>sthala purāṇam</i> (Ta. <i>stala purāṇam</i> ; <i>tala purāṇam</i>)	place history; an account focused on a temple and its deity that also includes local myths
<i>sumangalī</i> (Ta. <i>cumarikālī</i>)	auspicious married woman (i.e., one whose husband is living)
<i>svayambhū</i> (Ta. <i>cuyampu</i>)	“self-manifest,” as in a deity or anthill that arises “naturally,” through divine agency
<i>tāli</i>	a woman’s marriage necklace
Thirunageshwaram (Tirunākesvaram)	a Tamil temple near Kumbakonam that is dedicated to Rahu
<i>tīrtha</i> (Ta. <i>tīrttam</i>)	holy water, which may be sprinkled over or distributed and ingested by devotees at a temple as <i>prasādam</i>

<i>tīmiti</i>	firewalking ceremony
<i>tirukalyāṇam</i>	sacred marriage
<i>tiruvijā</i>	temple festival celebration
<i>tithi</i> (Ta. <i>titt</i>)	units of approximately 24 hours (i.e. lunar days) that comprise lunar months and are significant in determining the timing of festivals
<i>tīṭtu tuṇi</i>	“impure cloth;” cloth used to staunch a woman’s menstrual flow, and thus considered polluted
<i>tulsī</i> (Ta. <i>tuḷaci</i>)	sacred basil plant, associated with Vishnu
<i>ukanta</i>	suitable or appropriate
<i>ukkiram</i> (Skt. <i>ugra</i>)	fierceness or intensity
<i>ūr</i>	village or home place, may also refer more generally to an area or neighborhood
<i>uruvam</i>	shape, form, or figure (usually of a deity)
<i>uttaravu</i>	divine permission, usually communicated in a dream, through words spoken by an individual who is possessed by a deity, or by interpreting the flickering of the flame of an oil lamp
<i>uttarāyaṇa</i>	the sun’s six-month progression northward which begins in

	<i>Tai</i> and lasts until <i>Āṇi</i> , or mid-January to mid-July
<i>uṭukkai</i>	hourglass-shaped drum that is played along with the <i>pampai</i> drum at non-Brahmin Tamil rituals
<i>uyir</i>	life, essence, spirit
<i>vaḷaikāppu</i>	bangle ceremony; either performed during a woman's first pregnancy or in honor of the goddess
<i>vēṇṭutal</i>	vow or request that a devotee brings before the deity
<i>viḷakku</i>	lamp, light
<i>viratam</i> (Skt. <i>vrata</i>)	religious vow or austerity
<i>viti</i>	fate

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