Boundaries of the body: faith, identity and embodied ritual practice
in diasporic Hindu communities in Britain

A warm spring day in a landscaped public park on the outskirts of London. There are joggers, walkers, families enjoying the blossom, the lake, the wildlife and the green spaces. Near the lake, however, an area is cordoned off, where the turf is removed and a fire is burning. The presence of various ritual objects, of Hindu priests, of paramedics and police indicate that an unusual event is about to take place. (Author’s fieldnotes, March 08)

Extreme ritual practices of the body, an essential part of certain trajectories of Hindu worship, are now being seen in an innovative, refigured form in the UK. This paper looks at newly settled diasporic Tamil groups in Greater London where fire-walking, body piercing and walking on machetes are part of annual festival celebrations. How do these groups negotiate their public image in the face of such practices? Does the setting up of temples support their settlement in the UK in an area known for anti-immigrant sensibilities? Are these extreme acts in fact performances of faith? In this paper I will examine their public representation through performance of bodily ritual in the light of current theoretical debate on migration, diaspora and identity, and will seek to address the changing nature of British Hindu worship, evidenced as more and more groups establish their own particular practices and own identity.

The description given above is of a fire-walking ritual, called Thimitee, put on by a group of devout Mauritian Tamils in the Ilford area of East London. It is the first event of this kind to take place in the UK, although it remains an important part of devotional ritual within Tamil Hindu groups in Malaysia, South India, Mauritius, Sri Lanka and Singapore. Three years ago, in 2006, the group established their own temple in a converted garage in Ilford which now hosts a community of about 200 Mauritian Tamil devotees. Special Hindu priests are flown in from Mauritius for the event, as the detail of the ritual differs from the Sri Lankan and South Indian ones, and the South Indian Tamil priests who work in other parts of London do not know
the ceremonies. It is based on vernacular, village practices rather than more formal Agamic ritual seen in established UK Tamil temples.

Let us look now at the context in which to view this public display of performative devotion. I am focusing primarily on Hindu community worship, where individual devotees use a variety of embodied practices to ‘perform’ their faith in a public setting. British Hindu temples such as the Shree Ghanapathy Temple in Wimbledon, south-west London, the Shri Kanagathurakkai Temple in Ealing, west London and the London Shri Murugan Temple in East Ham, east London, play host to large numbers of mainly Tamil devotees at festival times and feature Bharatanatyam dance performance, trance dance and body piercing in addition to the daily, embodied ritual worship. This local level of practice, although subjected to both national and trans-national influences, remains for the most part, hidden from the public eye and certainly receives no money from the public purse. It has too, remained hidden in academic research, being over-looked perhaps by a body of work on more prominent Hindu groups such as the British Gujarati population (see for example, Dwyer 1994; Knott 1987; Mukadum 2007). Very little scholarly writing is to be found on British Tamils at the present time, although several studies have been carried out on migrant Tamils in Europe¹. This writing indicates how in a similar fashion, Tamil diasporic communities in Germany, Switzerland, and Norway for example, are establishing new temples and revealing increasing confidence in festival practices. As in London, a new self-assurance that reveals specific Tamil identity, and in this case, a particular Mauritian Tamil identity, is articulated and performed in these embodied customs.

Several examples reveal this new confidence in presenting a Tamil religious identity to a more public gaze. At the Highgatehill Murugan temple in north London, it was only after the Queen had made an official royal visit in the millenium year that the temple trustees agreed for the first time to hold a chariot festival, where they paraded the main deity around the local streets. At the London Shri Murugan temple during their annual Tai Pusam celebrations, there has been a large increase over the last 5-6 years of the numbers of devotees practicing body piercing, and in Wimbledon, in south-west London at the Shree Ghanapathy temple, the numbers

¹ See for example
attending their outside chariot festival have risen over the last ten years (1998-2008) from 4,000 to 10,000. 2009 is the second year of the public performance of ritual fire-walking by the group of Mauritian Tamils, and will be the fourth year of their ritual walking on machetes. These events indicate a new willingness and a significant impulse to display Tamil identity through ritual performative events.

Here I am introducing an extended notion of performance - a model that considers everyday actions as well as rituals and artistic events as performative and that seeks to analyse the ‘doing’ of performance across a range of modalities of artistic cultural expression. It sees performance as communicative behaviour and focuses primarily on embodied practice, forming, as Tamil scholar Stuart Blackburn states ‘a performance-centred approach to culture’ (Blackburn 1998:2). In recent decades, scholars of religion as well as those in anthropology, history and other disciplines have looked towards performance and practice as a way to understand the processes rather than the products of religious or cultural beliefs. The question of how communities ‘produce a culturally meaningful environment’ (Bell 1998: 208) through the expressivity of their actions is one that has elicited a growing interest in these academic fields, as well as providing new ways and responses to areas over-populated with academic writing, such as ritual events. Through this approach new and layered levels of understanding and knowledge become available.

In viewing rituals such as the one described as performative, certain characteristics are evident; firstly, that both ‘performer’ and audience are participants in the event, secondly that the event is framed in some way (Finnegan 1989:152) and thirdly, that some preparation has gone on prior to performing. Not only is public witnessing understood as a significant factor in these performances but the audience is no longer a passive spectator but an engaged and active listener and observer, drawn into a relationship with the ritual performer. The several hundred mainly Tamil onlookers at the fire-walking ritual, with backgrounds in Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Singapore as well as Mauritius were participating in a religious event alongside the devotees actually doing the fire-walking. Most had come directly from worship at their local temple and those engaged in walking on the hot coals had been preparing for 10 days through praying, fasting, chanting and ritual bathing. The discourse from those present is of purification, of devotion to the deity and of religious vows that
have been made. Only if their faith is not strong enough, and if preparations have not been thorough, will their feet get burned. ‘No-one has ever got burnt, as we prepare properly’, one of the men tells me. Both male and female devotees enact the fire-walking, some even carrying their small children across the coals, and some have their bodies pierced and some are in trance. Others carry on their shoulders or heads the kavadi, a decorated wooden frame (for the men) and milk pots (for the women), something more commonly seen at the January Tai Pusam festival. Religious studies scholar Ron Geaves notes that the ‘Mauritian Tamils are proud of their Kavadi performance and perceive it as part of their identity along with the worship of Murugan’ (2007:96). Loud chanting by the onlookers and the playing of drums accompany those walking, building an atmosphere of high tension, excitement, participation and drama. It is demonstrably a religious, devout and auspicious occasion for all those present.

[Play film clip]

But are these extreme acts of self-mortification seen by non-Hindus as such an event – as religious, auspicious and even divinely orientated? How do the small Mauritian community present themselves publicly in this politically Conservative-led London borough of Redbridge? Several councillors of different faiths and the local mayor attended the ritual, as invited VIPs, and at the end were blessed by the priests with prayers and gifts. The local parks manager and the police were included in this simple ceremony, and some of the guests interviewed for Tamil TV. Although this borough has an active inter-Faith Forum that promotes inter-faith dialogue, respect and toleration, it borders onto the borough of Barking and Dagenham, a Labour-controlled local government but with a strong extreme right-wing presence. This is the area where the BNP (British National Party) fielded 13 candidates in the local elections of 2006, the biggest push of the BNP in Southern England, and where they won 12 seats in the council. Barking and Dagenham is the first council in the country to have the BNP as the second party, giving it over 10% of the total council vote. They also have one member in the Redbridge local council. With the BNP’s rallying cry to stop all further immigration to Britain, and to deport all illegal migrants and asylum seekers, the presence of these recently-arrived Mauritian Tamils is framed in tension, fear and uncertainty, yet despite these factors, they choose to display their rituals practices overtly and confidently. In this instance, in these embodied rituals, as Geaves puts it, ‘the body itself becomes a site of contested narratives where the
sociological, the psychological, the political and the religious meet’ (2007:194). In these acts, not only are tradition and identity celebrated, but past and present, home and diaspora are inextricably linked and in doing so, physical difference and bodily boundaries are transcended.

We can see perhaps, in these rituals, not only the means of purifying, of blessing and of healing for individual devotees, but also a means of healing and uniting the imagined global social body of the Tamils – a body that is fragmented, under tension and in conflict and in transition. The rituals offer both a religious salvation and a political, cultural and social one, through the embodied practices of individual devotees in such a religious frame. Homeland and identity are commemorated, are remembered, are etched into the physical bodies through piercing, cutting and burning. In performing such extreme religious ritual, ordinary men and women can assist in healing the disruption of the diasporic condition of the Tamil social body, as well as partaking of their own personal religious vows. As Geaves points out in discussing the carrying of the kavadi, ‘Politically the struggle to carry the kavadi is transformed in diaspora from an act of national identity and struggle for self-determination to one of seeking to achieve economic prosperity whilst simultaneously preserving Tamil identity and ancestral traditions’ (2007:194).

A further context for consideration is the larger frame of fire-walking traditions – found all over the world and practiced for many hundreds, if not thousands of years. Famous examples of these customs include the northern Greek ritual of Anastenaria, where participants are thought to become possessed by Saint Constantine, as well as those in other parts of Europe, the Far East, North America and Africa. There is also the phenomenon of the more recent ‘revival’ of the fire-walking ritual by new age practitioners which started in the 1970s in the USA and burgeoned in the 1990s. Their practice is based in a psychological frame and terminology rather than in a religious one, where they offer training in fire-walking as a means for individuals to empower their lives, and to experience their ‘inner selves’, free from everyday fears and anxieties. ‘Empowerment, Enlightenment, Achievement’ reads the front page of www.firewalking.com. Although these companies that offer fire-walking weekends and training align themselves with the religious ritual of the past, interestingly, the Tamils groups seek to distance
themselves from such modern motivational discourse, stating on the UK Tamil news website that, ‘This ceremony must not be mistaken for the walk on fire exercise which is practiced in the UK and across the world as part of team building exercises. It is done as part of a religious vow in which devotees walk on fire to show their faith in God’ (3/29/08 www.uktamilnews.com), re-affirming its location in religious, devotional worship.

There is of course, a substantial amount of scientific data that challenges the perceived dangers in fire-walking. Certain laws of physics relating to the low thermal conductivity of the burning wood and facts such as the short time of contact between the hot coals and feet and the layer of insulating ash on the top of the burnt wood or coals indicate that people’s feet are rarely burned or blistered. David Willey, a physics lecturer at the University of Pittsburgh, who has participated in fire-walking and has investigated the phenomenon, states, ‘What I believe happens when one walks on fire is that on each step the foot absorbs relatively little heat from the embers that are cooled, because they are poor conductors that do not have much internal energy to transmit as heat, and further that the layer of cooled charcoal between the foot and the rest of the hot embers insulates them from the coals’ (www.pitt.edu/~dwilley/Fire/FireTxt/fire.html). Those engaging in the ritual from a religious point of view, such as the Mauritian Tamils described, do not subscribe to these sceptical views, as this of course would undermine the believed power of the supernatural, of the deity or of God.

So, to conclude, the pursuit of a particular Mauritian Tamil identity is evident in the rituals as described in this paper, underlined by the statement on the community’s temple website that states, ‘We are a Hindu temple established and run by Mauritian migrants. We can say that we have contributed to the spiritual uplifting of fellow devotees...because we follow customs and traditions from Mauritius...’ (www.mauritiantemple.com). This local level of identity is also part of a global Tamil identity that is especially aware of its diasporic status and seeks a sense of unity with other displaced Tamil groups. Finally identity adheres in addition to the ethnic and religious notion of being Hindu - one that transcends boundaries of specificity of place of origin, one that perhaps transcends boundaries of the body.
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