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## Scandalizing the Goddess at Kodungallur

### **Abstract**

The Cock Festival (or Minam Bharani Festival) at Sri Kurumba Kavu in central Kerala is known for the raucous, erotic, and insulting devotional practices of its participants. Thousands of devotees take part annually in the singing of highly explicit sexual songs and in the ceremonial pollution of the goddess Sri Kurumba's shrine. This festival is controversial but popular, and resembles in many ways descriptions of the ecstatic cults of the ancient Near East that spread throughout the Greco-Roman empire. Oracles of the goddess, called *veḷiccappāṭus* (illuminators), reveal her wishes through trance and in their possessed state cut their foreheads with swords as they dance. The *veḷiccappāṭus*, along with the *aṭikaḷs*, play major roles in the month-long, non-Brahminical Bharani Festival. Many Hindus find the treatment of the goddess during the festival reprehensible, while devotees feel she is pleased and sated by their amplification and celebration of her *śakti* (power). This paper presents firsthand descriptions of the temple and festival and discusses various ways of making sense of the activities of devotees.

**Key words:** women — oracles — Kerala — goddess — possession —  
desecration — ritual — Hinduism

## INTRODUCTION

THE young men pressed their backs against the walls of the temple and stood ten deep watching other devotees race around in a frenzy. At the signal, the raising and opening of a satiny red umbrella by the Chief of Kodungallur who was seated near the eastern doorway to the temple, the worshippers had begun to circle like the tiger who turns to butter in the story of Black Sambo.<sup>1</sup> These devotees did not melt even in the hot noontime sun, but several shed blood from wounds on their heads, self-inflicted by the ritual weapons they wielded as they ran. Red rivulets streamed down faces that stared in detached, shocked expressions as though just awakening into the present moment.

A young man brandishing his *pallival*, or ritual sword, careened to the spot where I was standing. A friend or attendant grabbed his arm in great urgency and guided him to a table, at the same time pushing the gawking spectators to the side. The cuts on the young man's forehead were oozing red and his helper applied bright yellow turmeric powder as an antiseptic and to "cool" the wounds. I was standing not two feet away from a starkness of religious expression that I had never seen before. I felt reluctant to photograph this devotee, not necessarily because he even knew I was near him, but because I felt that I had somehow gotten inside a moment of "real time." There was a vividness and a personalness, as though I had stumbled onto someone's intimate contact with a "something else." Whatever the reason that photographs of icons in inner sanctums are not generally permitted in Kerala, that was the reason I did not record this devotee on film.

Admonishments to clear out of the way of the racing devotees pulled my attention back toward the circling runners. I became aware of the quality of the atmosphere. An intense feeling of energy—a reaction to the violent movement and the waving, jingling weapons—griped the air. Now set in motion, that energy could suddenly go over-

board, manifesting itself in further bloodiness. There was both a grim seriousness and an ebullience in the faces of the spectators. A helpful devotee urged me forward through the crowd so that I could get a good shot with my camera. At the same time, I was pinched on the behind. I turned around to the stoney faces behind me and said in a calm voice in Malayalam, "You shouldn't do that." As I clicked the shutter, I received another pinch and a goosing.

Up to that point I had received catcalls, stares, friendly questions, and concerned comments from the participants of the Bharani Festival, but I had not been touched in that manner. Inside the goddess's shrine building, however, while moving through the narrow spaces that channel the fervent devotees seeking her *darśan* (Mal. *darśanam*), I had come into intimate contact with many people. I had virtually become one with them in the creation of a solid, undulating snake of people, none of whom could move independently. We were pressed together shoulder jammed against chest, side against side, inching forward in a cloud of moaning devotional fervor. "Amme, amme. Amme, amme."<sup>2</sup> Some of us chanted it; all of us were a part of the sound and motion. But no one actively touched me and, in fact, I felt a clear inner separation, that no one wanted to invade the privacy of my experience of the goddess, the *darśan*. We were not there as tourists, but because we had business with the goddess at her annual festival at Sri Kurumba Kavū, a major goddess temple in the town of Kodungallur.<sup>3</sup>

*Darśan*, contact with the divine through sight of the goddess's icon, is a very profound experience sought by each devotee, whether a professional *veliccappāṭu* who lives a life dedicated to the goddess, an individual who has made a one-time vow to her for her help with some personal problem or desire, or someone who regularly approaches her to be spared from smallpox or other disease. I was there because I wanted to learn about the religious beliefs and rituals of the Araya fishing caste community and their relationship with Bhagavati (fem. of *bhagavan*, Lord, and the most general term for "goddess"). Araya worship other deities as well, but the center of their community and ritual is the goddess in her specific forms in local communities, and they play a special ritual role in the Bharani or "Cock" Festival at Kodungallur Bhagavati temple as perpetrators of the *kāvū tīṇṭal*,<sup>4</sup> the annual desecration of Sri Kurumba Kavū.

#### THE KĀVU

The first time I visited her sanctum at Kodungallur during the festival only a few devotees were present, so I could easily negotiate the

prescribed path (*pradakṣinā*) of worship and took my time bowing before each of the icons. I was dressed in *selwar/kamiz*, the pajama set favored by young women in Kerala, and carried a bag with my camera. Males entering the shrine building are required to remove their shirts and should wear a *muṇḍa* (a sarong-like skirt). A considerate policeman standing at the entrance of the shrine building offered to watch my shoes, which I left on the porch of the shrine.

As in most Bhagavati shrines, the entrance at Sri Kurumba Kavu opens on the north side so that the devotee faces southward toward the main icon of the goddess when entering. The icon, placed at the south end, faces northward. South is the direction of the tip of the subcontinent and the location of the temple of the virgin goddess at Kanyakumari, a goddess related by type to Sri Kurumba. Besides the north door and its broad portico, a second major doorway, ritually significant in the Bharani Festival, opens on the east. Most Śiva shrines face east, and at Sri Kurumba Kavu the subsidiary sanctum of Śiva opens on the axis leading to the eastern doorway. The temple, or *kāvu*,<sup>5</sup> at Kodungallur consists of several buildings, including administrative offices, residences, and a central sanctuary where the icons of the goddess and other deities are located. The spacious grounds are covered with sand and there are a number of tall, old banyan or peepul trees in raised, circular planters, as well as a large pond, or *kulam*, in the northwest corner of the grounds used for ritual bathing. If a *kāvu* is supposed to resemble a verdant forest or glade, the shrine grounds are stark and dry in comparison. The beige sand sets off the striking, extensive roof structure of the central shrine building (*śrikōvil*). The towers and planes of the copper-plated roof with its many intersecting angles dominate the view on approach. From afar the shrine building looks top-heavy, but up close it looks light and airy.

Between the double-tiered roof is an open, wooden latticework like that in traditional Malayali houses. In the northeast sector of the roof structure stands a tower (*śikhara*) with a gaping mouth into which devotees throw offerings. During the festival the opening in the lattice work of this tower is hung at times with a red banner resembling a tongue, like that in icons of Kali, stuck out in eagerness for a meal of offerings. A swath of yellow dusts the roof below the tongue where packets of turmeric thrown by worshippers have missed their mark. Visible between the bars of the latticework are piles of coconuts and other offerings deposited by accurate arms.

The *śrikōvil* consists of an open-air flagstone courtyard surrounded by a stone wall with an overhanging gabled roof that creates a veranda

on the inside of the wall adjacent to the courtyard. The image of the goddess Bhadrakali is an eight-armed, six-foot-tall figure carved from the trunk of a jackfruit tree and dates from the nineteenth century. She sits in the *sanctum sanctorum* (*garbhagṛham*), a stone chamber with closeable wooden doors in the courtyard. This is the absolute center of the shrine.

The icon of the goddess depicts her as having just defeated and decapitated the demon Darukan, whose head she holds in her lower right hand. The Malayali myth of the creation of Kali tells of her manifestation out of her father(!) Śiva's third eye and out of the poison trapped in his throat for the purpose of killing Darukan, who is misusing power. Six gods each furnish the goddess with a weapon to aid in her battle. Unfortunately, the symbols the goddess holds that should remind the viewer of her mythic exploits are no longer clearly visible. V. T. Induchudan in his study of the temple calls it a "confused image," and gives his interpretation of the symbols. The lower right hand holds the head of Darukan, the second right hand may be a palm-leaf text, the third right holds a trident, and the fourth right hand grips a sword against the chest (INDUCHUDAN 1969, 192). The lower left hand carries a bell, the second and third left may be an anklet and a serpent, and the fourth left hand holds a vessel (INDUCHUDAN 1969, 192). Songs sung to Kali at the temple mention a Kali of Kurumbakavu, but the descriptions of the goddess in the song texts vary from the characteristics of the icon found in the central sanctum today (INDUCHUDAN 1969, 2-8).

On festival occasions the goddess is dressed in a luxurious, detachable gold mask, crown, and armor. She is draped with lengths of silk, necklaces, earrings, and other finery. Oil lamps (*vilakku*) with flickering golden flames set before her reflect off the metal, and she radiates a beauty and warm glow very different from the plain figure underneath. A red silk cloth is wrapped around her, completing the visual opulence of gold and crimson. The living sense of the goddess is ritually expanded by the priest tossing brightly colored flowers at the image, waving a wand of incense, and chanting prayers while inscribing a pattern in the air before the image with the flame of an oil lamp. The inanimate is thus transformed with color, light, sound, and smell.

Adjacent to the goddess, attached to the western side of the *garbhagṛham*, is an oblong chamber. This chamber holds the *Sapta Matrkas*, or the Seven Mothers: two-foot-high, shiny, black stone icons lined up in a row and facing north. A narrow raised porch fronts the chamber where a priest may stand accepting offerings and

dispensing *prasādam* (gifts returned from the goddess and imbued with her energy). At this point the low porch of the Matrkas-Bhagavati sanctums and the side wall of the shrine of Śiva, a small stone building located to the northwest of the goddesses, create an L-shaped corridor. This space was dark, narrow, and cave-like and smelled of moist granite.

During my first visit inside the main shrine building, I performed the *pradakṣinā*, absorbed the atmosphere, greeted the goddess, and thanked her for letting me be there. I proceeded to the entrance of Śiva's shrine, but found it closed. Here Lord Śiva is represented in the form of the lingam with a crescent moon attached. I passed by the Śiva shrine and entered the sunlit, open courtyard and sat on the shaded veranda on the inside of the roofed wall. It was quiet and bright and I felt what I can only describe as a jolt or a vibration that made all the colors richer and shadows deeper. After exiting through the narrow opening in the west wall of the courtyard I circled around to the porch at the north door to retrieve my shoes. Outside the walls, the heat and noise of the greater shrine grounds contradicted the cool, stony shade and relative silence of the inner courtyard.

On the second, crowded occasion the experience of the shrine courtyard was very different. The grounds and the building were seething with devotees and tumultuous activity. Turmeric powder, peppercorns, and chickens rained over the wall of the inner courtyard. I barely squeezed through the *pradakṣinā* corridor and was unable to get close to the opening of the goddess's sanctum. The crowd moaned with a haunting call to the goddess. The closeness and lack of air in the small passage made me dizzy and I was happy to turn the corner into the sunlit open courtyard. An English-speaking young man who seemed intrigued by my presence there picked up and broke off a piece of coconut meat that someone else had thrown over the wall and gave it to me to eat as *prasādam*. Again, I took only one picture and that was of an agitated chicken, squawking and crawling along the thick metal grating over the courtyard of the shrine building.

Cocks are the preferred sacrificial victim whose blood the goddess delights in (TARABOUT 1986, 375). Until 1954 thousands of cocks lost their heads and blood at the offering stone during the Bharani Festival (TARABOUT 1986, 376). Now, live chickens are tossed over the walls of the shrine building, along with the other offerings of peppercorns, turmeric, coconuts, and coins. The peppercorns and turmeric slip through the grating and crunch under bare feet, but the chickens are left to wander along, feet slipping through the grating, but prevented from landing on the worshippers below. I noticed a number of wor-

shippers shattering coconuts by hand on the *balikkal*, a sacrificial stone outside the shrine building, but I never found out what happened to the chickens. I saw baskets of them, still alive, being carried out of the shrine doorway.

#### THE BHARANI FESTIVAL

Thousands of devotees, drawn mainly from the lower castes, participate in the annual festival to the goddess that is held from Bharani day in the lunar month of Kumbham to Bharani a month later in the lunar month of Minam. The festival takes its name from the star *bharani*, one of the twenty-seven *nakṣatrams* (asterisms) that mark the progression of days through the Malayali month. The *bharani* star is represented by the symbol of a hearth or fireplace and by an earthenware vessel that TARABOUT (1986) identifies as homologous to the female sexual organ, the yoni.

In 1990, the first day of the festival (Kumbham Bharani) fell on 2 March and reached a climax with the “polluting” of the temple, the raising of the umbrella, and the devotees’ frantic race around the temple building during the twelve hours before Minam Bharani (28–29 March). The seven star-days before Minam Bharani were each the occasion of specific ritual activities. This last and most important week of the festival drew the greatest crowds of devotees who performed their sacrifices to the goddess. Several types of ritual specialists maintain privileges to serve the goddess during the festival, and the Nambudri (*namputiri*) Brahminical ritual establishment, who perform ceremonies throughout the rest of the year, relinquish control over the context of worship. Non-Brahmin ritual specialists called *aṭikaḷs* and *veḷiccappāṭṭanmar* (pl. of *veḷiccappāṭṭu*) exercise their ritual power and forms of worship while Brahmins stay away.

The following description of the overall structure of the festival is based on Induchudan and Tarabout, as well as my own firsthand observations of the 1990 festival. Unfortunately, I was not in a position to complete a fuller study. The festival begins on Kumbham Bharani when Nambudri priests declare the shrine polluted after a member of the goldsmith caste at 7 A.M. circumambulates the outside of the main shrine building (*śrikōvil*) three times while ringing a bell. Shortly after that “the eldest female member of the Pilappilly family announces that the temple has been swept clean” (INDUCHUDAN 1969, 103) and the priests continue their regular *pūjā*. Banners with the goddess’s colors are hung from the large banyan trees on the shrine grounds and on the porticos of the main shrine building. The raising of the flag is the common signal of the beginning of most festivals, though I did not

notice the usual erection of a special flagpole. From this point certain ritual activities common at the temple at other times become prohibited. These include Kathakali dance dramas, the cooking of a kind of rice and banana-ghee-coconut pudding as an offering to the goddess, the ritual use of *guruti* (a deep-red liquid made of turmeric and lime), and the decoration of the Ksetrapala (guardian *yakṣa* figure) in the *śrikōvil*. The first day also marks the beginning of the mythological conflict between Kali and Darukan that the festival commemorates or reenacts. The details of how this myth is related to specific festival practices and participated in by people linked to the goddess are fascinating topics for future study.

During the last seven days of the festival, the week before Minam Bharani, large numbers of devotees begin arriving, traditionally in caste order. Before 1954, the Nayars were first to sacrifice their cocks to the goddess on the special offering stones near, but outside, the walls of the inner courtyard.

The sacrifice is commenced by a Nayar belonging to a house known as Kodungallur Bhagavathi Veetu, i.e., the Kodungallur Goddess's House, and the cocks sacrificed by him are brought from the Tarvads of Tacholi Otenan and Karampilly Kurup in Malabar. On that day the eastern portico of the temple is decorated by hanging strings of flags and festoons. (INDUCHUDAN 1969, 104)<sup>6</sup>

This occurs on the days of the *avittam* and *catayam* stars, days seven and six in the countdown before *bharani*.

Tarabout quotes several descriptions of the devotees and their activities by Malayali scholars. The devotees constituted an army of the goddess carrying batons or sticks and singing obscene songs as they marched toward the temple. The Bharani Festival was a time of the overturning of the ordinary social order and behavioral codes. No one was spared from the insults and direct affronts of the dancing devotees in procession, but the festival context protected the pilgrims from prosecution.

All along the way and certainly in the environs of the temple the pilgrims could, with complete impunity, insult and ridicule prominent people and women. (TARABOUT 1986, 374)

Besides the open sexuality and humor of the ridiculing, the atmosphere was charged with a kind of violence that would culminate in the bloody sacrifice of cocks. The devotees marched and danced holding sticks

that Tarabout, quoting Thurston at the turn of the century, says were associated with rites involving death and first menstruation.

The use of two short sticks recurs in different rituals of Kerala in a violent context: among the Parayans they are used to slay a victim (THURSTON 1906, VI, 127), to carry a baby who then dies (report collected at Kalampu shrine); in the Palghat area they are struck together during the processional that returns a young girl home after the (ritual) bath that concludes her first menstruation (information communicated by A. Leday). (TARABOUT 1986, 374)

I observed the groups of devotees beating their sticks while dancing and singing as they moved down the main street of Kodungallur. Some in these groups carried the large sickle-tipped sword, which they shook in the air.

On Kumbham *rēvati* and Minam *aśvati* (the last day of Kumbham and first day of Minam), devotees from the Izhava caste throw offerings (turmeric packets, coconuts, coins, live chickens) over the walls of the temple courtyard. The Pulaya caste then, traditionally, begins their sacrifice of cocks at a spot a “furlong” from the east door of the temple. This continues to the following day: Minam Bharani. I did not see the sacrificing of any chickens nor any blood, but early accounts of sacrifices describe copious amounts of blood in the temple, to the extent that it was covered.<sup>7</sup> While I saw no chicken blood, I did witness the throwing of numerous live chickens over the temple wall.

On *aśvati*, the day before Bharani, the *aṭikaḷ* performs the ritual act of smearing the main icon of Bhagavati with sandalwood paste, a rite that lasted from noon to three. Although the *aṭikaḷ*s administer the shrine and hire the brahmin *pūjāris* (officiants), because they themselves are non-Brahmins, they are permitted to perform few rituals in the temple, except at Bharani. While the smearing of the icon is taking place, the doors of the sanctum are closed. When the *aṭikaḷ* is finished everyone must leave the shrine building and the doors are locked. The nature of the participants allowed in during the *aṭikaḷ*'s ceremony and the exact form of the rituals they engage in is unclear.

Late that morning, the day before *bharani*, a great crowd gathers for the ceremony on the east portico: the opening of the umbrella, the polluting of the temple, and the devotees' frantic race around the shrine building with swords and sticks in the air. The Chief of Kodungallur arrives and sits in the large chair provided for him. As he opens the red umbrella, a group of devotees led by the head of an important Araya fishing clan approaches the temple building and deliberately and

demonstratively pollutes it by approach and touch. From that moment the mass of Izhava, Araya, Pulaya and other devotees is released to race around the building three times and perform their acts of self-mortification. These activities near the eastern doorway of the *śrikōvil* are most likely timed with the rituals going on inside the building, such as the smearing of the icon with sandal paste. But, as Induchudan reports, the *aṭikaḷs* protect their tradition and will not divulge information on their performances before the goddess while the doors of the shrine building are closed.<sup>8</sup> At 3 A.M. on Bharani day, twelve hours after the shrine building was locked, the *aṭikaḷ* reenters the building and serves the goddess a sweet pudding. At 6 A.M. more cocks are traditionally sacrificed, this time at the western door of the temple. The temple receives an additional act of pollution by the touch of the Palakkal Velan (a desecrating priest), and devotees of most levels of society throw offerings over the walls simultaneously. At the north door to the shrine building a lamp is lit to represent the victory of Bhadrakali over Darukan. The next day, Karttika, the temple is swept out, purified, and reconsecrated by Nambudri priests, who in this way reestablish liturgical control. They perform *pūjās* every morning of the following week behind closed doors. On the seventh day, Minam Puyam, the doors are reopened.

The interpretations of the closing of the temple for a week vary, but they hinge on the state of the goddess. One devotee at a parallel Bhagavati celebration at an Araya Bhagavati temple told me the doors are closed because the goddess needs to “rest” after the excitement of the festival. She is said to become very agitated during the festival. Tarabout quotes Gopal Panikkar that Bharani is a time when the temple is taken over by “countless demons” who submit it to “the worst possible depredations” and that the goddess is a “virgin . . . whom no quantity of blood will satisfy” (TARABOUT 1986, 377). The devotees, as demons, have agitated her, egged her on, and caused her to get angry or aroused, a condition for which the appeasement of the sacrifice is necessary. The return to the daily Brahmin-led *pūjās* to calm the goddess is preceded by a week of recuperation or denial. Tarabout concludes it is a time of fasting.

It is only on the seventh day, on *puyam*, that the temple is reopened and the normal rites resume. This period [the previous week] is said to represent a time of fasting of the goddess. (TARABOUT 1986, 376)

The charge of depredation and “scandalizing” of the goddess

arises out of the devotees' singing, dancing, and insulting language. Induchudan, who grew up in Kodungallur, remembers the behavior of earlier devotees and the emphasis on sexual expression.

The most controversial and widely discussed ritual of Bharani has been the singing of obscene sexual songs and slogans by the pilgrims. These describe the sexual organs of the male and female and narrate the sexual act in the most naked manner. They start singing all along the way and in the temple premises, though not inside the temple [*śrikōvil*]. There are usually men and women, of all ages, among the pilgrims, though the female sex may be less in proportion. I have not come across any records which may show that there had been any sexual orgy. The songs may or may not have religious significance. Some of them may be about Kali; others may be just simple sex. . . . The use of liquor is also very popular among these pilgrims. . . . I remember in my boyhood days, if a group of pilgrims came across a lady on the way, they chant to her these songs or shout at her any sexual slogans. . . . Till about a quarter of a century back, I have seen the chief of Kodungallur sitting at the eastern door of the temple in the portico, and a group of selected singers from among the pilgrims chanting these songs before the chief. When the pilgrims sing they move their body in a rhythm. Sometimes, they imitate movements of sexual union. (INDUCHUDAN 1969, 128–29)

I can verify personally Induchudan's comment that the devotees serenade women visitors to the festival.

#### THE CONTROVERSY

In present-day Kerala, the controversy surrounding the ritual practices and attitudes exhibited in the Bharani Festival is deeply felt by many Hindus. Demonstrators *against* the festival have mounted campaigns for years in an effort to have them banned. They march in the streets with banners in direct opposition to the dancing devotees. Each year the confrontation is reported in the newspapers and a dialogue takes place in the letters-to-the-editor section. The task of keeping the demonstrators and worshippers apart in the street falls to the local police. The objections of the demonstrators center on the barrage of insults directed at the goddess, the obscene songs, the wild, confrontational attitude of worshippers, and the ceremonial pollution of the shrine. The worshippers, on the other hand, argue that the goddess finds their behavior pleasing and stimulating: she likes it. The long-

lived tradition they are following glorifies her sexuality. If she is not feted and satisfied, disasters, such as smallpox, may result.

The description below by L. K. Anantha Krishna Iyer reveals that the acts of earlier devotees in the late nineteenth century were much more colorful. Present behavior is much toned down.

A grand festival, called Kumbhom Bharani (cock festival), is held in the middle of March, when the Nairs and low caste men offer up cocks to Bhagavathi beseeching immunity from diseases during the succeeding year. In fact, people from all parts of Malabar, Cochin, and Travancore attend the festival, and the whole country near the lines of marching rings with shouts of “*nada nada* (walk, walk, or march)” of the pilgrims to Cranganore, her holy residence. In their passage up to the shrine, the cry of “*nada nada*” is varied by terms of unmeasured abuse at this goddess. The abusive language, it is believed, is acceptable to her and, on arrival at the shrine they desecrate it in every conceivable manner on the belief that this too is acceptable. They throw stones and filth, howling volleys of opprobrium at her shrine. The chief of the Araya caste, Koolimuttath Arayan, has the privilege of being the first to be present on the occasion. (IYER 1985 (1906), 238)

I was told by a well-educated member of the Araya community who was adamantly opposed to the festival that worshippers threw feces and dead animals into the temple and took part in orgiastic activities. I saw none of this behavior in March 1990 and attribute some of the exaggerated nature of the descriptions to the conflicting approaches to the goddess. The ritual forms of the Bharani Festival are antithetical to Brahminical practices and involve ritual specialists, such as the *aṭikaḷ* and *veḷiccappāṭu*, who are members of other sectors of the society.<sup>9</sup>

The behaviors, understanding of the goddess, and role of devotees in the ritual life of the community differ significantly. The Bharani Festival is a context in which a different set of ritual specialists becomes the central actors. They share and transmit a tradition of songs to the goddess, specific practices, a set of ritual symbols, and a performance expertise grounded in trance. The success of the festival demonstrates the large size of the clientele who choose to approach the goddess in this way and use the services of the oracles of the goddess, the *veḷiccappāṭus*.

Many of the *veḷiccappāṭus*, who form a loose organization of shamans or oracles, are women and, as special initiates of the goddess,

serve as her spokespersons to reassure, chastise, or predict the future for clients. Some have an intense personal charisma and are able to heal and prophesy through inspired contact with the goddess. They are considered capable in varying degrees of reading her mood and desires and of channeling her ability to rid an environment of detrimental or inauspicious forces. The goddess is believed to cause smallpox when unhappy, and a family may call a *veliccappātu* to prevent or cure this dread disease. A *veliccappātu* is present at most ceremonies of worship to Bhagavati, whether in permanent temples or in temporary outdoor *pantals* like those traditionally constructed for the *tāliket-tukalyānam*, a rite of maturation and signal of status change for young females widely practiced in Malabar in the past.

Hundreds of *veliccappātanmar* come to the Bharani Festival, many from Tamil-speaking areas. They travel in small groups of five to eight, usually under the leadership of a guru who trains them and guides their trances and relationship with the goddess's sword and other ritual symbols, such as the thick metal anklets tied around their legs. I saw the leader of one group taking the sword out of an entranced woman's hand as he calmed her. They stand out vividly in their striking red costumes and jingling bells on belts and swords. They dance, sing, and beat drums in a hypnotic rhythm. I observed more than one *veliccappātu* on the north portico of the shrine facing the sanctum of the goddess and dancing. They hopped and swayed back and forth with eyes closed, head tilted forward, rotating the upheld sword in hand, the long dramatic black hair swirling around the head. They seemed to be generating a trance experience and sometimes cut themselves with the sword. At other times, they sat and conversed in groups or walked in a very deliberate gait across the shrine grounds, tinkling all the while.

Because of their relationship with the goddess, the *veliccappātanmar* are attributed a certain authority among the devotees and were in charge of restraining the crowd before this large group dashed around the shrine with their sticks and swords in the air. The *veliccappātanmar* also preserve and perform the lewd songs, "insult" the goddess and allegedly take part in orgiastic rites in worship of Bhagavati at the Bharani Festival. One of their primary objectives in making the pilgrimage to the Sri Kurumba Kavu is to have the power of their ritual swords recharged by contact with the goddess.

#### ANALYSIS

Interpreting the meaning of the festival, the nature of its ritual specialists, and the *kāvu tīṅṅal* (shrine pollution) involves complex questions

that can be approached from many perspectives that emphasize historical background, belief systems, ritual process, and/or social organization. For instance, the message of polluting the *kāvu* involves psychological, social, and ritual referents. At one level, the *tīṅṅal* (pollution) is an action of central importance in the temporal unfolding of the festival. At another it manifests the conceptualization of states of purity and impurity, as well as pure and impure persons. At a third level, which will be discussed below, the act of polluting the temple may metaphorically enact a process of penetrating the goddess's body. Why the Araya chieftain and the Palakkal Velan reserve the right to lead the *tīṅṅal* is unknown. The festival opens with the goldsmith circumambulating the *śrikōvil* and ringing a bell, but, as Induchudan reports, the Nambudri priests on that first occasion of pollution continue with their normal duties. It is not until the last week of the festival, seven days before *bharani*, that the pollution is more extreme and the non-Brahman *aṭikal* performs his rites at the *garbhagṛham* (sanctum sanctorum). During that week the temple grounds abound with devotees, many of whom are *veliccappāṭus*.

Demonstrators opposed to the deliberate act of pollution present an argument based on socio-ritual grounds: it perpetuates a way of thinking that forbade low castes, because of their innate impurity, to enter the temple or use the adjacent streets. With the passing of the Temple Entry Act in 1936 and recent changes in social relationships, such rites, which are felt to force the issue of caste prohibitions, should be obsolete. In other words, there is no longer a "pollutability" by low-caste approach; by law, all worshippers should be allowed equal access to the goddess.

The devotees respond to this denial of their claim to pollute by saying that the Nambudri priests do not speak for them nor perform rites that express *their* understanding of and relationship with the goddess. They require an autonomy from Nambudri ritual paradigms. The self-evaluation expressed in the act preserves for worshippers a categorical differentiation and claims for them a direct, unmediated relationship with the goddess. Or the relationship is mediated by a ritual specialist that circumvents Brahminical control of the ritual context. The descent into chaos or takeover by demons, as the festival is described by some, provides for a reversal of status. Devotees join together in overturning ordinary ritual forms and deferential behavior, insulting community leaders and women with impunity. They are criticized, but not prosecuted.

If the polluting of the temple is considered solely from the perspective of caste relationships and not from the internal logic of ritual,

perhaps the “pollutingness” claimed by low-caste devotees is a parody. The devotees are reflecting in their behavior an opinion that supposedly no longer exists, but whose hidden influence needs to be expressed. For some devotees, surrendering to the idea of being polluting may reinforce the desire to be a sacrifice to the goddess. To be considered polluting or act in a polluting way from a Tantric perspective is a form of empowerment. Devotees take part in a ritual counter-structure in which an alternate view of the goddess defines the reality. Their offering of themselves by blood or vow gives them the benefit of the goddess’s *śakti* and protection and appears to be a subjugation to her. Perhaps the enactment of pollution preserves this power and subjugation at the level of social structure and revitalizes the devotees during the festival. Van Gennep’s and V. Turner’s model of ritual process and structure/antistructure may help to clarify this dynamic more fully, but further study of the festivals is required if the application of the ideas are to be more than superficial.

A historical and sect-based theory that attempts to explain the rite of polluting of the temple holds that originally Sri Kurumba Kavū was the shrine of a Jain goddess or a Buddhist *vihāra* for nuns (see OBEYSEKERE 1984, 518–20). The Chera emperors, whose capital was at Vanji, probably near or at Kodungallur,<sup>10</sup> protected and supported Jain and Buddhist communities. The Buddhists flourished in Kerala during the fourth to the eighth centuries C.E. (OBEYSEKERE 1984, 517). At the end of this period, with the migrations of groups of Brahmin settlers into Kerala, the religious climate began to change. The caste system as defined by southern Indian Brahminism was gradually extended over the diverse residents, altering the social, ritual, and political positions of the different segments of the population.<sup>11</sup> By the twelfth century Buddhism had virtually disappeared and the cult of the goddess Kālī was in the ascendent. This growth led to the reconsecration of Jain and Buddhist sanctuaries as Bhagavati temples (INDUCHUDAN 1969, 200–201). In order to get the nuns to leave their residence at Kodungallur, low-caste devotees of Bhagavati were persuaded to throw animals and filth into the sanctuary (INDUCHUDAN 1969, 39). It was then rededicated to Bhadrakālī and lost its institutional association with the Jains or Buddhists and with the Jain goddess Kannakī of the fourth-century epic *Shilappadikaram* [The affair of the anket]. The worship of Kannakī was absorbed into the Kālī cult, and the polluting of the temple during Bharani commemorates the original confrontation and transfer of liturgical control.

A third explanation of the *kāvū tīṇṭal* and the *veḷiccappāṭanmar* deemphasizes caste level and sect *per se* and deals with beliefs about

the nature of the goddess and the ritual interaction with her. Opponents of the festival activities object vehemently to the style and substance of the worship, to the use of obscene lyrics, the chaotic dancing, and the self-mutilation that the devotees say the goddess needs and wants. While a comprehensive ritual analysis of the festival requires further study, it is possible to raise questions and present general statements about the festival's complex of traditions, ritual specialists, and mythologies.

At Sri Kurumba Kavu, two narrative traditions depicting the life and characteristics of a goddess exist side by side. One of these goddesses is Bhadrakali. Her icon in the main sanctum receives Brahminic worship and her myth is recited in songs. These hymns praise the goddess for her victory over Darukan, for his decapitation, and for placing his head on Mt. Kailasa near her father Śiva. Another corpus of songs at Sri Kurumba Kavu concerns the heroine/goddess Kannaki of the epic *Shilappadikaram*. The songs that extol Kannaki's virtues are used as evidence to identify Sri Kurumba Kavu as the very shrine described in the ancient Tamil work that was built by the Chera king Sengottuvan to honor Kannaki. This identification also proves that the original shrine was a Jain sanctuary. As *bhagavatis*, Kannaki and Kali share some traits and are assimilated together at Sri Kurumba Kavu, but separate traditions also have been preserved in the mythologies and ritual practices.

INDUCHUDAN (1969) presents the theory that the true focus of the Bharani Festival is Kannaki and that the worship of Kali is suspended. He concludes that Kannaki's mortal remains lie in the unopened stone tomb (the "secret chamber") that abuts the eastern side of the inner sanctum. During the Bharani Festival a red cloth, one of the goddess's symbols worn by devotees and given in offering to the goddess, is hung on the stone wall of the chamber between the tomb and the Kali sanctum. An underground tunnel extends from the chamber out under the east portico and surfaces on the eastern side of the shrine grounds. A proscription protects this tunnel, closed and no longer in use: anyone looking into it will go blind.

Induchudan theorizes that at one time the tunnel was a conduit for neophytes initiated into worship of the goddess. In this initiation they entered into her courtyard, died, and emerged ritually "reborn" after transiting through the tunnel (INDUCHUDAN 1969, 118). The elderly *aṭikal* told Induchudan that in the past the *aṭikal*s entered the courtyard through the passage to perform services in the chamber, until it was sealed because of the danger of a cave-in. "When this practice ceased due to the risk of walking through the passage, services

came to be done through the eastern door. There were two houses of Atikals called Kunnath madhom and Neelath madhom. . . . Both these houses were traditionally located around the mouth of the underground passage" (INDUCHUDAN 1969, 119). The opening of the umbrella, the *kāvu tīṅṅal*, and the beginning and end of the frenzied run take place on the eastern portico, normally not used, precisely because worship is directed at Kannaki *devi*, whose remains rest inside the east door.

Induchudan derives the name of the goddess, Kurumba, from a shortening of *cilambu*, anklet, one of the key elements in the story of the killing and decapitation of Kannaki's husband Kovalan, and an important symbol in the costume of the *veliccappātu*. The name of the temple at Kodungallur, the Sri Kurumba Kavū, means "the sanctuary of the lady of the anklet," who is Kannaki.

However, Kannaki's story lacks the sword with a crescent tip, another important symbol carried by the *veliccappātu*. The sword is an emblem of Kali. Kannaki destroys the city Madurai by fire. In the *Shilappadikaram*, she tears off her left breast (seat of a woman's *śakti* [power]) and throws it at the city, burning it to the ground. The city's patron goddess, the virgin warrior Minaksi, was also said to have lost a breast, but it was an extra one that disappeared when she saw her husband Śiva on the battlefield. The folklorist Chummar Choondal, in his discussion of variations of the Kannaki cult in Kerala, reports that the goddess in rural north Kerala is called *ottamulachi* (the one with one breast) and *ottappalli* (the one with one tooth).

The image of ottamulachi is placed outside the temple of Kodungallur. . . . It is interesting to note that women folk among the pilgrims, remove their bodices and expose their naked breasts when they start singing and dancing. (CHOONDAL 1978, 28)

More details are needed to interpret the ritual use of the one-breasted icon. Do the *veliccappātus* treat it in a special way? Is this a cult of the breast, the tooth, or both? In the past the costume of women in Kerala consisted of a wrapped skirt and bare breasts. The privilege of wearing a blouse to cover the breasts was formerly denied low-caste women. It is understandable that the social pressure on the Bharani Festival has acted to curtail the bare-breasted dancing described above.

The icon of the goddess in the sanctum at Sri Kurumba Kavū is not Kannaki, but Bhadrakali. It is quite recent (nineteenth-century) and made of wood, while the one consecrated by Sengottuvan in the fourth century was described in the *Shilappadikaram* as of Himalayan

stone. Since the shrine structure is wood and has been burned several times in political conflicts, and the general area around Kodungallur is subject to flooding and alluvial deposits by the Periyar River, the history of the founding of the shrine and its original icons and building are lost. If there is an ancient icon of the goddess Kannaki it is not in the inner sanctum today. The present icon may represent the assimilation between the goddesses rather than a preservation of the distinctions between the traditions.

#### CONNECTIONS OUTSIDE THE SUBCONTINENT

G. Obeyesekere's comprehensive work on the Pattini cult describes in detail the worship of this goddess in southeast Sri Lanka and argues cogently that Kannaki/Pattini, as a goddess type, may have her origins in the worship of the *mater dolorosa* of Mesopotamia, the grain mother celebrated for thousands of years in the orgiastic, sacrificial rites of initiated devotees (OBEYSEKERE 1984, 530-34). An analysis and comparison of the use of symbols, kinds of ritual logic, and forms of initiation of the Kannaki cult and the *dea syria* or *mater dolorosa* would be fascinating and informative, but it is beyond the scope of this paper. Tracing the spread of a uniform cult of the "sorrowing mother" and the death of her son/spouse from point A to point B is historically problematic and an anthropologically formidable task. The mystery cults were diverse, popular, and secretive. For present purposes, rather than appeal to a theory of diffusion that identifies a single, verifiable source and recipient of beliefs and practices, this paper argues only that the opportunity and means for transmission had been present for centuries and that ritual forms described for some of the mystery cults of the ancient Near East appear similar to those observed during the Bharani Festival. The history of the cult of Sri Kurumba may thus be involved in the spread and development of the "mystery cults" of the Greco-Roman Near East, and a consideration of these cults may shed light on the current practices in Kodungallur and may "flesh out" the extinct practices of the mystery cults.

The ports of Malabar, source of the pepper, pearls, and wood sought by Rome, were heavily visited by Greco-Roman, Jewish, and Arab merchants. Copper plates attest to the bequests of land and tax-free status given to foreign trading diasporas living in Kerala, specifically at Kodungallur (or Muziris as it was known to the Greeks). Not only were the trade routes heavily trafficked, but immigrant trading populations also resided on Kerala soil. Trade routes, networks of settlements, and the movement of populations have been a significant means of transmitting and establishing new religious practices

in most religious traditions, because these populations bring with them their cults and practices into the new environment. In the early centuries of the Christian era Syrian Christianity was introduced into Malabar, an environment which already supported Buddhist, Jain, Jewish, Hindu, and perhaps other religious communities.

The links with Syria and the Hellenistic world may have been the conduit for the transmission of the worship of the mystery cult goddess into Kerala. Hourani, in his study of Arab seafaring in the ancient period, identifies two main trade routes across the Arabian Sea to the Mediterranean: one route followed the Red Sea and then continued overland to the Nile and downriver to Alexandria; the other went by way of the Persian Gulf, up the Euphrates, and overland along the Silk Route in Syria, where Aramaic and other forms of Syriac were the *lingua franca* (HOURANI 1951, 28–29). Today Aramaic remains the liturgical language of the large, wealthy Syrian Christian population of Kerala.

The myths of the “pagan” grain mother cults, the *dea syria*, describe the goddess’s bitter grieving for her mutilated dead son/lover, whom she mourned though he had acted with infidelity or unrighteousness towards her (OBEYSEKERE 1984, 533–34). Her sorrow followed their passion and his subsequent sexual transgression. Her vengeful wrath then caused his mutilation and death. The cultic paradigm tied the fertility of the land and the “mysterious” growth of the grain to the sacrifice of his body (penis) and to the goddess’s grieving. The early cults centered on the goddess as the source of fertility, and her male consort seems to have taken a secondary, if essential, role. Devotees of the cult of the Syrian goddess reenacted the cycle of death, mourning, and renewed growth through sacrificial rituals, ecstatic dancing, and dedication to the goddess. The story of Kannaki, too, paints her as a wronged, sorrowful, and ultimately vengeful figure who is deified and worshipped. But the story neither of Kannaki nor of Kali appears to be overtly tied to fertility exactly as it is expressed in the Syrian example. Still, as will be demonstrated later, the development and enhancement of Kannaki’s sexuality is central to the Bharani Festival and shares the same relationship between violent death, sexuality, and new life.

One of the most important of the Asian mystery cults, whose rites were eventually supported by the imperial government of Rome as a state cult, was the cult of the Phrygian goddess Cybele (pronounced ku-be-le). The emperor Augustus celebrated the festival of this imported goddess at her temple on the Palatine for the protection of the empire. Both men and women became priests in the cult of Cybele

and her consort Attis. In the later Cybele/Attis cult the male priests were called *galli* and their emblem was the cock (*gallus*). The cock is a common sacrificial animal and the main offering at the Bharani Festival. Painted cock statues surmount pillars at the gateways to the Sri Kurumba shrine.

The male priest of Cybele, the *gallus*, dressed as a woman, carried a stick or a shepherd's crook, and in dedication to the goddess and in replication of the goddess's lover Attis, was expected to emasculate himself with a sickle-shaped blade and offer up his *vires* to the goddess (GASPARRO 1985). The Roman authorities were horrified by this self-emasculation and made it illegal (VERMASEREN 1977, 96). The sickle-shaped blade atop a straight sword is the symbolic weapon of the *veliccappātu* at Kodungallur, but it is not known whether it is ever used for castration. *Veliccappāṭus* also dress as females and traditionally offer cocks in sacrifice to the goddess. In the mythological account of the goddess Bhadrakali's victory, she kills and decapitates a bull. Gruesome images of Kāli depict her with blood dripping from her lips and fangs.

Classical writers of the Hellenistic period describe the ecstatic dancing of Cybele's devotees and the ritual of the *taurobolium*, a shower of warm blood from a dying bull suspended on a grating over the worshipper who was stationed in a pit below (VERMASEREN 1977, 101-107). During the annual celebration of Cybele in March, devotees sought divine possession by the goddess and took part in secret initiation rites (GASPARRO 1985, 86). They walked in processions carrying a tray or vessel with a lighted lamp to the initiation and took part in a "mystical meal" in which they ate with the goddess in an intimate familiarity. The initiates entered into a special chamber, described as a "nuptial" chamber or a "descent into the ground," from which they emerged united with the goddess (GASPARRO 1985, 87).

The *veliccappāṭus* also take part in initiation, but little is known of the specific ritual form. Induchudan described the use of the subterranean passage at Sri Kurumba Kavu in the symbolic death and rebirth of priests of the goddess Kannaki. The carrying of the lighted lamp in a tray sounds very much like the *tālappoli*, a procession of young women carrying trays of offerings that is frequently a part of Bhagavati worship in Kerala. Induchudan noted that the *tālappoli* is one of the few ritual practices of Kāli worship that is part of the Bharani Festival (INDUCHUDAN 1969, 216). Further study of the rituals of the Bharani Festival and its specialists is needed before seeking a direct relationship with the Cybele cult or other ecstatic cults of the ancient Near East. They may be cognate developments of older grain-mother ritual com-

plexes involving the Indus, Nile, or Mesopotamian civilizations. It is certain, however, that the power of the goddess and the ritual offering of blood by devotees are closely linked to agriculture.

The cults of Cybele, Orpheus, or other deities were called "mystery" cults not only because knowledge of rites was revealed only to initiates, but also because of the mystery that produced the growth of grain. Scholars have identified Cybele with the early Anatolian mother goddess Kubaba and the exaggerated full-breasted and wide-hipped female icons that express abundant fertility. Perhaps it was assumed that menstrual blood and the blood of childbirth shed by women had to be given back for fertility to continue.

Kubaba was called "the mountain one" who roamed the forests. She was assimilated into the Greek-speaking world as "Cybele" and represented iconographically as a seated figure with a veil over her head and a young lion on her lap. Later she was absorbed into the Roman pantheon and shown riding a lion or on a throne with lions to the sides. Attis, her unfortunate lover, eventually came to be worshipped separately and was depicted as a shepherd with a crook (the sickle shape?), a cock at his feet, and a conical soft hat. His presence in the Cybele sanctuary was represented by the bough of a tree, especially a pine branch, an attribute of the castrated Attis and symbol of eternal life. An inscription near Rome, dated A. D. 147, mentions a College of Dendrophori (tree-bearers) who maintained a sacred forest of pine trees as a sanctuary to Cybele and Attis (VERMASEREN 1977, 62). A similar concept of the sacred glade as a repository of the energies of life and fertility is expressed in the term *kāvu* in Malayalam.

To the Roman literati Attis's emasculation was tragic and ludicrous.

Many representations also stress the hermaphrodite character of Attis. . . . The writers [in Rome] have never failed to deride his female characteristics, as the artists often depicted them. By having his clothes blown upwards as by a gust of wind these sculptors and painters very demonstratively and boldly revealed the nature of Attis' sex. Again and again they repeat this sad theme, which never failed to move the people of antiquity with a profound sense of pity and, at the same time, of awe at the dramatic love that could induce him to such a desperate act. (VERMASEREN 1977, 95)

Slowly a cult centered on Attis developed separately, but originally Cybele was the major focus of the festival. The Bharani Festival,

too, celebrates the goddess, rather than her dead husband, Kovalan. A separate cult centering on Kovalan (as for Attis) does not appear to have developed in Kerala, unless the form it has taken is the worship of the lingam (a phallus separated from a body) as the representation of male life energies. This possibility would tie the Śiva-Śakti model, the ritual and symbolization involving the lingam-yoni, to the ecstatic cults of the Hellenistic Near East.

Although the activities of the Bharani Festival are not a duplication of those in the Cybele cult, the worship at Sri Kurumba Kavu and the institution of the *veliccappātu* bear enough resemblance in a general way to the Cybele cult to indicate that further investigation of this link would be fruitful. The important ritual relationship of the *veliccappātus* with grain, demonstrated in their performance of the offering of the nine grains (*ari eriyuka*) to the goddess (CHOONDAL 1978, 30), must be further studied. I witnessed this rite at another Bhagavati festival but did not see it at Kodungallur. The *veliccappātu* used the sickle end of his sword to scoop a pile of mixed grains out of a bucket and pour it into the hands of a devotee. This was repeated three times as the devotee tossed the handfuls of grain toward the goddess's icon. The *pallival* (sword) and sticks carried by the *veliccappātus* and devotees resemble the sickle, the shepherd's crook, or stick that Attis holds in sculptures and paintings. The annual festivals of both goddesses are (were) held in March–April and are (were) related to a dry period before the engendering of agricultural life at the coming of the monsoon and the planting of the first rice crop. The sexual songs sung to the goddess at Kodungallur may share the erotic nature of those of the *dea syria* or *magna mater* tradition. These songs identify the plowing of the earth and the planting of the seed with the union of the goddess and her lover. The act of love between the anthropomorphic bodies of the deities (or goddess and human) is a metaphor for the fecundation and fertilization of the soil. The amorous and demanding nature of the Mesopotamian fertility goddess is described vividly in the songs.<sup>12</sup>

#### THE GODDESS AND THE *TĀLIKEṬṬUKĀLYAṆAM*

The Bharani Festival is celebrated in Kerala, and the interpretation of its ritual logic, the activities of devotees, and the nature of the goddess must be understood within Dravidian beliefs and practices. The goddess is known as both benevolent and violent. Rituals of placation are needed to “harness” her *śakti* for procreation and protection. Her potential for destruction must be averted by sacrifice (blood for blood). One way her *śakti* is understood is as the vivifier of the natural environ-

ment, the earth, and its cycle of productive and unproductive stages, and as heat. In March, as the earth begins to dry up and become hot, the Bharani Festival articulates through ritual this retractile phase, the dying of vegetation, and prepares the source of life for entering a new phase of future fecundity. In March the anthropomorphized goddess is in danger of overheating, of becoming angry, so devotees cool her down and appease her with sacrifices. More than that, the *veliccappāṭu* goes through the process with her, knows her sorrow (her husband Kovalan is dead), becomes her sacrifice, and then lives in identification with her as her oracle. Other devotees, who are not *veliccappāṭus*, seek her protection from disease, especially smallpox, thought to be caused by her anger and state of being "overheated."

At this hot, dry time of year, the goddess also symbolizes the incipient "heat" (desire) of a young virgin who has a budding, yet rapacious, sexuality. The danger of her sexual desire and the challenge of transforming the virgin into docile wife and mother is well known in South Indian ritual and myth.<sup>13</sup> In Madurai the warrior goddess Minakshi is annually wedded to Lord Sundaresvara (Śiva) in a ritual that expresses the change in her status from independent goddess to consort as "marriage."<sup>14</sup> The Cittirai Festival occurs at approximately the same time of the year as the Bharani Festival, at the beginning of the hot, dry season, but the Bharani Festival explains the fulfillment of the goddess in a different way from that of wedding the goddess to Śiva.

The ceremony of the *kāvu tīṇṭal* at Kodungallur treats the goddess as a girl who is undergoing her first union through the rite of the *tāliketṭukalyāṇam*.<sup>15</sup> She is to be titillated, praised, and then "polluted" by being ritually joined with a special partner, just as young female members of many caste communities had been until this century. But, the *tāliketṭukalyāṇam*, essential for Malayali girls of most caste communities on the threat of severe punishment to the families, probably did not inaugurate a girl's actual sexual relations nor did it create an enduring marriage that would produce children. It celebrated her as a source of power and life and claimed her sexual potential for the lineage. The ritual focussed on the developmental progression of the girl and her identity as a force that had to be reckoned with before she reached puberty, as well as assuring the future of the lineage as a whole. The union took place with a special one-time partner from a lineage (*enangan*) bonded with the girl's family for the purpose of the *tāliketṭukalyāṇam* relationships.

The worship of Bhagavati and the building of a temporary *kāvu* to her was part of the traditional *tāliketṭukalyāṇam* ceremony. The

young girl sat on a plank within the *pantal* or temporary *kāvu* and was treated as a living representation of the goddess, receiving offerings and being feted by songs. The male partner, sometimes dressed as a warrior and carrying a sword, was brought to her and given gifts. The couple was secluded for several days in the girl's house, ate a special meal, and then went through a purifying bath.<sup>16</sup> From the ceremony onward, the girl was considered a reproducer of the matrilineage and, when physically ready, could take *sambandham* partners (the partners would who produce children and bring her to a new status in having replaced herself in the lineage). The *tālikeṭṭukalyānam* enacted the "polluting" of the girl and celebrated her sexuality and new role; not as "wife," however, but as one who has the power to create and withhold life. I think the distinction in ways of thinking about the *tāli* necklace-tying ceremony is tremendously important. A *tāli* union may facilitate a young woman's claiming of her *śakti* (power) and role and her control of her own chastity (in the South Indian sense) without expressing it as a dissolution of her life into that of a man's. The *tālikeṭṭukalyānam* verifies her "goddesshood" and tells her she is empowered to choose her sexual destiny and not accept subjugation to a male, whether god or human. As a necessary ceremony it marks and values the young females of the lineage and society as a whole.

The focus of the Bharani Festival and the *kāvu tīṇṭal* may be this kind of statement and transition of the goddess. Her allies are the *veḷiccappāṭanmar*, who, having died as her victims, live in an intimacy with her as her spokespersons. They celebrate the vigor of her sexuality and water it with songs and dancing. All the while, they play to its desire for blood and its power to castrate. If the male *veḷiccappāṭu* followed the patterns of the Cybele cult priest, he might practice self-emasculation, and as Obeyesekere and others have pointed out, cutting the head is a parallel for cutting the penis. In the past, perhaps it was the Araya fisher king or other leaders who performed the role of the *enangan* "groom."

When the devotees pollute the temple they are treating it as the body of the goddess and performing the same necessary act as the pollution of the earth by plow, fertilizer, and seed, and the pollution of the virgin to deposit semen. The male *veḷiccappāṭanmar* negate their contradictory sexuality and dress as females, recognizing the dominance of the goddess's reality over their maleness. They even symbolically castrate themselves by cutting and drawing blood from their own heads. The female *veḷiccappāṭu* worships her own nature through the goddess.

As I stood there in the midst of the racing devotees, and observed

the blood flow on the face of the man who cut his head with his own ritual weapon and the ecstatic dancing of *veḷiccappāṭanmar*, I realized I was witnessing a living form of worship that may have antecedents in the cult of the grain goddesses thousands of years ago. This was a celebration of femaleness in its own right and of the process of balance, development, discovery, and growth of the energies of life and death. The “conference” of *veḷiccappāṭanmar*, dressed in red skirts, carrying the crescent-tipped ritual weapons, and dancing with the thick metal anklets on their legs and belts of bells around their waists, has been under criticism for many years, perhaps as the mystery cults, too, were opposed. The devotees of Sri Kurumba “realize” the goddess through their “scandalous” songs and dances and the *kāvu tīṇṭal*. They are preparing the future fertility of the land (her body?) by addressing her sexuality directly. From the devotees’ perspective such behavior is required annually to create the necessary relationship with her to ensure her blessings as the procreator of the grain and protector of life. The controversy over the festival reveals fundamental differences in worshippers’ conceptualizations of who the goddess is and how she is to be approached and indicates that “scandal” is in the eye of the beholder.

## NOTES

1. In the story of Little Black Sambo, the main character tricks the tiger into running around a palm tree until he turns into butter.
2. They were calling “mother, mother” to the goddess.
3. Kodungallur (koṭungallūr), called Cranganore by the English, is a small, quiet town near the palm-shaded shores of the Periyar River upstream from where it reaches the Arabian Sea. This sleepy town was probably the site of the trading city of Muziris mentioned by Greek and Roman writers in the first centuries of the Christian era as a bustling port filled with ships carrying all kinds of wares. It is near the spot where legend records that the Apostle Thomas brought Christianity to India. Kodungallur is also the site of what is said to be the oldest Śiva temple and the oldest mosque in India. A fourteenth-century literary work (*Kokasandesam*) describes an active Kali temple at Kodungallur named Sri Kurumba Kavū. Although caches of Roman coins have been found in towns near Kodungallur, archaeological research in the area has not been able to substantiate the existence at Kodungallur of the first-to-third century emporium mentioned by ancient historians. Nor has it been able to verify the site, thought to be at Kodungallur, of the first Chera capital called Vanji, where the Chera king Sengottuvan constructed the shrine to the heroine-goddess Kannaki.
4. *Kāvu*: shrine, see discussion later; *tīṇṭal*: a state of being impure or polluted, such as occurs when a woman is in menses or when a family member has recently died and the rest of the family observes death pollution customs. The ideology of caste characterized Araya, Izhavas, and other low castes as constantly carrying differing levels of impurity. The belief in “distance pollution” forbade lower-caste members from coming within a measured number of feet of the higher castes or using certain

roads or entering the temples or stores where a low-caste person might encounter a high-caste person. The courts would assess damages to be paid to a high-caste person if a low-caste person approached too closely. The rules of pollution in Malabar were very strict, but since the Temple Entry Act of 1936 all castes have been legally permitted to enter temples.

5. *Kāvu* is one of the Malayalam terms for temple, shrine, or sanctuary. Others are *ampalam*, *kṣetram*, and *kōvil*. The first two refer to a consecrated field, ground, or institution and are Sanskrit-based. *Kōvil* is a Dravidian word meaning palace, king's house. G. Tarabout writes that *kōvil* is used for the largest temple complexes, including goddess and Ayyappan shrines. *Kāvu*, he continues, is used for inferior divinities and serpents and originally meant an altar in the forest. A *kāvu* is a glade, grove, forest, or patch of vegetation. The sanctuary of trees on the large Nayar estates (*taravātu*) where the *nāgas* reside and from which they can be drawn out to speak through dancers is called the *sarppakāvu*. *Nāgas* are primordial beings in control of the powers of creation and fertility that often appear as snakes in this world. Stone statuettes of snakes are set before trees all over Kerala in recognition of the *nāgas* and offerings are made to these stone snakes, especially in hopes of increasing fertility. The *pambim tuḷḷal* (snake theater) is a ritual performance tradition in which *nāgas* are called forth and communicated with. The term *kāvu*, thus, has a deep resonance with ancient fertility rituals, the powers of life in vegetation, and with chthonic deities. Deborah Neff writes of the Nayar *kāvu*,

The entire grove is situated in a well-bounded miniature reserve forest within the family compound. The grove is the snake world (*nāgalōka*), or the city of pleasures (*pātāḷa*), ruled by Vasuki the mythological serpent king, and shared with their guardians, the ghosts or spirits (*bhūta*). In the grove are two or more carved stones (*bimham*) representing a single hooded serpent or figures of intertwined snakes, stones depicting figures that are half-human, half-serpent, or they may be simply non-iconographic pyramid shaped stones (*ṣītrakūdam*). (NEFF 1987, 64)

6. A tarvad, or *taravātu*, is the large traditional matrilineal estate of the Nayars.

7. Tarabout again cites Vaidyanathan's and Sreedhara Menon's vivid comments. "In no length of time, the whole of the temple courtyard is converted into one horrible expanse of blood, rendering it too slippery to be safely walked over" (Vaidyanathan) . . . "The whole temple courtyard was a vast expanse of stinking blood." (Menon)" (TARABOUT 1986, 376)

8. Induchudan reports that he tried "persistently" to question the "eldest atikal living," but to no avail. "He is supposed to have taken an oath of secrecy. He could only say in a general manner that the mantras were learnt from the texts of Mezhatol Agnihotra, the eldest son born of the Brahmin philosopher, Vararuchi, and his low-caste paraya wife" (INDUCHUDAN 1969, 119). The rituals appear to have been related to ancestor worship.

9. The *aṭikaḷs* are considered "degraded Brahmins" because they perform certain rituals in some temples that involve the offering of meat and liquor and because they practice sorcery. The *aṭikaḷs* have a much higher ritual status than the *veḷicappāṭanmar*, who are usually from the lowest caste communities.

10. INDUCHUDAN (1969) discusses the theories of different scholars on the historical location of Vanji.

11. See Susan BAYLY's discussion of the relationship of Brahmin settlements to

other populations residing near them in the first chapter of her *Saints, Goddesses, and Kings*.

12. BERGER (1985) and many other scholars have presented translations of the hymns to Hathor-Isis, Inanna, Astarte, and other "love" goddesses.

13. David SHULMAN (1980) discusses the valences of the goddess and the ritual paradigm of her marriage.

14. See Dennis HUDSON's comprehensive description (1982).

15. There is an excellent literature on this important festival. See especially GOUGH 1955.

16. For specific examples of variations in the celebration of the *tālikeṭṭukalyāṇam*, see descriptions in GOUGH 1955 and FULLER 1976.

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