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Ritual Rivalry in Kerala

Gilles Tarabout (CNRS)

Temple festivals in the former Cochin and Travancore States frequently follow a similar pattern in their organisation: specified groups of devotees, sometimes from different castes, aggregate in two factions entering into ritual competition on (or near) the temple precincts. These factions have only a ritual purpose and should not be confused with political factions or other feuds which might occur in villages.

This specific kind of rivalry has to be distinguished from other kinds -quite widespread in South India- where many separate teams or individuals are competing during games, races, or fights.¹ We shall only be concerned with competitions between two factions. Out of some twenty festivals observed in the southern half of Kerala ten featured such a rivalry, most of them in the Trichur-Palghat region (in or near the former Cochin State) but some as far south as the Quilon area in former Travancore.

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After a brief overview of traditional Kerala society, a few festivals will be presented.² The analysis will then try to outline the symbolic world within whose parameters these rituals ought to be understood as well as the sociological terms of their organisation. This in turn suggests a comparison with two neighbouring areas of India (Tulu and Coorg regions of Karnataka State) and with Sri Lanka.

THE SOCIAL SETTING

The rituals we will study are still linked in many respects to a traditional order of society in which caste distinctions are relevant. Festivals with competing factions are especially frequent in temples owned or frequented by upper status castes although other castes might participate. Among castes of high status in Kerala we find the (patrilineal) *nampūtiri*³ Brahmins and the (matrilineal)

1. See for instance: Beals 1964 (hand wrestling in Karnataka); Muthanna 1953: 340, and Srinivas 1952: 198, 240 (stick fencing and competition games in Coorg country); Dumont 1957: 382ff (bull races in Tamil Nadu); Fawcett 1915: 294 (former archery competition in North Kerala); Kareem 1976: 182 (bull fights in Palghat area of Kerala); Sreedhara Menon 1965: 295, 836ff, id. 1975: 152ff, 589ff, Devassy 1966: 165ff, and Kurup 1966: 9ff, 21ff (boat races in central Kerala); Tarabout 1986: 139ff, 334 (competition of processions in South Kerala).

2. Examples are drawn from a field enquiry made in 1980-1983. They can receive only a cursory treatment here (details in Tarabout 1986 -except for an unpublished material: "festival 3"). Field-work was made possible by a grant of the Government of India (Indo-French Cultural Exchange Programme). My thanks are especially due to Prof. V.I. Subramoniam, head of the International School of Dravidian Linguistics, Trivandrum, for providing constant support during my stay, and to all the friends in Kerala whose help was boundless.

nāyar, two well studied groups. In a kind of symbiosis, which included alliances with royal lineages, they exercised ritual, political and economic dominance in the region.⁴

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What should be stressed here is the locality component of the social units of these castes. Take the Nayars for instance. A *taravātu* ("authority in the *taṛa*" -the term will be explained later) is formed of the descendants in the female line of common ancestors (a woman and her brother), and has been variously termed as "lineage" or "clan". But the word means at the same time the dwelling house and its compound, which is not only a garden but also the place where important rituals are performed, including cremation of the dead and -at least in former times- burial of the charred remains. As Melinda A. Moore (1985) has aptly pointed out the house-cum-compound unit is symbolically self-contained, like a small realm. Each Nayar was known after his *taravātu*'s name -therefore also a locality name- which was supposed to be the only one of its kind in the whole of Kerala. The preservation of the *taravātu*'s name along with its agricultural and political rights and its possible ritual privileges was a principal concern, and whenever its perpetuity was at risk adoptions were resorted to -a fact well supported by evidence and already stressed in the XVIth century by the Arab traveller Sheikh Zeen-ud-deen (Rowlandson 1833: 66). Matrilineal filiation was thus completed by adoptions as a means to preserve the system, a fact ignored in most of the literature on kinship in Kerala. The *taravātu* was thus ideally perpetual with indivisible rights (though segmentation did in reality occur), and was deep-rooted in its locality; members who could number more than a hundred in big *taravātus* were under the authority of the senior-most male.

Even though Namputiri Brahmins were patrilineal and had a quite different way of preserving their rights undivided, similar remarks apply to them. Moreover, Namputiris and Nayars could enter (in past times) in hierarchically oriented matrimonial relationships -it was in fact a necessary condition of the equilibrium of the Namputiri customs. Thus both castes (taken as exemplary cases of the higher castes in Kerala) can be viewed as forming two poles in a single system, whose characteristics and dynamics were determined by the interaction between conflicting tendencies: caste endogamy/ across- /p.84/the-caste hypergamy, patrilinearity/ matrilinearity, "blood"/ "soil" references.⁵ These tensions are characteristic of what C. Levi-Strauss (1979; 1984) has described as a society of Houses, referring to a mediaeval feature of European society. In this state of society, political and economic interests, in order to be preserved, tend to alter the traditional reference to blood relationships. This was quite explicitly the case in Kerala regarding both the Nayars and the Namputiris. We shall therefore speak of Houses in their case rather than of "lineages".

In most parts of Kerala settlements are of a dispersed pattern, and typically occupy comparatively highland grounds bordered by the lowland paddy fields (for a comparison with Tamil Nadu, see Mencher 1966b). Namputiri Houses could be found separate or with others in a (dispersed) *grāmam* ("troup", sometimes rendered as "village"). Nayar Houses were as a rule part of a (dispersed) neighbourhood called in the South *kara* ("embankment"), in the North *taṛa* ("ground,

3. Transliterations will follow Malayāḷam spelling whatever the origin of terms. In order to make the text more readable, "*Nāyar*" and "*Nampūtiri*" will be further referred to without diacritical marks. Names of regions, places, and of gods, demons, heroes, have not been transliterated.

4. Literature on the subject is too abundant to be detailed here. A very subjective selection of some of the main studies could include Ananthakrishna Iyer (1969), Dumont (1961), Fuller (1976), Gough (1952, 1961), Mencher (1965, 1966a), Mencher & Goldberg (1967), Moore (1985), Panikkar (1918), Thurston & Rangachari (1965).

5. For an elaboration of these points and a discussion of their effect on the nayar and namputiri kinship terminologies see Tarabout (1991).

platform, altar, embankment"). The importance of the Nayar neighbourhood was formerly far greater than it is nowadays -and has been somewhat underrated by social anthropologists. The neighbourhood used to be the place where local Nayar affairs were discussed in an assembly of the different Houses, and where the youth was trained in martial arts (Nayars were reputed for their fighting ability). It is used today as an organisational basis for the socio-politically powerful Nayar Service Society and is still the place where social and ritual cooperation is extended (for instance during funerals), and where issues of local life are regulated (caste authorisation for weddings, registration of births). Each neighbourhood is known by a name and we shall see participants in festivals eager to defend that name. Neighbourhoods and settlements of other castes were under the authority of a chief of *dēśam* (sometimes rendered as "village"), who was the leader of the local militia /p.85/ and himself owed allegiance to a regional (*nāṭu*) ruler. In some places Houses still retain these titles which can still have a ritual relevance, but their power belongs to a bygone age.

THE SACRIFICE OF BATTLE

The martial tradition of the Nayars is well known. One should not forget, however, that such a tradition was widespread among many other communities in Kerala: among Brahmins (one subcaste) as well as castes of lesser status, and among Muslims and Christians. In times of peace fights were regularly organised by chieftains in order to keep up the martial spirit of their men. They have been described from the XVIth century. There were also ritual occasions for such armed (and bloody) contests, which were extant until the XIXth century (Thurston & Rangachari 1965: II-60). Nowadays sham fights are still regularly held in many places, but in a more friendly way. Let us mention two occurrences.

The festival of *ōṇam* in the solar month of *cinnam* (mid-August, mid-September), the first month of the Malayalam calendar, is an occasion of general rejoicing, connected according to popular Hindu belief to the celebration of the annual return of the "good king" Mahabali. People will discard used objects and buy new ones, they will receive and offer gifts, and many will practice games. In some "villages" (for instance in Palghat district) one of these games is the *ōṇattallu* ("*ōṇam*'s blows"), a kind of boxing which includes slapping hands. Two factions are opposed, the actual fights being done by groups or by pairs (Kurup 1966: 22; Marar 1979: 7). It does not occur, as a rule, in connection with the local temple festival, though in some cases the fight might be held on temple grounds (see below the case of Pallassena).

Festival 1

The *ōccira kaḷi*, "play of Occhira [locality]", in Travancore, is a sham fight specifically organised as a temple festival. The temple complex is presided over by Parabrahma, a form of Siva. /p.86/ Three main festivals are celebrated during the year: the *ōccira kaḷi* is the last one and falls on the first two days of the month of *mithunam* (mid-June). Its celebration brings rain, a belief often verified since the time corresponds to the onset of the South-West monsoon in this region. Local newspapers regularly publish pictures of fencers with water up to their knees.

The festival is said to perpetuate the memory of a XVIIIth century battle in which a Raja lost his life. It is held on the "battleground" (*paṭanilam*) of the temple, specifically in a rectangular depression south of the shrines. People from two neighbourhoods,⁶ East and West, trained and led

6. In Occhira festival the term *kara* is not used in its restricted meaning of "Nayar neighbourhood", for nearly all castes, including lesser status ones, participate (a fact noted already a century ago by the Rev. S. Mateer, 1883: 56). For a description of the ritual cycle in Occhira see Devassy 1966: 116-118.

by fencing masters (*kaḷari āśan*, "masters of gymnasium") fight each others with small canes or sticks. Technically it is different from the style of fencing formerly practiced by Nayars (*kaḷarippayarru*, "exercices of gymnasium"), and is more akin to the style termed by the latter as mere "warding off blows" (*aṭittolaṃ*). Fighters will choose opponents of similar dexterity, beginners (often young children) against beginners, experts against experts. Blows are not given at full strength; the winner is the one who makes his opponent fall, or disarms the opponent, whose weapon he then takes. The best fighters can be seen at the end of the game parading with five or six sticks.

Why do wargames have significance in a religious festival? Some interconnected reasons can be put forward: real battle is a sacrifice lead by the king, as is borne out both by Sanskrit speculations (Biardeau 1976: 131ff) and by old Tamil poetry (see Book III of *cilappatikāram*, "The Lay of the Anklet"). In this sacrifice, the king puts his life at risk, loses some of his soldiers (abandoning therefore something of himself), and slays his enemies who can be seen as /p.87/ substitutes for his own life (Biardeau 1976: 134). Through his victory, the king attains pre-eminence, and fame (*śrī*); under his protection, rituals are peacefully performed, rains are abundant, the kingdom obtains prosperity. From a different perspective, J.C. Heesterman (1967) has argued that Vedic ritualists, in order to attain a "pacified" form of ritual, tried to rationalize away an original agonistic logic which still permeates (other) actual religious practices. In a way battles would have been the model for "classic" sacrifices -out of which real human death had to be eliminated. The author points out that in agonistic festivals "the basic pattern...is dualistic, in principle involving two parties: hosts and guests" (ibid., p.27); "the antagonist is not just an enemy, he is related to the conquering party in a dualistic pattern...the two parties, like the Pandavas and the Kauravas in the great epic, needed each other for the agonistic exchange in which life could only be rewon out of the other's death" (ibid., pp.40-41). Thus, playing war during mock-fight competitions is a way of performing sacrifices or at least -since direct rivalry can give place to more "diluted" forms of competition as we shall see- can be ascribed to a "sacrificial logic". Note in the case of *ōccira kaḷi* the reference to a king's death and the belief that the fight brings rains.

There is a cosmic symbolism behind both, a "model" war such as the Mahabharata and many temple festivals: *praḷayam*, the necessary resorption of the worlds between two *kalpam* (cosmic periods).⁷ The presence of this symbolism in festivals where different rituals refer, more or less explicitly, to this articulation between an old age and a new forthcoming (and better) one, helps to mark the cyclical nature of time and the auspiciousness of the coming year. The time of *praḷayam* is a time of wars followed by a conflagration, which itself is followed by a deluge. According to orthodoxy it is also a time where there is no more order in society, where high castes and elders /p.88/ are shown disrespect, where all castes are mixed. In Occhira "deluge" and caste mixing can be considered to allude to this cosmic dimension.

GLORIFICATIONS

Festival 2

The Chinakkattur Puram festival is held in a locality some twenty miles west of Palghat in the center of Kerala. It falls during the month of *kumbham* (mid-February, mid-March) when the

7. For a presentation of the *praḷayam* dimension in a Tamil temple festival, especially during the cart procession, see Reiniche 1979: 102ff.

moon is in line with the *makam* ("sacrifice") and *pūram* ("abundance") constellations: a timing well in agreement with the values previously underlined.

The temple has two main shrines side by side, sacred respectively to Siva and Kali Bhagavati, both facing south. For the ceremonies of this festival, the shrine of Siva is closed. The "trusteeship" belongs to a Namputiri who has to assume all the temple expenses not covered by the devotees' gifts, and who receives a yearly contribution of paddy from surrounding neighbourhoods (collected in the name of the Goddess).

Here also a historic battle is said to be at the origin of the celebrations. Two factions, East ("local") and West ("enemy") compete, each comprising eight Nayar neighbourhoods (*taṛa*). On the *makam* day each neighbourhood brings in procession to the temple esplanade a huge fake stallion of rudimentary shape, its body stuffed with dry leaves, wrapped in clean white cloth, surmounted by a wooden sculpted head; ten to twelve feet in height, it might weigh nearly half a ton. The horses are offered by the Nayars, but bearers can be "any workers" (as a participant put it). When all the horses have reached the foreground of the temple, they are placed in two rows face to face. In the middle of each faction's row, a horse bigger than the others with a palm umbrella attached to its neck is called the "Rājā".

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Low-status castes (washermen, basket or palm-umbrella makers, former agricultural bonded labourers) form their own groups, sometimes preceding closely a *taṛa* horse procession, sometimes coming in completely distinct processions. Some present costumed or masked dances.

Twice during the festival, on the afternoon of *makam* day and on the morning of *pūram* day, there will be a "play of horses" (*kutira kaḷi*): each horse in turn, beginning with the "Rājās" of each faction (West first), is carried in front of the Goddess where it is made to rush to and fro then to jump vertically in movements of growing amplitude up to the point where the horse is thrown up eight or ten feet above the ground and caught when falling down, then thrown up again -to the awe and enthusiasm of spectators. After the first play the horses are put at each end of the esplanade.

Ceruman (agricultural workers of low status), in some eight tumultuous processions, bring fake decorated bulls and cows -smaller than the Nayar horses- and palm-leaf umbrellas with long fringes (the umbrellas are held by both men and women). They make the umbrellas rotate very fast so that the fringes fly horizontally, or they dance around them holding the handle up to the point where some fall on the ground in a swoon. After this play they salute the Goddess in her shrine and go to the eastern or western part of the esplanade where they form three groups (one group in the East, two in the West -following an internal feud).

By the evening, East and West are completed by the coming of deities from other nearby sanctuaries, borne on fully caparisoned elephants and accompanied by big, traditional orchestras. They group at each end of the esplanade, and then proceed in very slow and majestic motion toward the sanctuary to the sound of "war" music. Each orchestra is surrounded by enthusiastic supporters, jumping from excitement and waving their hands high to mark the complex rhythms. In front of the temple, elephants will salute the Goddess /p.90/ (East faction first), make a circumambulation and leave the esplanade. Then, in the middle of the night, two powerful fireworks, each sponsored by a faction, will be set ablaze in turn on each side of the esplanade.

At the end of the festival, when the second and last "play of the horses" is completed in the morning, the horses, stripped of their decoration and their wooden head, will be abandoned at each end of the esplanade; for a fortnight, nobody will dare touch them, for *bhūta*-s, the dangerous and often malevolent spirits which form the Goddess' turbulent army, are playing with them.

By comparison with the fight of *ōccira kālī*, this is a more symbolic way of enacting battles. Blows are replaced by mere competition and offering of emblems, so that an image of confrontation is conveyed through pacific means (but in a different way from what J.C. Heesterman has said about Vedic ritualists). Rivalry between the two parties will be expressed in the size and decoration of the horses, in the strength and abilities of their bearers, in the performance of the "play of horses", in the number and in the size of the elephants, in the richness of their decoration, in the sound-power and rhythmic precision of orchestras, in the demonstrations of enthusiasm from supporters, and in the impressiveness of the fireworks -especially during the final deafening explosions (think again about the *pralāyam*!). Fireworks should not be overlooked as much prestige is attached to them: factions will spend a great deal (Rs 100,000 each in another festival of similar size), so much so that some festivals will be reputed throughout Kerala mainly for this item, thus bringing fame to the temple's locality.

Fame is the only prize the participants may obtain. But it is a powerful force bringing people to the festival.⁸ It is a testimony of /p.91/ the deities' power through a reversal of the current logic: a "powerful place" (deity) attracts a lot of people and has a lot of rituals.⁹ Then it gives wide public recognition to the factions' own power and good name and to their social components. In most festivals the core of the factions are Nayar neighbourhoods, a fact which should remind us of the peculiarities of traditional society, in which Houses are "rooted" in locality: it was not mere fancy but a matter of crucial importance for the Houses to defend their name in front of other local Houses as well as outsiders, and for that purpose they could engage in very high expenses. Likewise, the name of the Houses' neighbourhood is at stake in festivals; in order to defend it, a lot of money, physical exertion and participation of followers and dependents are deemed necessary. Also worth noticing also is the fact that while the two factions in Chinakkattur are symbolically "local" and "enemy", that is like "hosts" and "guests" in Heesterman's terminology, together they constitute the actual cult unit of the festival -none being in that respect more "local" than others. Dual factions, therefore, imply a wholeness at a higher level, found here in the deity on the religious plane, and on the social plane in its Namputiri trustee -who does not take part in the outer rituals of the festival.

Stallions, bulls and umbrellas are offerings (and in some respects, elephants, too). This is brought out by local evidence, since all these offerings are shown to the Goddess, umbrellas are thrown in the sanctuary's yard, and the *bhūta*-s play with the horses. Comparatively, similar festivals in Travancore -with hints to the Mahabharata war- are called *keṭṭukālca*, "built gifts", *kālca* being a traditional word /p.92/ for ceremonial offerings to a superior. These offerings have symbolic inferences. In Indian culture all have obvious connotations of kingship; the horses are specifically connected with kings and warriors; bulls, which in some other places are offered with new paddy spikes, can be seen as symbols of agricultural production (just as as the palm-leaf material out of which umbrellas are made); finally, both horses and bulls are linked to fertility. Their manipulation is noteworthy: vertical agitation of horses and bulls is akin to the characteristic jumping that takes place during masculine possession in central Kerala (*tullal*); the quick rotation of the palm-umbrellas with their flying fringes closely evokes the rotating movement of the head with loosened hair, characteristic of feminine possession in the region. In the same moment, it is an

8. For instance hundreds of thousands will flock Trichur town during its *Pūram* celebrations -supposed to be the grandest of its type. In this *Pūram* the two factions are made of different temples' deities along with their devotees.

9. This is popular talk. Another instance is given in a myth of the Mammiyur Ambasivan temple: following ghost infestation, the *caitanyam* ("effulgence") of the deities is lessened so that they have no more rituals and no more festivals; only the main deity, whose *caitanyam* is strong enough to resist, keeps a daily cult (Venni Vasupilla 1983a). For a brief discussion of the notion of *caitanyam* in Kerala temples see Tarabout 1990: 219ff.

enthusiastic offering to the Goddess and the visible sign of their being taken by Her. This kind of agitated presentation of gifts has a name in other parts of Kerala: *kāppoli* (which can be understood as "increase in fruits, benefits"). In a locality of Travancore reputed for its ritual masked dances (*paṭayani*, "battle row" -another means of enacting mythic war), people said that in former times two competing neighbourhoods went too far during their respective *kāppoli*: one faction conceived of exhibiting a corpse, whereas the other, not to be undone, impaled a man alive on a stake and presented him to the deity; this put a definitive end to *kāppoli* as far as the locality was concerned, but the story shows that a sacrificial logic is still at work throughout all these rituals, even in seemingly subsidiary details.

Be it from the enactment of war or from offerings of emblems of the kingdom and its prosperity or from manipulations in a logic of possession/sacrifice, this kind of festival is popularly thought of as nourishing the deities, and is also seen as a contribution to the yearly renewal of their power (though, according to orthodoxy, only the tantric cult lead by the Brahmin priest inside the sanctum is supposed to have that effect). Through competition, which brings fame, through symbolic sacrifices, which bring "food" and power, deities are glorified, as are the human rivals who glorify them, and the /p.93/ whole of the temple "realm" (the kingly dimension of the deity-in-temple is well known) partakes of this effulgence.

A few other festivals will offer the opportunity to add some further remarks.

WHOLE AND PARTS

Unlike most parts of Kerala, the Kollamkode area south of Palghat is grouped in villages. In that area there is also a tradition of enacting theatrical sketches during temple festivals (similar traditions can be found elsewhere of course). The village of Pallassena does this, with the peculiarity that it takes the form of a competition between two factions.

The village is multicaste. In the Nayar neighbourhood, two temples, close to each other, are respectively sacred to the Goddess Bhagavati and to a hunter god, Vettakkaruman (thought to be a form of Siva -his son in some other places, under the name Vettakkorumakan). A single regular oracle dances both deities.

The Nayars take part in two main festivals during the year.¹⁰ At the time of *ōṇam*, together with two other castes, they engage in traditional fight *ōṇattallu* (see above). The Nayar neighbourhood splits into two halves (*muṛi*), East and West, each forming with other castes, which are similarly divided, a multicaste faction. The ritual is said to commemorate a past battle in which a local ruler was (treacherously) slain: in reparation, the overlord of the victorious party gave the Vettakaruman idol to the aggrieved House. *ōṇattallu* is fought on its temple ground.

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Festival 3

The second main festival is a theatrical competition which occurs in front of the same temple, beginning on the tenth of *mēṭam* month (last week of April).¹¹ The participation is restricted to members of the Nayar neighbourhood born there; another caste has a similar but separate theatrical competition ten days before in its own neighbourhood.

10. For an overview, see Choondal 1978: 77-86. Some extracts of the theatrical sketches have been published (in Malayālam), for instance in Bharggavanpilla 1979 and Visvam 1979.

11. The date is called *pattāmudayam*, "tenth dawn", when the sun is said to be at the zenith of Kerala; it is, throughout the region, an important event, associated with numerous festivals; it is an especially auspicious day for initiating agricultural operations.

In order to acquire the necessary skills, rehearsals are held in each *muri* during the few weeks preceding the festival. Only men will play. The direction is assumed by senior masters (*āśan*) of three specified Houses, two in the West half, one in East; the overall authority belongs to the "master of the play" (*kaḷiyāśan*), the seniormost *āśan*: each of the three aforesaid Houses may have to assume the charge in turn, seniority being the only rule -a fact which is not unlike the traditional former exercise of authority among the different branches of a same Nayar House.

The festival is called *kaṇṇyārkaḷi* (*kaḷi*: "play, game"). It lasts four nights, each night having a specific name. Typically the night begins with a procession of the whole neighbourhood (supposed to correspond to "99 Nayars", the 100th being the oracle who leads the way), starting from the Bhagavati temple and arriving in front of the Vettakaruman temple, where the game will be played. In the middle of the performing area are a lit oil-lamp, the sword of Bhagavati, and a stool on which the oracle sits during the preliminary dances. The male members of the neighbourhood will execute these dances (*vaṭṭakaḷi*, "circle, wheel play") together, in a circle, around the lamp and the oracle, with devotional songs. This is the time of first appearance of new young performers, garlanded and tonsured. The festival *kaṇṇyārkaḷi* is not just an entertainment -/p.95/ though it is obviously a good one: it is the traditional local form of offering to Bhagavati and Vettakaruman, and many performers have to participate to fulfil their vows, thus making this an offering to the deities for past favours.

When the circular dances are over, the oracle leaves the area and East and West go to their respective quarters, where they will get ready for the competition of theatrical plays (*porāṭṭukaḷi*, "farcical play"). Each night there will be some ten to twelve of them, alternating plays with a single character, two, or a full group. They are supposed to portray the day-to-day life of tribals or low-caste people from the area or from Tamil Nad, through songs, dances and dialogues. By contrast, as characters in the play, the Nayars are conspicuous by their absence -the exception is a "learned man of the locality" who, as a link between the audience and the fiction enacted, asks the characters questions in order to make them decline their identity or their intentions. We shall thus see joyful tribals bringing the products of the forest or of their "gardens", happy agricultural labourers carrying spikes of corn, silk-dressed Tamil leather-workers, merchants, potters and so on. We shall witness disputes of couples of washermen or of "gypsy" caste, with erotic if not obscene implications which provoke hearty laughter in the audience. In short, more than a realistic portrayal of humble life, that which is stressed through such idealized presentation of people engaged in agricultural production and harvest is fertility (sexual and agricultural) and abundance. The whole performance ends with the chanting of ritual verses (*tōṭṭam*), more circular dances with the oracle, and processions to both temples, then to the Houses of two former local rulers. A final salute takes place before Vettakaruman and sacrificial honoraries (*dakṣiṇa*) are given to the main master.

In this competition, as in the previous ones, no winner is proclaimed, no prize is given. Mutual evaluation and public appraisal are based on the quality of the performance (technical perfection, beauty of songs and dances, wittiness of improvised parts, innovative details in costumes or accessories). What should be observed /p.96/ from our perspective, is the strict regulation of the competition: if West plays first on the first night, East will play second, then West, then East...the last to play on this night being East; the following night it is the opposite. Every male member has to participate; but the rivalry is organised through the channel of traditional hereditary rights of a few Houses; everyone, every House, will try to do the best to defend its name -but there is no scope for a modification of precedence, nor in the social order; even the most expert player

will never become "master of the play" if he is not born in one of the three Houses whose hereditary right it is, and if he is not the seniormost in them.

This kind of regulation, especially apparent here, but not altogether unknown in other festivals, shows that such a rivalry between factions refers more or less explicitly to a superior unity (of which factions are but temporary parts). The *kaṇṇyārkaḷi* organisation in Pallassena underlines this superior level in many different ways : unity of cult and unity of neighbourhood, equally signified when the oracle is said to be the 100th (and ultimate) member of the neighbourhood (indicating that this is not a mere grouping of people, but a totality); a single "master of the play" and its mode of designation; ceremonial recognition of the above-the-neighbourhood (former) rule of two Houses -whose formal authorization is a prerequisite for performing the play. In fact there are no real competitive aims that would upset or simply modify the local order of society. In short, Houses in the neighbourhood do not gain pre-eminence through the competition, they just defend their name and position. It is at the level of the "whole" of the festival unit that pre-eminence or fame can be gained.

So far the factions we have encountered were obvious ones; more subtle forms of expression can also be found.

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ASSUMING CHARGES

Instead of a competition between face-to-face factions the rivalry can be fully sequentialized. For instance, in the Kartyayani temple of Shertallai, south of Cochin, the annual *Pūram* festival is conducted by two neighbourhoods, North and South, each of them in turn being in charge of all the events in a day. In the nearby Krishna temple of Ambalappuzha, two troupes compete in a martial dance called *vēlakali*. They dance together, alternating in the pole position according to the days of the festival. But ritual factionalism can also structure the repartition of charges in rituals -as the Kongan Pada festival in Chittur village (not far from Pallassena and Palghat) will demonstrate.

Festival 4

The Kongan Pada festival (*koṇṇappaṭa*, "war of the King of Kongu Nad") and the story to which it refers have been described by many authors.¹² For the present concern a few indications should be enough. The festival is supposed to re-enact a past war which opposed the king of neighbouring Kongu Nad and the people of the locality. At that time a warrior form of the benign Goddess (or her sister according to others) came forth to protect the villagers and in return asked for blood and alcohol. Now there are two shrines: one of Bhagavati, vegetarian and served by a Brahmin; the other, east of the former and on a higher ground, sacred to Chittur kavilamma (Lady of the *kāvu*, "grove", a general term for some sanctuaries in Kerala). She gets vegetal substitutes for blood offerings, is served by a Nayar *pūjāri*, and has a Nayar oracle. Both of these men belong to specific Houses of the West Nayar neighbourhood, adjacent to the sanctuaries: the *pūjāri* comes from a House which had previously the charge of the local gymnasium, from /p.98/ whose shrine the Bhagavati temple is itself said to be an offshoot. The oracle is selected by Chitturkavilamma among the male members of two other Houses.

12. See for instance: Ananthakrishna Iyer (1969: II, 71-75), Devassy (1966: 348-351), Tarabout (1986: 170-174); in Malayālam: Venni Vasupilla (1983b), Kottarattil Sankunni (1974: 833-848); I was unable to obtain a Malayālam publication on the subject written by P.R. Menon.

There is also an East neighbourhood. Kongan Pada is said to be the festival of four main Nayar Houses (*pramāṇakkār*, the "pre-eminent ones") other than the *pūjāri* and oracle's Houses. There are two "pre-eminent ones" in each neighbourhood. These Houses had the power to obtain, even through coercion, financial contributions and man-power from the different Houses of the two Nayar neighbourhoods (an informant put forward the number of 108 Houses -a figure quite theoretical, but indicative here also of a "totality").

There are numerous and complex processions during Kongan Pada in which people from both neighbourhoods along with other castes take part. Many of these processions are costumed. If in the general participation there is no distinction along neighbourhood lines, yet some characters in the processions are played by members of specific Houses: the impersonation of the enemy king -supposed in the myth to be mounted on a buffalo and to look "like Yama"- is the hereditary privilege of a House belonging to East; a different House of the same neighbourhood has the task of providing a man who has to act as a corpse during a mock funeral; from East also a third House (one of the "pre-eminent ones") has to assume short costumed plays, especially an obscene parody of astrological calculation in front of the Bhagavati temple.

Thus we have Nayars of both neighbourhoods participating equally in all processions, but a distinctive repartition of tasks held by a few Houses. Houses of West neighbourhood, which is close to the sanctuaries and said to be at their origin, assume all the (Nayar) charges connected with the worship. Houses of East neighbourhood have the privilege to enact all the (Nayar) costumed characters during processions, including the enemy king and the fake corpse. Such a polarisation can be seen as a variant of the "hosts-guests" agonistic /p.99/ relationship, but is not formulated at all by devotees, especially in its symbolic, hierarchical consequences; instead the equality of both neighbourhoods is stressed.

In a subsequent festival a few weeks later, confrontation -on an equality basis- of the two neighbourhoods is explicit: during *karivēla* ("black procession"), the youth of East and West, blackened with soot, forming two separate processions and accompanied by low-status *Paṛayan* playing drums, will compete in wild exuberance; when these processions cross each other, it can degenerate into real blows.

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Let us try to resume what we have seen. Participation in factions which have no existence outside festivals can be a duty, most of the time on a basis of neighbourhood membership: factions appear to be anchored in locality -as are neighbourhoods and Houses- and to partake of the same concern for prestige. There is often an internal organisation if not hierarchy, the rank of each component being well established by tradition: the rivalry does not bring out any change in the local social structure. Factions are therefore the result of a ritual partition of the cult unit, thought of as a totality; placed on an equal footing, they are often symbolically polarized ("hosts/guests"). No winner is proclaimed, no prizes are won, only the "names" are held up. The whole of the festival celebration, the deity, the locality, attain fame -which can be considered as a certain idea of force. In this respect the competitions we have come across, based as they are on multiple references to the logic of sacrifice (even though people might speak in devotional terms of their relation to the deity), are certainly effective in nourishing and glorifying the gods.

The importance of these forms of celebration seems to be connected with some features of Kerala society: locally rooted aristocratic Houses exert dominance and tend to constitute their relationships into traditional stable networks in which prestige is a crucial issue. Such a social morphology appears to have been a fertile ground for the development of factional forms of rituals. But, though frequent, the latter are by no means the only ones in Kerala, and the peculiar social morphology described should therefore be **/p.100/** considered as essentially a fertile ground for their blossoming. It is rather tempting to ask the inverse question: can similar ritual factions develop in societies without "House" characteristics?

ADDITIONAL REMARKS

Competitions and evocations of battle are not restricted to festivals of "carnivorous" deities: vegetarian divinities can also be worshipped in this manner. Factional organisation of rituals is not related to specific categories of gods.

Brahmins and rulers are above the factions, they are at the level of the "whole", and have therefore no observed participation in the competition proper -though their agreement to proceed to the festival is often necessary (but not always: for example this is not the case for Kongan Pada, which is said to be the festival of the four "preeminent ones"; the local ruler's permission is not even sought).

Though Kerala society has changed since the XIXth century, reference to neighbourhoods and former Houses has still some relevance in day to day rural life, and a lot during festivals. Modern small families, created by the partition of Houses, might well have their own cults, individuals might seek personal salvation through *bhakti* (devotion), the locality level of religious practice is mostly founded on references to the old order of society (except in some urban contexts) and is still the scene where social mutual evaluation is at its peak.

Let us conclude on a comparative note. Few similar cases have been reported from South India outside Kerala, except in the Tulu region (Biardeau 1981: 878ff). There are, however, well known ritual factions in Buddhist Sri Lanka during festivals of the Pattini cult (Yalman 1965; Obeyesekere 1984: 381-423) -with the difference that a party must win. These similarities are part of other ritual resemblances (for instance religious masked dances) which can be observed from Tulu and Coorg regions, Kerala, to Sri Lanka -but not typically in nearby Tamil Nadu or in the northern parts of Karnataka (Tarabout 1986: 617-633). Factional competitions appear, in **/p.101/** this general perspective, as an element in a wider common ritual complex, found along the south-western coast of India and in Sri Lanka. What about the societies concerned? Briefly put, it seems possible to consider the patrilineal Coorg *okka* as a House, and to suggest that the Bants in Tulu region might present some of the features earmarked for Kerala (Bhatt 1975: 149, uses in some contexts the term "manor-house"; Claus 1975: 91 underlines the importance of locality). In the Goyigama caste in Sri Lanka strong interference of a locality component in kin definitions has been stressed: "anyone who lived in the same garden or house (whether related or not) could use the same gedara [dwelling] name" (Yalman 1967: 269). The "kindred" (pavula) tends to be a neighbourhood (id., pp191ff). Locality is brought into evidence also by E. Leach (1961: 7): "it is locality rather than descent which forms the basis for corporate grouping"; the same author links the time-enduring kindred groups to the detention of agricultural rights (id., p.123).

Whatever the obvious contrasts between all these societies, we notice a distinctive importance of locality in the definition of social groups and loyalties. This is not to say that it is altogether absent in other parts of South Asia but, at least in most castes of the same level in

neighbouring parts of India, we do not find such a systematic interference of locality with descent. That the south-western coast of India and Sri Lanka should possess similar social and ritual features, notwithstanding current differences in religious references, in languages, in history, leaves us in fact with more disconcerting questions than before -but provides also a stimulus for further research.

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