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Reconstructing Tamil Masculinities:  
*Kāvaṭi* and *Viratam* Among Sri Lankan Men in Montréal

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in partial fulfillment of the degree of Master of Arts

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## Abstract

This thesis examines masculinity in the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora through two ritual practices, *kāvaṭi* and *viratam*. I argue that these practices are expressions of masculine identity and articulations of anxiety rooted in the refugee experience. *Kāvaṭi*, a ritual piercing and ecstatic dance, and *viratam*, a rigorous fast, reconstruct masculinities fragmented by expatriation and the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. Through ritual performance, men fashion themselves as the selfless heroes of traditional Tamil literature without negating their fluency as modern Tamil-Canadians. By voicing rupture and enacting reprieve, the men who perform these rites incur individual catharsis. New non-Brahmin masculine identities that draw their authority from renunciation and asceticism as opposed to social privilege emerge in this diasporic context. Employing analyses of literature, political propaganda, and ethnography this thesis demonstrates the powerful relationship between ritual performance and masculine identity. In *kāvaṭi* and *viratam*, the male body becomes the site of contested personal, political, and religious narratives.

## Résumé

Cette thèse examine la masculinité dans la diaspora des tamouls srilankais au moyen de deux coutumes rituels, le *kāvaṭi* et le *viratam*. Je soutiens que ces coutumes sont des expressions de l'identité masculine et des articulations d'anxiété qui ont leurs sources dans l'expérience réfugiée. Le *kāvaṭi*, un perçage rituel et une danse extasiée, et le *viratam*, un jeûne rigoureux, reconstruisent une masculinité fragmentée par l'expatriation et le conflit ethnique au Sri Lanka. Dans l'exécution de ces coutumes, ces hommes se façonnent des héros altruistes, bien connus dans la littérature tamoule, sans nier leur facilité d'être tamouls canadiens contemporains. En vocalisant la rupture et en démontrant la surséance, ceux qui exécutent ces rites achèvent une catharsis individuelle. Des nouvelles identités masculines non-Brahmanes apparaissent dans le contexte de la diaspora : celles qui n'obtiennent pas leur autorité du privilège sociale, mais du renoncement et de l'ascétisme. En employant des analyses de la littérature, de la propagande politique et de l'ethnographie, cette thèse montre le rapport puissant entre l'exécution de rites et l'identité masculine. Dans le *kāvaṭi* et le *viratam*, le corps mâle devient le site où se disputent les récits individuels, politiques et religieux.

## Note on Transliteration

For the most part, this thesis adheres to the standards established by the Madras Tamil Lexicon for the transliteration of Tamil words. Many Sanskrit words, however, are reproduced in their more familiar Sanskrit transliteration. For example, I refer to *mokṣa*, *brahmācārya*, and *prasādam*. I have chosen to retain common or official transliterations of proper nouns. For example, I refer to Mohan instead of Mōkaṇ, and Mithun instead of Mituṇ. I have spelled temple names in accordance with the temple administrations' own spellings. Thus, I refer to the Montreal Murugan Temple instead of the Montréal Murukaṇ Temple, and the Montreal Sri Aiyappan Temple instead of the Montréal Śrī Ayyappaṇ Temple.

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## Introduction

There are approximately twenty-five thousand Sri Lankan Tamils living in Montréal, and two hundred thousand across Canada.<sup>1</sup> Although they are a diverse group, most share experiences of war and refugee life, which have generated ambiguous identities. The vast majority of Sri Lankan Tamils arrived in Canada in the 1980s, in the wake of horrifying riots, which shattered the nation they had long called home. Ethnic animosity between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority had been brewing during the four antecedent decades, but the eruption of violence was the immediate impetus for the exodus of an unprecedented number of Tamils. Many departed for Canada, encouraged by perceptions of the nation's open policy towards refugees. Rendered nation-less by the realities of war and transnational migration, the identity of Sri Lankan Tamils in the Canadian diaspora is inherently vexed. Their identity as a community is not characterized by stability and unity, but by flux and fragmentation. While their collective identity is complex and capacious, I focus here specifically on the construction of masculine identity.

This project explores issues of identity in the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora by examining two contemporary, pain-inflicting ritual practices, *kāvaṭi* and *viratam*, which are both performed exclusively by men. Following Isabelle Nabokov, I argue that identity is the fundamental subject of Tamil ritual performance. "The critical question that it asks and answers is, 'Who are you?'" (2000, 15) I understand both rituals as forms of active communication, a kind of language, which are not merely symbolic representations, but are efficacious productions (Tambiah 1985,

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<sup>1</sup> These estimates are from Diversity Watch, a database founded and managed by the Ryerson University School of Journalism, which updates its figures according to annual census data ([www.diversitywatch.ryerson.ca/backgrounds/tamils.htm](http://www.diversitywatch.ryerson.ca/backgrounds/tamils.htm); accessed 2008).

17-59). *Kāvaṭi* and *viratam* do not just represent something; they *do* something. Specifically, they animate and reconstruct fragmented masculine identities. This thesis aims to highlight doubts and assertions about masculine identity that are embedded in *kāvaṭi* and *viratam*, in order to illuminate the ways Sri Lankan Tamil men in the diaspora conceive of themselves. I hope to elucidate the process by which Tamil men in Canada attempt to reconcile conflicting drives to preserve their heritage, assimilate to their new socio-cultural milieu, and remain connected to the struggle for homeland occurring in Sri Lanka. In this project, I underscore the way conflicted masculinities are expressed, eased, and perpetuated through ritual performance.<sup>2</sup>

Specifically, I argue that performances of *kāvaṭi* and *viratam* are flawed attempts to reconstruct ruptured Tamil masculine identity. Through active ritual productions, performers locate themselves in an imagined past characterized by fixed and stable gender norms in order to combat the reality of contested masculine identity. Their ritual performances are expressions of masculine anxieties, which give voice to troubling memories and contradictory beliefs, and enact personal catharsis. The heightened popularity of *kāvaṭi* (Geaves 2007, 193) and Ayyappan *viratam* in the diaspora indexes the idea of fragmented identity in this context. In addition, multiple and contradictory understandings of ritual meaning and ritual efficacy expressed by individual men, and even more so among different members of the community, complicate understandings of *kāvaṭi* and *viratam*. In both ritual acts, the male body is the site for the inscription of contested personal, political, and religious narratives.

Performances of *kāvaṭi* and *viratam* attempt to reconstruct fragmented Tamil masculine

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<sup>2</sup> Patricia Lawrence's work on *kaṭṭāṭikaḷ* or *teyyam āṭumākkaḷ* (oracles) in the context of goddess worship in war-torn Eastern Sri Lanka is similar to mine (1997; 2000; 2003). She discusses the way women embody and interpret the war during states of possession when no other means for articulating violence, pain, and loss are available. She argues that the compulsion to tell is a requisite component of healing trauma and alleviating emotional suffering.

identity for the collective, not just for the individual. They are expressions of collective Tamil masculine identity that embed themselves in Canada's uncertain cultural terrain. Public, ecstatic performances of both *kāvaṭi* and *viratam* create a unified impression of Tamil masculinity, as these rituals are always performed in large groups and before large audiences. In Montréal, *kāvaṭi* is undertaken at the temple festival (Skt. *brahmotsavam*, Tamil *Tiruvīḷā*), which is the largest annual gathering of the Tamil community in the city. At least fifteen men perform *kāvaṭi* simultaneously. Their dancing to the rhythmic beating of the accompanying *tavil* drums is rapturous and attracts the highest number of spectators of any event at the festival.<sup>3</sup> *Viratam* is also a public spectacle. While men observe celibacy and limit their food intake in private, the *viratam* period is recognized by the community of devotees at nightly *pūjās* that honour the men's accomplishments. During these celebratory *pūjās* the men observing the *viratam* are propitiated as embodiments of the divine.

The scale and spectacular nature of these rituals creates the impression that power, selfless forbearance, and courage are traits inherent to Tamil men. Both the annual festival at the Montreal Murugan Temple and the *viratam* period at the Montreal Sri Aiyappan Temple are understood as celebrations and recreations of the sacred heritage of Tamil civilization. They are thought to shield and deploy Tamil culture in the new socio-cultural milieu, and to index the strength of Sri Lankan Tamils as a people. As such, they are safe venues that house "true" expressions of Tamil identity, including gender identity. Performances of *kāvaṭi* and *viratam* at these events, therefore, are considered to be authentic, unadulterated expressions of Tamil masculinity.

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<sup>3</sup> The *tavil* is a two-headed drum played by tapping one side with the hand and the other with a stick. It is often used at temple festivals and life-cycle rituals.

## Tamil Masculinity: Ideals and Anxieties

Through their performances of *kāvaṭi* and *viratam* Sri Lankan Tamil men embody what they understand as traditional Tamil masculinity. Their performances temporarily transform them into idealized Tamil men. Although a singular, static conception of Tamil masculinity does not historically exist, many contemporary Sri Lankan Tamil men posit particular masculine traits as emblematic of Tamil masculinity. In their conceptions of the traditional Tamil man, they point to a number of moments in Tamil cultural history during which paradigms of masculinity are somewhat consistent. Characteristics such as martial courage, heroic power, and protective self-sacrifice, which are exhibited by male figures in ancient and medieval Tamil literature and contemporary Tamil mythology, are understood to define Tamil masculine identity. Men point to the paradigmatic warrior of Cankam literature and the self-sacrificing saints of the *bhakti* period as heroes who best embody the essence of Tamil masculinity and role models they hope to emulate. Murukan and Ayyappan, two popular male deities, personify similar masculine ideals that are also mirrored in devotees' ritual performances. Murukan is considered a virile protector of his two wives and a fierce warrior; Ayyappan is considered an exemplar of selflessness and continence.

Most Sri Lankan Tamil men, however, are wary of steeping themselves too fully in the heavy traditions of antiquity. They tend to see modernity as an integral component of being a Tamil man. Intellectual and scientific advancement, and a general tendency to “keep up” with developments in the West, are essential to some Tamil men's understandings of masculinity. In fact, many explain the advantages of their ritual performances from scientific perspectives, such

as popular ideas of health and wellness. In turn, the scientifically verifiable benefits of *kāvaṭi* and *viratam* underwrite the modernity of Sri Lankan Tamil men. Through ritual performances, Tamil men (literally) incorporate both “tradition” and “modernity.” At the individual level, these performances provide a sense of whole-being – a seamless integration of nostalgia for the past and potential for the future.

Although ritual performances furnish a temporary sense of stable identity, anxieties and frustrations about masculine identity are lived-in experiences. The trajectory of ethnic conflict, war, diaspora, and refugee life is an ongoing source of anxiety, which has a direct bearing on collective and personal masculine identity. Since the 1960s, the political and cultural voices of Sri Lankan Tamil men have been emphatically silenced, as they have been barred from institutions of higher education and government, and from holding prestigious and powerful positions. Enforced socio-economic disadvantages make it difficult for many Sri Lankan Tamil men to affirm their modernity. In addition, self-images of altruistic courage and power have been reproached with the significant force of ethnic violence since the eruption of war in the mid-1980s, which has continued with only brief interruptions up to the present day.

For many, living as a refugee increases the pressure on already fractured masculine identity. Militant Tamil nationalists, who have responded ruthlessly to acts of exclusion and repression, summon Sri Lankan Tamil men to act courageously and selflessly in defense of their community. In turn, a great deal of Sri Lankan Tamil men in the diaspora believe that Tamil nationalists regard them as cowards who have abandoned “their brethren” in selfish pursuit of a better life. Yet, for many, occlusion from positions of power and prestige persists in Canada. State-endorsed and popular portrayals of Sri Lankan Tamil men as terrorists in addition to

generic forms of racial discrimination, exacerbate experiences of marginalization and disadvantage.

While both *kāvaṭi* and *viratam* attempt to reclaim the contested male body, endowing it with the strength and unity of heritage and modernity, neither succeeds at repairing the fractures of Tamil masculine identity. For the men who perform *kāvaṭi* and *viratam*, and for Sri Lankan Tamil men in general, masculinity remains ambivalent. There is no singular Tamil masculinity. Rather there are several contradictory characteristics that comprise a set of Tamil masculinities. While Tamil men reach into the past to imagine themselves as courageous self-sacrificing heroes, they also turn to scientific epistemologies to project their community into the future. The collective Tamil male body is never made whole.

### ***Kāvaṭi* and *Viratam* in Montréal**

My analysis is based largely on the ethnographic research I conducted at two primary research sites. I examine *kāvaṭi* at the Montreal Murugan Temple and *viratam* at the Montreal Sri Ayyappan Temple. Over the course of several months, I spoke with devotees and observed ritual activities at both temples. In this thesis, I provide a detailed analysis of the personal testimonies of five Murugan devotees and three Ayyappan devotees who perform *kāvaṭi* and *viratam*, respectively. Their voices – their experiences as devotees, as Sri Lankan Tamils, as refugees, and as men – will elucidate the growing importance of *kāvaṭi* and Ayyappan *viratam* as iconic articulations of Tamil masculine identity, and will highlight the way that masculine identity is being reformulated in the diaspora. While different in many ways, the physical circumstances of both performances point to the motifs of traditional Tamil masculinity.

*Kāvaṭi* (literally “stick of protection”) refers to both a ritual performance and a ritual implement used during that performance. The implement is an arch-shaped wooden yoke that is the width of the shoulders and the height from the shoulders to about six inches above the head. It is similar to an altar in that it is decorated with auspicious substances and carries offerings to the deity. The performance, which occurs at temple festivals (especially at Murukan temples), involves carrying the *kāvaṭi* across the shoulders for at least three hours in a ritual procession.<sup>4</sup> As devotees first assume the weight of the *kāvaṭi*, they also undergo ritual piercings, which they bear for the duration of their performances. The puncturing of the cheeks and tongue with small spears is common in Montréal. Even more common is the insertion of clusters of large hooks into the flesh in the middle of the back from which large bundles of thread protrude. The threads are joined into a single rope, which is held by a male attendant. Enduring both the piercings and the *kāvaṭi*, the performers dance ecstatically to the undulating beats of the *tavil* drum as they slowly travel around the temple in procession. Male attendants take part in the ritual production by pulling with all of their strength on ropes that are attached to the performers’ backs.<sup>5</sup> The performers resist the tension of the ropes strenuously, a practice that sometimes results in bleeding and torn skin. Meanwhile, a crowd of mixed gender and age watches with awe and admiration.

While the performance of *viratam* at the Montreal Sri Aiyappan Temple is less spectacular, it also invokes strength, heroism, and courage. *Viratam* is a general term for a

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<sup>4</sup> While *kāvaṭi* is performed at temples of various deities, such as village goddess shrines and even Pīḷaiyār temples, scholars recognize that it is most commonly associated with Murukan worship (Clothey 1978; Ceaves 2007; Zvelebil 1991).

<sup>5</sup> The act of pulling on ropes affixed to the performers flesh may be unique to Sri Lankan Tamil communities, as it is not usually a component of *kāvaṭi* performances in South India. Although Ron Ceaves recounts similar practices among Sri Lankan Tamils in the United Kingdom (2007, 186), styles of *kāvaṭi* tend to vary between region and community.

religious fast undertaken for a set period of time, and refers to a wide variety of temporarily altered lifestyles. Mirroring the ritual calendar of the Sabarimala Sree Ayyappa Temple in South India, the principal shrine of the Ayyappaṇ cultus, the community of male Ayyappaṇ devotees in Montréal undertakes a forty-day *viratam* in November. Theirs is even more rigorous than the fast undertaken by many in South India. They eat vegetarian food only, practice celibacy, and refrain from vacationing and from watching films. Most eat only once a day, between nine and ten at night, after the *pūjā* is over, and many sleep on the floor. Self-denial becomes foundational, as men endure hunger pains with the strength and courage they accrue through their single-minded devotion to Ayyappaṇ.

*Kāvaṭi* and *viratam* reinforce both traditional and contemporary visions of Tamil masculine identity. *Kāvaṭi* is an exhibition of courage and self-sacrifice through which men fashion themselves as ideal Tamil men. Typically, *kāvaṭi* is undertaken when the family unit faces a crisis of health, finances, or even separation. Understanding familial protection as their duty, men vow to the deity that they will undergo self-mortification through *kāvaṭi* in exchange for the deity's assistance in safeguarding the family. *Kāvaṭi* is thus a means to incorporate the courage, self-sacrifice, and heroism that men see as inherent to Tamil masculinity when other means to exhibit such traits are inhibited. Stoically sacrificing themselves for others, *kāvaṭi* performers literally embody classical ideals of Tamil masculine identity. For some, the performance of *kāvaṭi* also signifies the modernity of Tamil men, as it is believed to have esoteric medical benefits. While identity is expressed in painstaking *kāvaṭi* productions, some performers report the onset of relieving numbness, as they are temporarily released from memory and conscious thought. *Kāvaṭi* is both a public expression of and a temporary release from emotional pain.

Performers of *viratam* at Montréal's Sri Aiyappan Temple incorporate traditional conceptions of masculine ideals, but they follow a path that diverges greatly from the one followed by performers of *kāvaṭi*. *Viratam* is aimed at renouncing family life and exhibiting bravery and selflessness for the sake of the deity and for one's own spiritual growth. In performing *viratam*, Sri Lankan Tamil men fashion themselves as selfless ascetics seeking enlightenment. While men usually understand their acts of renunciation as returns to primordial forms of Tamil masculinity, they also fashion themselves as "modern men" who have fully assimilated into the Canadian socio-cultural milieu. Many explain the health and psychological benefits of performing *viratam* in order to underscore the modernity of Tamils as a community. Their performances of *viratam* both weave them into the roots of renunciatory Tamil masculinity, likening them to Ayyappan himself, and establish new roots here in Montréal. Finally, *viratam* operates as a liberating force, which temporarily releases performers from the conflicts and contradictions embedded in their composite Tamil masculinities.

### Religious and Caste Identity

My ethnographic investigation is focused on men who identify as members of the Vēḷāḷar *cāṭṭi*<sup>6</sup> (caste group), and the Śaiva religion.<sup>7</sup> In describing issues that are particularly important to Vēḷāḷars, I refer to them specifically. In other cases, I do not refer to them, hoping to point out that certain arguments are applicable to non-Brahmin men in general. Although this thesis

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<sup>6</sup> In the eastern regions of Sri Lanka, Tamils also use the word "*kulam*" (literally, class or type) to refer to caste groups.

<sup>7</sup> Spellings of the word "Vēḷāḷar" are inconsistent in scholarly literature. Other spellings include Velallar, Vēḷāḷar, and Vellāḷa. The spelling I use conforms to the Madras Tamil Lexicon.

focuses on masculinity, *cāti* is intertwined with men's personal and collective identities.<sup>8</sup> In addition to the hardships of the war and ethnic conflict, which affect Sri Lankan Tamil men regardless of *cāti*, masculine struggles for power and authority resurface in the relationships between Vēḷāḷar and Brahmin communities.

My focus on Vēḷāḷar Śaivites is not arbitrary, as they are the most populous community of Sri Lankan Tamils in Canada.<sup>9</sup> Given the numbers of Vēḷāḷars that have migrated to Canada, it is not surprising that they have traditionally been the most economically and politically powerful *cāti* in Tamil Sri Lanka (Pfaffenberger 1981, 1146). Although they are technically considered Śūdras, members of the servant class according to Brahmanical understandings of social hierarchy, they tend to be successful landholders and agriculturalists. Almost all Vēḷāḷars are Śaivites, and many of them financially control Śaiva temples in the Jaffna region of Sri Lanka.

Protracted Vēḷāḷar dominance in Sri Lanka is partially facilitated by their interdependent relationship with Brahmins. They patronize Brahmins munificently because Brahmanical authority remains a signifier of cultural purity, and evidence that they accurately adhere to the social patterns of ancient Tamil civilization, unlike Tamils on the subcontinent's mainland (ibid., 1148). Moreover, the favoured treatment they receive from Brahmins establishes the Vēḷāḷars as inherently endowed with good fortune in the eyes of other groups (Pfaffenberger 1982). Vēḷāḷar

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<sup>8</sup> All of the informants interviewed for this thesis identify as Vēḷāḷar Śaivites. While some claim that *cāti* has ceased to be a significant marker of identity in the diaspora, for many it continues to inform choices for marriage partners. The Vēḷāḷars especially tend to retain a sense of *cāti* identity. Moreover, the elevated ritual status of Brahmins persists among many diasporic communities, including the Tamil community in Montréal.

<sup>9</sup> Through my pointed examination I do not wish to obscure the diversity within the Sri Lankan Tamil community in Canada, which mirrors social reality in Sri Lanka. Sri Lankan Tamils in Canada are heterogeneous in terms of socio-economic status, religion, and *cāti* identity. They are employed in a wide array of fields, ranging from physicians and attorneys to janitors and painters. In addition, their diverse religious affiliations are reflected in the variety of institutions they have established. Across Canada, there are at least fifteen Tamil Christian churches of at least eight different sects, and twenty-five Tamil Hindu temples housing numerous Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava, and Śākta deities. Several *cāti* groups are also represented.

acceptance of the ritual superiority of Brahmins is not, however, entirely guileless. While Vēḷāḷars rely on Brahmanical authority to endow them with elevated social status, they also recognize that Brahmins are dependent on them for financial support.

In Montréal, Vēḷāḷar identity remains a mark of high social status, but it is also inextricably linked to troubled masculine identity, which emerges from the vexed relationship between Vēḷāḷar and Brahmin communities.<sup>10</sup> While in number and wealth non-Brahmin Sri Lankan Tamils are more powerful, they often rely on *arcakars* (Brahmin ritual practitioners) to underwrite the “purity” of their cultural heritage. At the Montreal Murugan Temple, for example, many members of the temple’s managing committee are Vēḷāḷars who ideologically and financially support Brahmin leadership. Their insistence on hiring *arcakars* to oversee ritual life at the temple is met with the enthusiastic approval of the overwhelming majority of devotees. At the same time, Brahmin leadership pushes non-Brahmin expressions of religiosity to the periphery of temple culture. For most of the year, non-Brahmin men accept their religious inferiority, and refrain from expressing their brave, self-sacrificing – inherently masculine – devotion. Non-Brahmin ritual practices, such as *kāvaṭi*, are not given precedence and are sometimes depicted as displays of “barbaric” and antediluvian understandings of Śaivism. In such cases, vestiges of Orientalist thought and Brahmin spiritual suzerainty coincide to affect the marginalization of non-Brahmin men. During the annual temple festival, however, non-Brahmin, and especially Vēḷāḷar, religiosity is staged prominently. As *kāvaṭi* is performed before large

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<sup>10</sup> Vēḷāḷar status is so sought after that, as one of my informants explained, many non-Brahmins claim Vēḷāḷar identity regardless of their *caṭi* in Sri Lanka. Removed from the traditional customs of village life, many Sri Lankan Tamils find it impossible to determine on sight who is a Vēḷāḷar and who is not. Thus, those who are eager to be counted as Vēḷāḷar have few problems fashioning themselves as such. Although it is difficult to determine whether my informants were born into Vēḷāḷar families in Sri Lanka, such details are of no consequence as they are recognized as Vēḷāḷars in Canada. Whether or not they *were* Vēḷāḷars, they are Vēḷāḷars now.

crowds of impressed spectators, non-Brahmin men assert their masculine spiritual power. In this way, *kāvaṭi* performances are also attempts to express conflicted *cāti* identity, and claim communal strength in the face of fragmentation.

For male devotees at the Montreal Sri Aiyappan Temple, *cāti* identity is also a troubling source of ambiguity. The temple is owned by a Vēḷāḷar family and all of the temple's ritual functions are overseen by a number of Vēḷāḷar men who perform the annual *viratam*. Many of the temple's devotees hope to sever the traditional bond between Vēḷāḷar and Brahmin communities, and to assert their own ritual purity and spiritual authority, largely through the performance of *viratam*. Although many understand *viratam* as an act of returning to ancient, time-honoured forms of Tamil masculinity, it is also a move to adopt roles that are new to non-Brahmin Sri Lankan Tamil men. Such intellectualized, other-worldly practices are traditionally the domain of Brahmins, which Vēḷāḷars usurp in this context, constructing new types of masculinity for themselves and their community. The position of Vēḷāḷars vis-à-vis Brahmins, however, remains ambivalent as some members of the temple community hope to hire an *arcakar* to run the temple. Those who hold this opinion believe their *viratams* would be more powerful if endowed with Brahmanical authority. They are willing to give up their leadership roles in exchange for greater ritual power. While some view *viratam* as an expression of Vēḷāḷar masculine might, others are eager to accept secondary positions in order to concretize their cultural purity.

Although they share some of the same views, anxieties, and aspirations, Sri Lankan Tamil male devotees at the Montreal Murugan Temple and at the Montreal Sri Aiyappan Temple do not present a united vision when it comes to conceptions and expressions of masculine identity. On the individual level and as a community, Sri Lankan Tamil masculinity remains unstable.

## Methods and Materials

This is a two-fold work: it is ethnography, and an analysis of primary and secondary sources. I employ textual materials to contextualize ethnographic data collected over nine months in the Montréal region from December 2007 to August 2008. I conducted research at a number of different sites in order to gain a generalized knowledge of Sri Lankan Tamil Śaiva culture in Montréal. I regularly attended *pūjā* at the Montreal Durkai Amman Temple, a popular shrine located in the Parc Extension area, which is one of the principle enclaves of the Tamil community. I observed an array of ritual performances, including *kāvaṭi*, at the temple's annual festival in June, and interviewed the temple's *arcakars* and numerous devotees. I also attended the Durkai Amman Tamil Education Centre on a weekly basis where Tamil instructors taught me about life in Sri Lanka and in the diaspora, and demonstrated the process by which young Tamil children learn about their own cultural heritage. Lessons at Tamil school shed light on the way non-Brahmin Sri Lankan Tamils self-consciously portray, and preserve, their culture.

More focused research took place at the Montreal Murugan Temple and at the Montreal Sri Aiyappan Temple. Between the two temples, I observed a variety of religious practices and conducted thirty interviews in Tamil, as well as two in English. I frequently attended *pūjā* at the Murukan temple in order to locate informants whom I interviewed in the temple, in their homes, in their cars, and even at their work places. I also observed my informants performing *kāvaṭi* at the temple's annual festival in August of 2008, and at another Québec Murukan temple, the Subramanya Ayyappa Temple in Val Morin, in July of 2008.<sup>11</sup> I conducted in-depth interviews

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<sup>11</sup> This temple, which is owned and operated by the International Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centre, hosts a *kāvaṭi* festival every year in July. It is an extremely popular event, and is considered by many to be the greatest celebration of Tamil culture in Canada. According to the Montreal Gazette, it is the largest Hindu festival in North America, drawing over thirty thousand devotees per year (Hugus 2008).

with each *kāvati* performer and came to know a few of them and their families well. I also attended one of my informant's karate classes, where he instructs a group of young Tamil boys three times a week. At each three-hour class, I gained further insight into my informant's understandings of Tamil masculinity, which he disseminates to the Tamil boys. At the Montreal Sri Aiyappan Temple, I attended tri-weekly *pūjās* and observed a ceremony commemorating the six-month anniversary of the *viratam*. Numerous interviews in the temple and in the homes of devotees provided me with information about the ascetic, spiritual interpretation of *viratam*, and about the ways in which *viratam* is understood to represent primordial Tamil masculinity. The memories, thoughts, and opinions of all of my informants have been an invaluable resource for this project.

In order to unpack the conversations I had and the rituals I observed, I employ a number of primary and secondary sources. I attempt to map images of masculinity in Tamil literary and mythological history. First, I investigate literature from the Caṅkam and *bhakti* periods in order to isolate early motifs of masculinity. I utilize the seminal translations of A.K. Ramanujan (1985), George L. Hart (1999), and George L. Hart and Hank Heifetz (1999) as primary literary sources. Culling their translations of the anthologies, particularly the *Purāṇānūru* and the *Patirruppattu*, I posit themes of selfless heroism as foundational to understandings of masculinity at that time. In excavating images of masculinity that emerge from *bhakti* culture, I turn to Indira Viswanathan Peterson's groundbreaking study of the Tēvāram hymns (1989), and Alastair McGlashan's translation of Cēkīlār's *Periya Purāṇam* (2006). I use both the hymns and hagiographies of the *bhakti* saints to suggest that altruistic, devotional self-sacrifice defines masculinity in *bhakti* ideology.

Advancing through the trajectory of Tamil Śaiva history, my examination of colonial-period reform movements, particularly the movement spearheaded by Ārumuka Nāvalar in Jaffna, is informed by secondary sources. I rely on Dennis Hudson's (1992; 1995) and Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam's (1989) insightful analyses of Nāvalar's role in linking modernity and "refinement" to Śaiva religious identity. In exploring the affects of the recent socio-political crisis in Sri Lanka on conceptions of masculinity, Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam's path-finding work is essential (2005). The connection she posits between themes of martyrdom and self-sacrifice in Tamil nationalist and Cankam literatures undergirds my suggestion that certain traditional masculine ideals continue to resonate jarringly for men today. In addition, Sumathi Ramaswamy's discussion of the ideal protective son in South Indian Tamil nationalist rhetoric abets my conception of masculinity in the Sri Lankan Tamil nationalist movement (1997). For a closer analysis of the socio-political situation in Sri Lanka, I investigate Sri Lankan Tamil nationalist websites. Employing them as primary resources, I point to the ways nationalist ideology pressures Sri Lankan Tamil men to embody ancient ideals of protective self-sacrifice.

Finally, the works of Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah (1985) and E. Valentine Daniel (1996) provide the theoretical lens for my reading of *kāvati* and *viratam*. I employ Tambiah's performative-symbolist approach to ritual to suggest that *kāvati* and *viratam* are both discussions and active pursuits that alter the world of the performers and audience members. Daniel's view on anthroposemiosis supports my claim that both rituals are cathartic acts of collective and individual identity production. For my reading of *viratam*, in particular, anthropologists Filippo and Caroline Osella contribute to my view of Ayyappaṇ worship as a means to build masculine power through renunciation (2003). As this thesis moves through its

narrative of Sri Lankan Tamil masculinities and ritual performances, the significance of literary, cultural, and political history comes to the fore. Early literatures, discourses of reform, and recent social realities engender the multivalence and fragmentation of the Tamil male body.

## Chapter Outline

Comprised of four chapters, this thesis addresses the interplay between religious, cultural, and political forces in Tamil constructions of masculinity. The first two chapters discuss a number of historical moments in Tamil history when images of masculinity are somewhat contingent. The last two chapters focus on Sri Lankan Tamil men in the contemporary Canadian diaspora, and contain the bulk of ethnographic data.

Chapter One analyzes Tamil literature over three distinct historical periods: the Caṅkam period (circa first century BCE - third CE), the *bhakti* period (fifth - tenth centuries CE), and the late colonial period in Tamil Sri Lanka (mid-nineteenth - early twentieth centuries). I focus on these periods because they often surfaced during discussions about Tamil culture with my informants.<sup>12</sup> I examine motifs of masculine courage and power in the Caṅkam anthologies, and point to the deeply embedded ethos of self-sacrifice in *bhakti* poetry and the hagiographies of the Nāyaṅārs. I then turn to the late colonial period in order to locate the link between Śaiva identity and “modern masculinity,” which was largely established during the reform movement led by Āṛumuka Nāvalar. I conclude by demonstrating that some of the masculine motifs embedded in the reform movement resurface in contemporary emic representations of Śaivism.

Chapter Two sheds light on the present circumstances of Sri Lankan Tamils as a

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<sup>12</sup> During interviews I, and almost all of my informants, employed the phrase “Tamil *kalācāram*” to refer to Tamil culture.

community. I begin the chapter with an exploration of the political events from the closing decades of British rule in the mid-twentieth century to the mid-1980s, highlighting the way Tamils were first excluded from the nation as an imagined community (Anderson 1983), and then excommunicated more explicitly. I argue that the political crisis is a direct affront to Tamil masculinity. Turning to an analysis of militant Tamil nationalist reactions to the political events of the twentieth century, I point to the deployment of images of the warrior-hero and self-sacrificing devotee extracted from Tamil cultural history and used to mobilize men to fight for a Tamil nation. In closing, I argue that personal and collective Tamil masculinities are fragmented by memories of Sri Lanka and by the experiences of transnational migration and refugee existence.

In Chapter Three, I turn to an ethnographic account of *kāvaṭi* performances at the Montreal Murugan Temple. First, I analyze themes of courage and altruistic self-sacrifice inscribed in the figure of Murugan and in popular understandings of *kāvaṭi*. I then discuss the complexities of representing *kāvaṭi* in the contemporary Tamil diaspora. While some harbour apologetic attitudes, depicting *kāvaṭi* as a degenerate form of “folk” Hinduism, others understand it to be the apogee of Tamil spiritual heritage. Next, I examine the testimony of five *kāvaṭi* performers. I argue that *kāvaṭi* is not just a demonstration of religious devotion, but also an exemplification of masculine virtue. In concluding the chapter, I suggest that *kāvaṭi* performances are acts of catharsis because they bear the voice of masculine anxiety.

Following a similar trajectory, Chapter Four investigates the links between masculine identity and ritual performance. Here, I point to the importance of spiritual self-sacrifice as an expression of Tamil masculinity. First, I discuss mythological understandings of Ayyappan, and

underscore the way they glorify masculine selflessness and continence. Shifting the discussion to ritual practices at the Montreal Sri Aiyappan Temple, I claim that acts of self-sacrifice assert Tamil masculine strength against the forces of assimilation in Canada. In unpacking the testimony of my primary informants, I argue that performances of *viratam* are understood as a return to primordial forms of Tamil masculinity. At the same time, *viratam* establishes new masculine identities for non-Brahmin Sri Lankan Tamil men. This chapter best demonstrates the many cleavages in contemporary Sri Lankan Tamil understandings of masculinity, and highlights the way ritual culture tries to fill in the gaps. In a pilgrimage to the imagined past, *kāvaṭi* and *viratam* attempt to unify the Tamil male body.

For my informants, rituals assert Tamil masculine identity. Although fractures in individual and collective identity are ultimately irreparable, performances of *kāvaṭi* and *viratam* are fulcrums that link the unstable present to an idealized past, characterized by unity and strength. As my informants explain, ritual performances allow them to situate themselves on the firm ground of Tamil heritage. They connect themselves to early paradigms of Tamil masculinity, which circulate in literary and oral sources. As Chapter One demonstrates, literary works from the Caṅkam and *bhakti* periods, and from the much more recent rhetoric of Śaiva reform, have helped shaped the rugged landscape of contemporary Tamil masculinities.

## Chapter One:

### Mapping Masculinity in Tamil Culture

Over the course of discussions about masculinity and Tamil culture with my informants in Montréal, a number of motifs surfaced repeatedly – altruistic heroism, self-sacrifice, and modernity.<sup>1</sup> These three themes – the first two more intertwined than the third – inform the way Tamil men understand and represent themselves. Although not all of my informants spoke with such candor, some directed me to ancient and medieval Tamil literary sources. Kannan, for example, argued that “Tamil men are brave and do everything for others. You will see. Even in our Cankam literature ... Tamil men give their lives to protect others.” Likewise, Thangavelu pointed out that “Tamil men are like the Nāyanārs ... We give our whole bodies, everything, for god.” The virtue of stoic self-sacrifice clearly came to the fore in these conversations. Even for those who spoke opaquely, the idea of giving self for others – for family, for god, for nation – remained paramount. Many coloured the events of their lives, such as their experiences in their natal villages, the war in Sri Lanka, their migration to Canada, and their current lifestyles, with shades of self-sacrifice. Numerous Tamil men have embedded themselves into what they understand as an ancient, unbroken path of masculinity. For my informants, remaining a Tamil man within the amorphous, unrestricted, uneven geography of Canadian culture requires fastidious observance of the ancient virtue of selflessness.

However, Tamil men are careful not to sink themselves too deeply in the soil of antiquity;

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<sup>1</sup> Such discussions were the most difficult part of the ethnographic research, for both myself and my informants. Like most men, my informants had not self-consciously considered their masculinity in relation to their culture. I encouraged them to do so. I posed questions, such as, “How is a Tamil man different from a Canadian man? Who are the most important male figures in Tamil history? What characteristics are essential to manhood in Tamil culture? How should a Tamil man act?”

they are markedly modern. They have pointed to the ways that Tamil Śaivism is both the oldest religion in the world and the religion most clearly amenable to the laws of science, to contemporary discourses of health and harmony, and to the rhythms of an increasingly capricious, multi-cultural world. Highlighting the beliefs and practices of Brahmanical Hinduism, which they have adopted as their own, many men argue that their culture and religion demonstrate the highest levels of refinement. Some claim that “true Śaivism” is centered on sacrificing personal desires in order to advance spiritually and intellectually. In such cases, Tamil men understand themselves as meditators rather than warriors, who fight an internal battle against desire and immorality. Such cerebral representations of Śaivism challenge the authoritative voices of Protestant missionaries in Sri Lanka who referred to the Śaiva faith as barbarous, hedonistic, and morally deplorable. Even more directly, the polished statements of Ārumuka Nāvalar (1822-1879), the nineteenth-century Śaiva reformer, who is hailed by many of my informants as a great hero of Śaivism, underwrite contemporary understandings of masculinity. Under the influence of expanding Protestantism, Nāvalar reconstructs popular Śaivism, purging it of the elements the missionaries had maligned, and reconciling it with Western styles of education and religiosity. Many of my informants present bifurcated masculine identities: they follow the path laid out by Nāvalar, while at the same time invoking the trail of self-sacrifice blazed by the Caṅkam-period warriors.

In this chapter, I map masculine ideals as they have appeared in different moments of Tamil history in order to provide a better understanding of masculine identity in today’s Sri Lankan Tamil community. I do not aim to provide an exhaustive history of masculinity in Tamil culture, or to present an unbroken chain of Tamil cultural continuity. Instead, I highlight crucial

moments when consistent and structurally congruent masculine ideals emerge. I focus on themes, figures, and texts that surface most often in my ethnographic research, but am careful not to posit contemporary understandings of Tamil masculinity as linked to a static and monolithic heritage of gender norms. I hope to index the processes by which historical ideas about masculinity have been fortified and mobilized by contemporary socio-political discourses. Commonly held paradigms of masculinity are rooted in complex understandings of history, and in representations of Tamil men in contemporary political rhetoric.

This chapter begins with a discussion of literature of the Caṅkam period (circa first century BCE- third CE), considered to be the foundation of Tamil culture. The literature produced during this Tamil “golden age” is thought to have arisen from a number of academies of gods, scholars, and poets. It is considered so pivotal that many scholars maintain that Caṅkam-period phenomenology remains the defining feature of Tamil being (Brunger 1994; Peterson 1989). In my analysis of Caṅkam literature, I point to the image of the warrior-hero who willingly sacrifices life and limb for the protection of kingdom and family. I then move to the medieval *bhakti* period, in which bravery and heroic self-sacrifice take precedence as demonstrated by the Nāyanārs, the Tamil Śaiva poet-saints. I focus exclusively on Śaivism because of its overwhelming popularity in the Sri Lankan Tamil context. In Tamil Sri Lanka, Śaivism is synonymous with Hinduism. Thus, it is not surprising that Śaiva ideals and gendered paradigms are implicated in the Tamil socio-political milieu. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of Āṟumuka Nāvalar, his representation of Śaivism, and his influence on Śaiva communities today. Nāvalar introduces elements of modernity that continue to impact the masculine identities of Sri Lankan Tamil men.

## Praises to the Warrior-Hero in Caṅkam Literature

In Caṅkam literature, men are portrayed as warrior-heroes who are defined by their fearlessness, violence, and spirit of self-sacrifice.<sup>2</sup> Secular, naturalistic poetry from both genres of the Caṅkam corpus, *akam*, “interior,” and *puṇam*, “exterior,” introduces the valorous warrior-hero who elicits enthusiastic praise.<sup>3</sup> As David Shulman explains, the warrior-hero is characterized by “violence, freedom of action, a contempt for risks and dangerous consequences, a certain hardness of disposition, and the abrogation of boundaries,” including sexual restrictions (Shulman 1989, 359). The warrior-hero is so intrepid, so dauntless that he approaches the superhuman. Social norms of self-restraint do not apply to him; his victories on the battlefield incur gratuitous violence and his trysts in multiple bedrooms point to a heightened level of sexual virility. He is known to “dance the victory dance” at the sight of countless bodies lying lifeless on the battlefield (*Paṭṭirupattū* 77, in Ramanujan 1985, 116), and to engage in sojourns with numerous, enticing courtesans, while his wife pines away in his absence.

However, the excessive nature of the warrior-hero’s actions is justified by his protective altruism, which ensures the maintenance of the kingdom. In terms of his promiscuity, the

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<sup>2</sup> The hyphenated term “warrior-hero” is used by Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam in her discussion of Caṅkam-period themes in the LTTE (Hellmann-Rajanayagam 2005). I use it because it incorporates both aggressive violence and righteousness.

<sup>3</sup> The entire corpus of Caṅkam literature consists of the Eight Anthologies (*Eṇṇuttokai*), the Ten Long Poems (*Paṭṭirupattū*), and a grammar called the Old Composition (*Tolkāppiyam*). In total, there are 2,381 poems, which vary in length, style, and content (Ramanujan 1985). They almost all deal with secular issues, and incorporate details about nature and human emotion. During the first three centuries of the Christian era, academies of Tamil poets are thought to have divided the entire corpus into the categories of *puṇam*, “exterior,” and *akam*, “interior.” *Puṇam* works deal with the public sphere, covering themes as diverse as war, kingship, mourning, ethics, and death (Hart 1999, 7; Ramanujan 1967, 99). *Akam* poems deal with the private sphere, namely the stages of love between a man and a woman, and tend to highlight private, interior experiences.

In my discussion of the Caṅkam-period warrior-hero, I focus on poetry of the *puṇam* genre in order to remain concise. I cite the *Paṭṭirupattū* and the *Puṇanāṇṇūru*, which are both components of the *Eṇṇuttokai*. However, within *akam* works, the warrior-hero resurfaces. He is the enchanting, virile lover, who causes great suffering when he is absent.

underlying assumption is that his selflessness and bravery render him deserving of unconditional love. Despite his iniquitous pastimes, he sacrifices his life to protect his wife and the kingdom. Ultimately, the excesses of his masculine energy, which protect the kingdom when properly channeled, are celebrated. While his sexual virility cannot be satisfied by just one woman, he continues to evoke the deep, desperate desire of all who have encountered him. His masculinity brims to the point of danger, but he is honourable. The following excerpts shed light on the characterization of the warrior. For Caṅkam-period authors, he is indubitably heroic:

Because you have died, I cannot rejoice ...  
Must I go and tell your people of your death  
While I lift my hands empty of bangles ...  
Tell me what I must do! (*Puṛaṇāṇūru* 253, in Hart and Heifetz 1999, 154-55)

He embraced women wearing bangles on their arms  
And in a guarded forest he adorned them with flowers! ...  
He destroyed his enemies along with their families  
And his friends he praised to the skies! ...  
Never did he beg from others but never  
Would he refuse any who begged from him!  
In the courts of kings, he displayed his towering glory.  
He repelled the armies bent on invasion,  
And he saw the backs of armies in retreat ...  
Since he did all that he should do, you can  
cut off and fling away his head or burn  
the head of a man who sought such glory! Do as you will!  
(*Puṛaṇāṇūru* 253, in Hart and Heifetz 1999, 154-55)

This world lives  
Because  
Some men do not eat alone ...  
Give their lives for honor ...  
There's no faintness in their hearts  
And they do not strive  
For themselves  
Because such men are,  
This world is (*Puṛaṇāṇūru* 182, in Ramanujan 1985, 157)

All three passages describe the warrior-hero's courageous self-sacrifice. In the first

passage, a female speaker, ostensibly his wife or lover, laments his death. She rebukes him for leaving her, and implicitly expresses her difficulty in living without him. She points to her hands, empty of bangles, which signify auspiciousness and fertility, and demands that he direct her in what to do. Her grief and frustration suggest her yearning desire, and point to his invaluable role of protection and provision. In contrast to the wife or lover, the male speakers who narrate the remaining passages highlight the warrior-heroes' role in protecting and providing for others even in death. The second passage discusses his sexual virility and his martial prowess, which are both overly abundant. He illicitly embraces women in a forest and destroys his enemies' families. However, he lives his life dutifully and munificently. Thus, even a dishonourable death, such as the desecration of his head, would hardly be a blemish on his blameless record. In the final passage, the speaker credits the warrior-hero with the sustenance of the entire world. Specifically, his generous willingness to give his life for others and his refusal to strive for himself nourishes human society.

In addition to wives, lovers, and admiring men, the warrior-heroes' mothers also sing their sons' praises. The poems they narrate most clearly illustrate the integral nature of their sons' sacrifices. Rather than lament the violent deaths of their sons, the mothers of this genre of poetry express pride and admiration. The typical Cankam-period mother is joyful and proud. She praises her son's selfless defense of the kingdom. Beyond demonstrating the idealization of the warrior-hero, these early poems establish a relationship between protected mother and protective son that becomes a key feature of later politicized Tamil masculinity (Ramaswamy 1997).

In the following poems, sacrifice is recognized as an act of necessity, something Tamil

mothers know well. A mutual understanding of duty between mother, son, and king is established in the first poem. Resigned to “the order of things,” each knows their role. The mother must raise the son, and the king must demonstrate proper behaviour. The warrior-hero must stoically and skillfully engage in battle, as indefatigable protection must be given in exchange for motherly love. In the second poem, the mother’s love is activated when she sees her son’s sacrifice. Upon finding his corpse, milk flows from her breasts. The author suggests that the warrior-hero’s sacrificial death engenders renewal and fertility; it is the key to life itself:

To bring forth and rear a son is my duty ...  
To show him good ways is the king’s ...  
And to bear  
A bright sword and do battle,  
To butcher enemy elephants ...  
That is the young man’s duty (*Puṛaṇāṇūru* 312, in Ramanujan 1985, 185)

There, in the very middle  
Of battle-camps  
That heaved like the seas ...  
He had fallen  
in that space  
between armies,  
his body hacked to pieces:  
when she saw him there  
in all his greatness,  
mother’s milk flowed again  
in the withered breasts  
of his mother  
for her warrior son  
who had no thought of retreat (*Puṛaṇāṇūru* 295, in Ramanujan 1985, 183)

In Caṅkam literature, the only person more highly lauded than the warrior-hero is the king. He superlatively embodies the defining characteristics of the warrior-hero: he is brave, strong, and selfless. Even more than the warrior-hero, he is bound to the protection of his kingdom. He also tends to possess an innate sense of duty and justice, which he teaches to the

warrior-hero. As the mother who narrates the above poem tells us, it is the king's duty to show her son "good ways." The king is just and benevolent, but ruthless in his tutelage of the kingdom. Certain poems depict the king with a double nature. He is dangerous and bloodthirsty, but ultimately good. Although he relishes the violence of war, like the warrior-hero, his virtue rests on his selfless motivations. In fact, the wars he commands are thought to have renewing, revitalizing effects, as bloody war scenes are often compared to the harvest (Hart 1999, xix). While the king is a force to reckon with, he willingly sacrifices himself for his kingdom, transforming dangerous power into fertility and life:

His armies love massacre,  
He loves war,  
Yet gifts  
Flow from him ceaselessly ... (*Patirrupattu* 60, in Ramanujan 1985, 131)

Great king,  
You shield your men from ruin,  
So your victories, your greatness  
Are bywords ... (*Patirrupattu* 35, in Ramanujan 1985, 115)

A perfected warrior-hero, the king elicits devotion that surpasses the praises offered to his non-royal counterpart. In fact, in many *puram* works, the warrior-hero himself praises the king's virtues and expresses his willingness to sacrifice his life to honour him. In such cases, the king and kingdom are understood as an indistinguishable force, which requires the dutiful devotion of the warrior-hero. The warrior-hero exhibits deep allegiance to king/kingdom, and hopes to emulate his ruler's exemplary bravery and martial prowess. The warrior-heroes' devotion to the king is so deeply felt that some take their own lives when their king dies (Hart 1999, xix-xx). The following two poems illustrate the extent of the warrior-hero's admiration for and devotion to the king. The king is described as the essence of reality and is equated with life

itself. However, he also munificently manifests himself in the warrior's heart:

Paddy is not life,  
Water is not life.  
The life of this broad world  
Is the king ...  
With his many-speared army ... (*Puranāṇūru* 186, in Hart 1999, 13)

Hail lord [king] Atapuṅkaṇ  
All who open my heart  
Will find you there,  
And if I forget you  
It will be  
Only when my life is leaving my body  
And I forget myself.  
Only then will I forget you  
Whose just demeanor  
Means that you care for many  
Every day ... (*Puranāṇūru* 175, in Hart 1999, 14)

In the Caṅkam-period, courage, selflessness, duty, and excessive virility seem to have defined masculinity. These traits are deeply embedded in the literature's two most lauded figures, the warrior-hero and the king, who are essential to both the maintenance of the kingdom and to human society at large. Later literary and cultural forms incorporate Caṅkam-period characteristics into their paradigmatic men, and continue to emphasize man-to-man relationships that are similar in structure to the bond between warrior-hero and king. The archetype of the male role model-cum-divine being, served by his loyal devotee remains prominent in medieval literature and is carried into the contemporary popular imagination.

However, the continuity between understandings of masculinity is not definitive, as broad shifts figure throughout the trajectory of Tamil cultural history. As we move out of the Caṅkam period into the medieval period, both connection and rupture come to the fore. From approximately the fourth through the seventh centuries CE Tamil literature entered a

transitional phase as a new religious ideology, *bhakti*, swept through Tamil regions. Although structure and conventions remained similar to earlier Caṅkam works, largely secular themes were replaced by motifs of ecstatic religiosity. During this period, characteristics such as self-sacrifice, allegiance, and courage remained prominent, but the object of devotion shifted from king and kingdom to god and religious community.

### **The Nāyaṇārs: Sacrificing Self for Śiva**

The major impetus for this shift in literary themes was the *bhakti* (literally “love” or “devotion”) movement (fifth-tenth centuries CE), which was an era of great religious fervour on an unprecedented scale. During this period a new understanding of human relationships with god transformed the religio-cultural landscape of the subcontinent. Large segments of the population came to believe that loving devotion is the most effective and authentic model of religiosity. A somewhat radical ideology, *bhakti* posited pure emotion as the primary vehicle to approach the divine, and encouraged the abandonment of Brahmanical ritual norms and textual studies in favour of single-minded, ecstatic devotion. *Bhakti* also established the idea that any individual can achieve liberating union with god, *mokṣa*, regardless of caste or gender, an idea that in some cases overturned Brahmins’ ritual authority.<sup>4</sup> The primary medium for the transmission of *bhakti* ideology was a number of mystical poet-saints, which included some women and members of lower castes. In the Śaiva context sixty-three prolific poets, referred to as the Nāyaṇārs, are credited with the dissemination of *bhakti*. Traveling throughout the Tamil

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<sup>4</sup> Given its approach to caste and gender, it is not surprising that *bhakti* had an extremely wide appeal, and continues to find expression in nearly all dimensions of living Hinduism.

regions, they popularized their poetry and ecstatic religiosity.<sup>5</sup>

Today the Nāyaṇārs are understood as divine beings and exemplary devotees. As they are an integral component of ritual culture and popular mythology, their impact on contemporary Tamil Śaivism cannot be overstated. Their title, the Nāyaṇārs (literally, “leaders”) points to their position as role models, and the central placement of their images in Tamil Śaiva temples underscores their divinity. Ubiquitous images of the Nāyaṇārs are placed in close physical proximity to Śiva, and are worshipped much like other Śaiva deities. In addition, the recitation of *Tēvāram*, the Tamil hymns of the three most celebrated Nāyaṇārs – Campantar, Appar, and Cuntarar – is one of the key components of Tamil Śaiva temple ritual.<sup>6</sup> The use of *Tēvāram*’s in the ritual context serves to disseminate the ideas of the Nāyaṇārs, and publicly celebrates their achievements. Finally their hagiographies, which have been compiled in Cēkḷiār’s twelfth-century *Periya Purāṇam*, give voice to their ecstatic model of religiosity and uphold their status as the perfection of Śaiva devotion. In some ways, the Nāyaṇārs are structurally parallel to the Caṅkam period kings who also have the two-pronged status of divine being and mortal role model. However, the Nāyaṇārs’ single-minded devotion to Śiva strays from masculine behavioural ideals established in the Caṅkam period.

In terms of masculinity, the Nāyaṇārs set new standards of behaviour for Tamil Śaiva men. Both their poetry and their hagiographies reflect the vocabulary of the selfless Caṅkam-era

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<sup>5</sup> Although nearly all of the scholarship on the Nāyaṇārs refers to their influence in the Tamil-speaking regions of South India, their presence in Sri Lanka was also significant. They sung at shrines in Jaffna, debated with Buddhist monks, and converted at least one king from Buddhism to Śaivism (Peterson 1989, 13; Velupillai 2002, 488-89). The influence of the Nāyaṇārs in the contemporary Sri Lankan Tamil Śaiva milieu is unquestionable.

<sup>6</sup> The Nāyaṇārs are essential elements of Śaiva religiosity in Montréal. Four of the Nāyaṇārs, the three who composed the *Tēvāram* and Māṇikkavācakar, are worshipped alongside Śaivite deities at the Montreal Murugan Temple. At both the Montreal Murugan Temple and the Montreal Sri Aiyappan Temple the propitiation of the saints and the recitation of *Tēvāram* are requisite components of *pāja*.

warrior, but shift the locus of devotion from king and kingdom to Śiva and Śaivite community. While fearless self-sacrifice remains a paramount component of their behaviour, their protective capacity becomes centred on Śiva. They fiercely guard Śiva and the Śaivite community, but the defense of mortals, such as wives and children, recedes into the background.<sup>7</sup> In fact, some Nāyaṇārs are famed for having given their wives and children to Śiva and Śaiva devotees for consumption (*Periya Purāṇam* 13, v. 502-549; 42, v. 3660-3747).<sup>8</sup> In addition to alterations in protective capacity, the excesses of the virile warrior-hero are drawn away from human sexuality and combative glory, and redirected towards love for Śiva. All desires for sexual pleasure and worldly victory are overshadowed by an all-encompassing, devotional love.

Outlining the new boundaries of Tamil masculinity, the male Nāyaṇārs are above all radical self-sacrificers. The *Periya Purāṇam* foregrounds their staggering self-sacrifices.<sup>9</sup> Although the narratives are diverse, the defining feature of male Nāyaṇārs is their surrender of all human desires, including the desire to preserve one's own family and body. Such types of complete self-sacrifice are linked to masculinity as they do not figure prominently in the hagiographies of female Nāyaṇārs, who demonstrate more mainstream expressions of devotion. Certainly the life of Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār, the most renowned of the female Nāyaṇārs, is mundane compared to the violent feats of many of the male Nāyaṇārs. She expresses her *bhakti* by giving a

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<sup>7</sup> Although a discussion of some of the Nāyaṇārs' disregard for their families is beyond the scope of this thesis, Dennis Hudson's observations are valuable. According to Hudson, the Nāyaṇār does not hesitate to involve his wife and children in his fanatical commitment to Śiva because they are extensions of himself that he is giving to the lord (Hudson 1990, 386). The Nāyaṇār's individuality is communal, extending beyond his own bodily boundaries into the bodies of his kin (ibid., 396). Hudson's argument elucidates the way sacrificing others can be understood as a type of self-sacrifice.

<sup>8</sup> All of my references to the content of the *Periya Purāṇam* are drawn from Alastair McGlashan's translation of the text (2006).

<sup>9</sup> While the *Periya Purāṇam* was composed two centuries after what is technically considered the *bhakti* period, the narratives it contains have defined *bhakti* ideology as much, or perhaps more than, the Nāyaṇārs own hymns. In the contemporary popular imagination, the *Periya Purāṇam* operates as one of the most foundational extant *bhakti* texts.

Śiva devotee a mango that had been reserved for her husband (*Periya Purāṇam* 30, v. 1717-1782).

In contrast to their more reserved female counterparts, the fervent devotion of the Nāyaṇārs is so intense that it has been called *vaṇṇaṇpu*, or violent love (Vamadeva 1995, 35). According to Chandraleka Vamadeva, the emotional intensity of the Nāyaṇārs' love for Śiva drives them "far beyond normal moral boundaries" to an "excess of blood and death," which pleases Śiva because it expresses their total devotion (ibid.). Like that of the warrior-hero, the gratuitous violence of the Nāyaṇār is lauded because of the pure motivations behind it. By virtue of their selfless devotion, the Nāyaṇārs are understood to receive Śiva's *aruḷ*, or grace, and achieve *mokṣa*.<sup>10</sup> Here Śiva's *aruḷ*, achieved through great suffering, liberates the Nāyaṇārs from corporeal existence, and immortalizes them.

The hagiographies of the Nāyaṇārs recall the way many of them eagerly sacrificed their lives for Śiva. The celebrated stories of the Nāyaṇārs, Kaṇṇappar (*Periya Purāṇam* 1, v. 650-830) and Kaliyar (*Periya Purāṇam* 51, v. 4022-4038), aptly illustrate this motif. Kaṇṇappar, according to the *Periya Purāṇam* and popular oral sources, was a barbaric, untouchable hunter who was overcome by his love for Śiva (Hudson 1990, 381). When Śiva tested Kaṇṇappar's *bhakti* by crying blood, Kaṇṇappar began to rip out his own eyes in order to give them to his beloved deity. Śiva appeared before Kaṇṇappar to stop him from committing the act of self-mortification, and praised him for his pure love and devotion. Kaliyar was not so lucky. He was an oil presser who expressed his devotion to Śiva by burning lamps in the temple day and night. Śiva

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<sup>10</sup> Somewhat different from conceptions of *mokṣa* in traditional Brahmanical Hinduism, in *bhakti* the reception of Śiva's *aruḷ* is equated with liberation. Here the goal of Hindu practice itself is recast in terms of reciprocated love. By loving Śiva, devotees receive his love and are liberated. Liberation is not achieved through years of intellectual exercise, but rather through simple love and devotion. To be a devotee is to commune with Śiva through love (Peterson 1989, 48).

decided to test his devotion by eliminating his wealth, forcing Kaliyar to fill the lamps through various degrading means. One day, he ran out of options: “Unable to give up the satisfaction of serving Śiva according to his commitment, he chose to kill himself in the act of service. He put wicks in the lamp bowls, arranged them carefully, took a knife, and in order to substitute his blood for the missing oil, cut his throat” (ibid., 389). For both Kaṇṇappar and Kaliyar everything must be sacrificed in serving Śiva.

Despite the popularity of narratives punctuated with *vaṇṇanpu*, selfless devotion to Śiva is not always carried out with such excess. In fact, the tradition’s most venerated preceptors, the *mūvar* (literally “the three”) – Appar, Campantar, and Cuntarar – led relatively quotidian lives compared to the other Nāyaṇārs (Peterson 1989, 48).<sup>11</sup> Self-sacrifice, nonetheless, remains prominent, especially for Appar and Campantar, and tropes of physical suffering and redemption fail to recede into the background.<sup>12</sup> Agony comes to the fore in the hagiography of Appar (*Periya Purāṇam* 27, v. 1266-1694). He must suffer intense physical pain, a type of bodily sacrifice, in order to receive Śiva’s *aruḷ*. According to the celebrated tale, Appar was born into a

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<sup>11</sup> Appar and Campantar were contemporaries, living between 570 and 670 CE. Appar spent the latter half of his life traveling from one shrine to another, singing Śiva’s praises. Campantar was a child devotee who miraculously received the gift of sacred poetry from Śiva himself, and traveled to four major Śiva shrines to sing his hymns. He also became a humble devotee of Appar, whose name (literally “father”) he conceived. Finally Cuntarar, who lived about a century after the other two *mūvar*, received Śiva’s grace on his wedding day, composed numerous hymns, and ascended to heaven on a white elephant with his friend the Cēra king (Peterson 1989, 21).

Appar and Campantar were fully dedicated to expressing their love for Śiva, and gave up the pleasures of household life to become his humble servants. Perhaps the ubiquitous iconographic image of Appar with his hoe best illustrates this type of devotion. Medieval bronze images of Appar, which mirror depictions of him found in popular oral narratives and in the *Periya Purāṇam*, represent Appar with a hoe, which he used to clear the grounds of Śiva temples of weeds and grass. Ultimately, he expressed his devotion to Śiva by conducting himself with deep humility toward both the deity and the community of devotees.

<sup>12</sup> Cuntarar, who tends to be less popular than the others, does not neatly fit into the paradigm of humble, self-sacrificing devotion. Having been born into a family of Nāyaṇārs, he received Śiva’s *aruḷ* without having to abandon the comforts of household life, such as marriage and wealth (*Periya Purāṇam* 78, v 4229-4281). His comparatively less extraordinary hagiography may be the cause of his relative obscurity. In my experiences, his hagiography is not often recited by Tamil Śaiva devotees. Far more common are the hagiographies of the other two *mūvar* and the more extreme Nāyaṇārs, such as Kaṇṇappar.

Śaiva family, but drifted into the fold of the then dominant Jaina religion. He became a famous Jaina teacher attracting many admirers and followers. One day, however, he became afflicted with acute colitis, which caused agonizing stomach pains. He could find no relief from his ailment, which he describes as “pain beyond imagining...[a] poisonous disease that twists my guts” (Appar TVR IV: 1.2, in Peterson 1989, 284). While the Jainas could not cure him, his sister implored Śiva for relief. Impelled by her prayers, Appar returned to his natal village. His sister spread sacred ash on him and recited the five-syllable mantra, whereupon he burst into devotional song. He was instantly cured and became a devout Śaivite. Though in this narrative the Nāyaṇār does not suffer out of his fanatical love for Śiva, the idea that he must suffer physically in order to receive Śiva’s *aruḷ* endures.

The pain that leads men to Śiva’s *aruḷ* is not, however, exclusively physical; it can also be emotional. The story of Aruṇakirinātar, the more recent, fifteenth-century Śaiva saint, reveals the way psychological suffering is also related to the reception of divine grace. While in this case devotion to Murukaṇ displaces devotion to Śiva, the story of Aruṇakirinātar fits squarely within the framework of traditional Śaiva *bhakti*.<sup>13</sup> According to the narrative, which is recorded in a nineteenth-century poetic treatise entitled *Aruṇakirinātar suvāmikaḷ purāṇam* and continues to circulate orally (Clothey 1984, 5), Aruṇakirinātar “spent his young years as a rioter, good-for-nothing brawler, drunkard, and unbridled seducer of women” (Zvelebil 1973, 239). After ruining his health and reputation, he tried to commit suicide by jumping off the northern tower of the famous Tiruvaṇṇāmalai temple (ibid., 240). Instead of ending his wretched life, he landed softly in the arms of a holy man who turned out to be Murukaṇ himself (ibid.). After some

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<sup>13</sup> Although he lived much later than the Nāyaṇārs and was a devotee of Murukaṇ, he is an honorary Nāyaṇār. Contemporary Śaivites consider him to be on par with the Nāyaṇārs and often refer to his poetry as *Tēvāram*.

encouragement from a disguised Murugaṇ, Aruṇakirinātar “burst into streams of beautiful songs, and from that day Aruṇakiri became the most ardent devotee of Murugaṇ, wandering from temple to temple throughout Tamilnad, praising life and God in verses which have no like in Tamil literature” (ibid.). Ultimately, Aruṇakirinātar was saved from his state of suffering when he let go of himself – his desires and his pleasure-seeking hedonism. In a way, his willingness to sacrifice himself led to redemption. Through great psychological suffering and a final self-inflicted defeat, Aruṇakirinātar received Śiva’s transformative *aruḷ* and became an exemplary poet-saint.

With some new narrative twists, the story of Aruṇakirinātar perpetuates the themes of masculine devotionism present in the hagiographies and poems of the earliest Nāyaṇārs. Without fear or hesitation, a man must sacrifice himself and endure suffering in order to receive divine grace. Whether giving his eyes to Śiva, withstanding the agony of colic, or attempting suicide in a fit of despair, the male Śaiva saint is applauded for his bravery, stoicism, and selflessness. This particularly rugged model continues to inform contemporary understandings of devotion to Śiva. Be it *vannaṇpu* or the trajectory of suffering and relief, male *bhakti* consistently encompasses the reflection of the warrior-hero who must endure gruesome sacrifice for the lord and his kingdom. At the same time, the male *bhakta*, or devotee, diverges from the warrior-hero in that his religious devotion is paramount, and his excess virility is channeled into his love for Śiva.

The virtues of selfless devotion, established by the Nāyaṇārs, continue to resonate with many Sri Lankan Tamil men today. A number of the Nāyaṇārs’ hagiographies, including those cited above, were recounted to me by my informants in Montréal. Smiling proudly as they

narrated often gruesome stories of love and commitment, many men seem to understand the Nāyaṇārs as heroes whom they hope to emulate.

### ***Bhakti* Masculinity and Tamil Identity**

The type of masculinity established by the Śaiva saints continues to impact Tamil men because it has been rendered integral to Tamil identity. The Nāyaṇārs bound their style of selfless, devotional masculinity to the Tamil language, land, and culture. To be a servant of Śiva was to be Tamil, and to be Tamil was to be a servant of Śiva. This ideological coupling of Śaiva devotionalism and Tamil identity, which has been called the “Tamilization of Śaivism,” was reified by both the pilgrimages of the saints and their poetry (Peterson 1989, 12-18). By traveling to and praising temples within the Tamil region, the Nāyaṇārs carved their hymns and hagiographies into the Tamil landscape. More importantly, in their poetry, they refer to Śaivism as *the* Tamil religion and juxtapose it to the heretical and “foreign” faiths, Jainism and Buddhism, which were popular in Tamil regions at that time (ibid., 12).

In contrast to the “foreign tongues” spoken by the Jains and Buddhists, the Nāyaṇārs praise the Tamil language for its sweetness, purity, and antiquity.<sup>14</sup> They also claim that Tamil is sacred because it is the language in which Śiva chose to reveal himself. Although the Nāyaṇārs did not anthropomorphize Tamil, they render it divine by associating it with Śiva and his worship. Equating the Tamil language with Śiva, Appar writes, “See the god! ... See him who is Sanskrit of the North and southern Tamil and the four Vedas! ... See Śiva!” (Appar TVR VI: 301.1, in

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<sup>14</sup> Not surprisingly, their works eventually led to the official sacralization of Tamil. The *Periya purāṇam*’s author, Cēkkaḷār, identified the *Tēvāram* as *tamiḷmaṟai*, “The Tamil Veda.” This new title boosted the status of Tamil to the divine level of Sanskrit, and legitimated Tamil Śaivism as opposed to Brahman-dominated, Sanskritic Hinduism (Peterson 1989, 52).

Peterson 1989, 112). Appar also views Tamil as central to the worship of Śiva. He reminds Śiva that he never fails to worship him with the sounds of Tamil: “I have never failed to worship you with flowers and incense and water, never failed to sing you in melodious Tamil songs” (Appar TVR IV: 1.6, in Peterson 1989, 285).

The Nāyanārs’, and particularly the *mūvars*’, sanctification of the Tamil language incites battle calls reminiscent of those addressed to Caṅkam warrior-heroes. Fiercely protective of their sacred language, the Nāyanārs summon Tamil men to guard their mother tongue and their community. Here language and landscape converge to form cultural identity, which is endangered by the presence of outsiders. The Nāyanārs construct the Jains and Buddhists as “others”, and vehemently guard Tamil from the “foreign tongues” that they claim are spoken by members of the heterodox traditions.<sup>15</sup> As Campantar states, the Jains’ lack of knowledge of Tamil is one of the markers of their heresy. He suggests that their presence is a threat to the Tamil language and the Śaiva/Tamil people. He writes, “With Araṇ [Śiva] of Ālavāy by my side, I will easily defeat those filthy Jain monks who wander like elephants in a rut ... loudly declaiming in the corrupt Prakrit tongue ... and know[ing] neither good Tamil nor the Sanskrit language” (TVR III: 297.2, in Peterson 1989, 172).

Much later, in the mid-twentieth century, the Nāyanārs’ representation of Tamil as a divine language under attack was invoked in a new context.<sup>16</sup> During the highpoint of the Dravidian Movement in the twentieth century, Tamil was imagined as a goddess, mother, or

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<sup>15</sup> While the Śaivites depict the Jains and Buddhists as foreigners, most were actually native Tamil speakers. In fact, the Yāpparuṅkalam (tenth century CE) and the Yāpparuṅkalakkārikai (tenth century CE), both attributed to the Jain monk Amitacakkara, are full of praise for Tamil envisioned as a lovely young woman (Monius 2008).

<sup>16</sup> While occasionally Caṅkam-period panegyrics are directed towards the Tamil language (Ramaswamy 1997, 81), the divinity of Tamil is not intimated until the *bhakti* period. Much later, P. Sundaram Pillai (1855-1897) popularized the idea of Tamil as a goddess, mother, and maiden in his praise poem, *Tāyir Mēl Anai* (“An Oath to Mother”) (ibid.).

maiden – Tamilttāy (literally, “Tamil Mother”) – who had been imprisoned or violated by malevolent non-regional languages, especially Hindi and English (Ramaswamy 1997). The deployment of images of Tamilttāy violated by other languages, through poetry, prose, and lithographs, was a call to duty for Tamil men who were required to protect her (ibid.). Soon after her appearance in South India, Tamilttāy received enthusiastic approbation from Sri Lankan Tamils (Wilson 2000, 30). Navaliyur Somasunthara Pulavar (1876–1953), a teacher and poet in Jaffna, sings Tamilttāy’s praises (Ramaswamy 1997, 86), and Puttoli, a twentieth-century Sri Lankan Tamil author, points to the profusion of her tears after the anti-Tamil riots in the 1970s (Puttoli 1977) [Figure 1]. Tamilttāy’s role in Sri Lanka is similar to her role in South India; she urgently elicits the protection of her brave, devoted sons. The Tamilization of Śaivism and subsequent deification of the Tamil language reaffirms traditional images of Tamil masculinity, characterized by heroism, protective bravery, and self-sacrifice, and concretizes gender roles as integral components of ethno-linguistic identity. The *bhakta* is called to protect, not just Śiva and the Śaiva community, but the Tamil language and culture in which both are embedded.

### **Modernizing Tamil Masculinity: Ārumuka Nāvalar and the Śaiva Reforms**

Since the mid-nineteenth century, the terrain of Tamil masculinity has been reconstructed according to the blueprints of colonial modernity. When missionaries and colonists arrived in Sri Lanka, they immediately began rebuking and “civilizing” the natives. They claimed the elevated vantage point of modernity because they had supposedly adopted the practice of “universal humanism” by redistributing political, social, economic, and cultural authority away from the elites and into the hands of the body politic (Bayoumi 2000, 27). They

juxtaposed themselves with the “savage natives” who, they believed, continued to live according to the cruel laws of despotism and strict social stratification.<sup>17</sup> While the idea of universal humanism was an undercurrent of colonial discourse, the more explicit requirements of modernity were “literacy, mobility, and familiarity with the West and Westerners” (Philip 2003, 233). The understanding of familiarity with the West as a requisite component of modernity implies a sense of “keeping up,” which continues to resonate today. As the cultural and technological landscape of the West is in a constant state of movement, the conditions of remaining modern fluctuate. From universal humanism to notions of gender equality, “keeping up” with the West entails subscribing to a variety of ever-changing ideologies.

Despite their ironic calls for universal humanism in the colonial period, European attempts to enlighten natives were informed by their hierarchical conception of South Asian religion. European colonists and Orientalist scholars favoured Sanskritic Hinduism, which tends to involve more physically modest displays of religiosity, such as reading and meditation, as opposed to the more flamboyant forms of popular religion (Sugirtharajah 2001). As quiet textual study more closely resembles Western religious observance, especially Bible study, Sanskritic Hinduism met the approval of Europeans. In addition, the understanding of the body as the locus of all things, low, unspiritual, and unintelligent, which was deeply entrenched in post-Enlightenment European thought, furnished a strong aversion to corporeal religiosity. Physical expressions of devotion were frowned upon, while the ancient wisdom of Sanskritic Hinduism

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<sup>17</sup> Moustafa Bayoumi’s observations are useful in considering the nuances of the civilizing project. Ironically, the colonists exercised their own forms of absolute power in order to bring the natives into the fold of civilization (Bayoumi 2000, 27). “The fact that colonialism took place offshore, among people who were fundamentally different, meant that the rules of social organization, and of bringing these individuals into ‘civilization,’ could easily be considered and applied differently than at home” (ibid.).

was lauded.<sup>18</sup> Demonstrations of devotional heroism, such as those that reflect the masculine paradigm of the Nāyanārs, were belittled. For example, the French missionary Jean-Antoine Dubois called Hindu practitioners “imbeciles,” and stipulated that stupid practices were common among “men of low birth”:

Silly fanatics ... make it their task to torture themselves and to mutilate their bodies in a hundred different ways. I could not help shuddering one day at seeing one of these imbeciles with his lips pierced by two long nails ... The blood was still trickling down his chin ... the Sudras who practice such penances are for the most part men of low birth ... (Dubois 1897, 597-599)

Despite the power of colonial polemics and the invasive discourse of modernity, European constructions and their effects depended on the visions and interests of locally dominant groups (Vaitheespara 1999, 51-53).

The work of Ārumuka Nāvalar (1822-1879) and its deep impact on Sri Lankan Tamils exemplifies a double-reeded process of colonization, from outside and from within. In nineteenth-century Jaffna, Nāvalar spearheaded the Śaiva reform movement; he combated missionary critiques and conversions by calling for the purification and refinement of Śaivism.<sup>19</sup> Taking his cue from colonial and missionary understandings of the “progressive degeneration of Hinduism,” Nāvalar argued that knowledge of Śaivism had diminished over the centuries, leading to the “folk practices” that missionaries and members of the colonial regime were eager to label barbaric. According to Nāvalar, commonly scrutinized low-caste practices, such as *kāvaṭi*

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<sup>18</sup> Europeans tended to respect Sanskrit, which they connected to their own heritage. Amid the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European preoccupation with the origins of language and human civilization, philologists and linguists discovered similarities between Sanskrit and European languages. Many European writers used linguistic connections to argue that the Brahmins had originated in Eastern Europe, migrated to the subcontinent, where they conquered the natives, and introduced all extant elements of cultural refinement to the people of India. In this way, the colonists corroborated their own assumptions that the indigenous Indians were a lesser stock of human beings.

<sup>19</sup> The *Morning Star*, a Tamil and English journal founded by Tamil Christians, was a major source of anti-Śaiva rhetoric in the mid-nineteenth century. It expounded the evils of Śaivism. For example, its authors argued that Śaivism does not prevent or even condemn lying, cheating, infidelity, or the oppression of the poor (Hudson 1995, 98).

and animal sacrifice, were not genuine expressions of Śaiva religion. Although he was born into a non-Brahmin Vēḷāḷar family and remained a life-long advocate of Vēḷāḷar dominance, Nāvalar reconstructed Śaivism according to both the values of colonial modernity and Brahmanic cultural norms.<sup>20</sup> Nāvalar's version of Śaiva practice required Sanskrit learning and self-restraint as well as a work ethic oriented towards the acquisition of wealth. Today, Nāvalar's thought resonates among Śaivas who consider the reformer a cultural icon and a saint on par with the Nāyaṇārs (Hudson 1992, 43). As I explain in chapters three and four, colonial and Brahmanical ideologies continue to affect the practices of Tamil Vēḷāḷar Śaivites.

Nāvalar "civilized" Tamil Śaivism and its adherents by elevating the religious status of learning, Sanskritizing popular ritual practice, and introducing Western pedagogical styles and values. Educated by Protestant missionaries, and thus well aware of their depiction of Śaivism as barbaric and chaotic, Nāvalar constructed a coherent Śaiva system based almost exclusively on Brahmanical practices (Hudson 1992, 30).<sup>21</sup> For Nāvalar true Śaivism was Śaiva Siddhānta, the eleventh-century philosophical school that incorporated the Sanskrit Vedas and Āgamas as well as the corpus of the Nāyaṇārs' poetry.<sup>22</sup> In order to disseminate its teachings, Nāvalar and his acolytes established a number of schools and distributed Tamil books and pamphlets throughout

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<sup>20</sup> Since the Vēḷāḷars are the numerically and socio-economically dominant group in Jaffna, they have controlled the operation of temples. However, Brahmanical authority was rarely challenged as Vēḷāḷars considered their respect for Brahmins a marker of the purity and antiquity of their society (Pfaffenberger 1982). For the first time, Nāvalar called on Vēḷāḷars to question the spiritual dominance of Brahmins, but at the same time reconstructed Vēḷāḷar Śaivism according to Brahmanical paradigms.

<sup>21</sup> Although he was born of a Śaiva poet and received an extensive education in Tamil literature, Nāvalar's family sent him to a Christian mission school to learn English and take advantage of the Western system of education.

<sup>22</sup> As Hellmann-Rajanayagam notes, unlike the Nāyaṇārs, Nāvalar did not create a new religious system, but rather re-emphasized and streamlined certain pre-existing aspects of Śiva worship (Hellmann-Rajanayagam 1989, 252). While many scholars have pointed to the role of Protestantism in Nāvalar's thought (Hudson 1995; Bate 2000), everything he taught was autochthonous. More than anything, he adopted Protestant methods for explaining and justifying Śaiva ideas.

Sri Lanka and South India.<sup>23</sup> In his schools, the study of Āgama and Veda was required and “unrefined” elements of Śaiva culture (such as animal sacrifice and the worship of malevolent deities) were maligned (Hudson 1995, 98; Ambalavanar 2006, 151).<sup>24</sup> Nāvalar discounted popular practices, which he posited as excrescences originating from the *bhakti* movement, and favoured textual authority (Hellmann-Rajanayagam 1989, 239). In addition to introducing textual learning in his schools, Nāvalar translated a number of works and founded a printing press in order to produce publications that would endow Śaivites with knowledge about their religion.

Beyond the more obvious ways that mass education was amenable to the values of colonial modernity, it also adhered to the idea of universal humanism. Nāvalar corroborated the modernity of Śaiva culture by ostensibly bringing previously guarded religious knowledge to the masses. However, Nāvalar was not the great harbinger of egalitarianism that his admirers have envisioned; Vēḷāḷars were the primary benefactors of his reforms.<sup>25</sup> Despite the reality of Vēḷāḷar hegemony, Nāvalar managed to create a façade of universal humanism before the Śaiva community. Moreover, Nāvalar *did* bring elite knowledge to the Vēḷāḷars, enabling them to challenge the supremacy of Brahmanical ritual authority. By opening up the knowledge of Āgama and Veda to Vēḷāḷars, and arguing that both textual canons hold precedence over Brahmanical tradition, Nāvalar endowed Vēḷāḷars with the sense that they possessed the “true wisdom” of

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<sup>23</sup> Nāvalar founded the School of Śaiva Spelndour in 1848, which eventually spawned more than one hundred and fifty schools.

<sup>24</sup> Nāvalar’s opposition to animal sacrifice helped Śaivas remain “true,” as it conformed to the prescriptions of the Āgamas, and helped align them with modern sensibility. Modern Christianity had completely divorced blood sacrifice from religious practice and thus Christians saw Nāvalar’s approach as sensibly “civilized” religious proscription (Hudson 1992, 30).

<sup>25</sup> Nāvalar did not call for the education of lower or untouchable castes. Rather, he claimed that their duty is to serve the higher castes (Hellmann-Rajanayagam 1989, 248). Nāvalar was so caste conscious that he refused to enter the home of an illegitimate, mixed caste son of a petty king in Tamil Nadu (ibid.).

their faith (Hudson 1992, 33). Vēḷāḷars were afforded the authority to check on whether the Brahmin priests were performing rituals in the “proper” way (ibid., 246). Scriptural learning even provided Vēḷāḷars with their own ritual power. In his major treatise on Śaivism, the *Caivattūṣaṇaparikāram*, Nāvalar asserted that the key component of ritual action is reading texts, which cultivate the self (Ambalavanar 2006, 71). Learning thus became a signifier of Śaiva modernity and an efficacious ritual.

Largely because of Nāvalar’s work, the prestige of learning acquired a value equal to the ideal of self-sacrifice established by the Nāyaṇārs. Although Nāvalar greatly admired the Nāyaṇārs, whose work was a key component of Śaiva Siddhānta, he advocated a type of *bhakti* that was more cerebral than ecstatic or emotional. He idealized devotion through learning, rather than through bodily sacrifice: “Over and over he reiterated the belief that individual devotion to Śiva would be born from the knowledge of scripture” (Hudson 1992, 47). Nāvalar encouraged Tamil men to admire the Nāyaṇārs from a composed distance by studying their lives, rather than trying to emulate them. Interpreting the importance of the Nāyaṇārs in a decidedly intellectual light, Nāvalar argued that, “the models of piety provided by these saints would inspire Śaivas to remove their ignorance” (Hudson 1995, 104). In order to facilitate such enlightenment, Nāvalar published the first prose rendition of Cēkkilār’s *Periya Purāṇam* in 1852.

Although Nāvalar emphasized orthodoxy over orthopraxy, he valued Brahmanical conceptions of ritual purity and piety. In *Civālayataricaṇavīti* (“The Proper Way to Worship in Śiva’s Temple”), Nāvalar argues that devotees must follow Śiva in ways “appropriate to their respective classes and stages of life according to the rules of the Vedas and Āgamas that he [Śiva] has graciously created” (Nāvalar 1882, in Hudson 1995, 311). Nāvalar also applied a number of

purity regulations to the acts of reciting and hearing the *Periya Purāṇam*, creating a ritual context appropriate to his assertion that acquiring the knowledge of the text was a religious act conferring spiritual benefits.<sup>26</sup> Nāvalar adopted many elements of Brahmanical piety in his own life. Although he was not attached to a *maṭha*, Nāvalar was a scholar, devotee, and preacher who vowed complete celibacy (Hudson 1992, 30). Ultimately, his advocacy of Brahmanical practice diminished the excesses of Tamil masculinity. The ideal Tamil man, according to Nāvalar, would deny himself any indulgences, without being drawn to the excessive love of *vannanpu*. The “reformed” Tamil man was pious, but controlled.

In addition to more well-mannered models of belief and practice, Nāvalar incorporated Western ideologies into both his education system and his theological discourse. Nāvalar’s school system imitated the Protestant schools he knew intimately, adapting the pedagogical methodology and subject matter of the West. Moving away from the traditional Tamil paradigm of memorization and individual learning, Nāvalar advocated the Western model that required all students to learn the same materials at the same pace (Hudson 1995, 102-3). He also incorporated Western science, history, and geography into the curriculum of his Śaiva schools, ensuring that Śaiva men became modern cosmopolites.

Both inside and outside his schools, Nāvalar promoted the idea that Śaivism was the one true faith, and could be proved through logical and rational argumentation, the same method that missionaries had used to discredit it. Attacking Protestantism intellectually, Nāvalar self-consciously characterized himself and the Śaiva community at large as learned and wholly

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<sup>26</sup> Contrary to the Nāyanārs, whose stories of transgressive mutual love colour the pages of the text, participants in the recitation of the *Periya Purāṇam* were to maintain strict bodily purity. Nāvalar required them to abstain from meat and liquor, to apply sacred ash to their bodies, and to use consecrated *rudrākṣa* beads for reciting the five-syllable mantra (Hudson 1995, 105).

modern. In an 1842 letter to the *Morning Star*, an anti-Śaiva journal established by Tamil Christians, Nāvalar argues that a similar temple-centred cult stands at the center of both the Bible and the Śaiva scriptures (Hudson 1995, 99). Therefore, the Bible cannot reasonably be used to support the thesis that Śaivism is devilish (ibid.). Using logical argumentation, Nāvalar's assertion points to the superiority and modern palatability of Śaivism. Nāvalar also took to preaching on topics that established the sufficiency of the Śaiva ethical system. Besides critiquing Christians, he preached on "the evils of adultery and drunkenness ... the value of non-killing, the proper conduct of women ... and the unity of god" (ibid., 101). Clearly, Śaivites were not the evil-minded heathens the Christians had depicted; the truth of their religion fell within the jurisdiction of reason and modern (Christian) ethical thought.

Śaivism's "modernity" again came to the fore in Nāvalar's views on economic matters. Following the Calvinist model, which encouraged adherents to earn and save money in order to prove their predestined righteousness (Weber 1930, 56-79), Nāvalar argued that Śaivas should work toward economic betterment. He believed that becoming wealthy should be everyone's primary objective (Hellmann-Rajanayagam 1989, 247). He did not, however, argue that riches should be acquired in order to enjoy them, but rather "for the power and respect they entail and to enable their possessor to dedicate his life to the furtherance of his religious dharma" (ibid., 248). Reminiscent of Calvinist men who came to be defined by their work ethic, Nāvalar's coupling of religious duty with the acquisition of wealth implied new criteria for masculinity. The Śaiva Tamil man was now required to educate and refine himself in order to gain respectable employment as a priest, teacher, government servant, or employee in commerce and trade (ibid., 247). The ideal Tamil man was wealthy, English-educated, and white-collared. His heroic

selflessness and intense, corporeal devotion to god took a back seat to his intellectual and economic achievements.

Like the image of the violent self-sacrificer developed during the *bhakti* movement, Nāvalar's new image of masculinity became inextricably linked to Tamil identity. Nāvalar reflected the rhetoric of the Nāyaṇārs in his belief that Śaivism was embedded in the Tamil language and land. For Nāvalar, being a good Tamil was a requisite component of being a good Śaivite. Nāvalar's attempts to revitalize Śaivism were coupled with steadfast efforts to promote the Tamil language. He edited and distributed classical Tamil texts in book form (Hellmann-Rajanayagam 1989, 244), and published a number of grammar primers and tracts for both his school and wider circulation. In terms of oral Tamil, Nāvalar developed a form of speech now called *mēṭaittamiḷ*, or stage Tamil, which is characterized by its literary, poetic style (Bate 2000, 27). When spoken, it indexes the refinement of both the speaker and the Tamil language itself (ibid.). Later in his life, Nāvalar called on the Tamil people to recognize the sanctity of their soil and speech. In a sermon in South India in 1866, he accused the Tamils of facilitating foreign rule by failing to preserve their language and leading ethically dubious lives, faults he believed were interdependent (Hellmann-Rajanayagam 1989, 243).

Due to his fervent promotion of Tamil, Nāvalar was adopted as an early icon by Sri Lankan Tamil nationalists who point to his support of Sir P. Ramanathan and his attacks on foreign rule as evidence of his aspirations for political awakening. According to Hellmann-Rajanayagam, however, "nothing could be farther from the truth" (Hellmann-Rajanayagam 1989). Nāvalar likely supported Ramanathan because he was a devout Hindu, not because he opposed British rule (ibid., 248). In fact, Nāvalar failed to show any antagonism towards British

rule, which he seemed to view as entirely separate from British proselytizing efforts (ibid., 249). More importantly, Nāvalar never singled out the Sinhalese for criticism: “The astonishing fact ... for a writer from Sri Lanka is that the Sinhalese hardly figure at all in his books except in passing” (ibid., 250). While historical evidence suggests that he did not harbour nationalist sentiment, the appropriation of Nāvalar as an incipient national leader by writers, biographers, and politicians after the blossoming of Tamil nationalism in the 1930s is a testament to his enduring importance. For Sri Lankan Tamils with nationalist inclinations, Ārumuka Nāvalar is a hero of both Śaivism and the Tamil nation. His redefinition of the ideal Tamil man in the context of modernity resonates loudly for those engaged in the struggle for Eelam.<sup>27</sup>

### **Echoes of Nāvalar**

Nāvalar’s opinions and teachings endure in the wide terrain of present-day Sri Lankan Tamil Śaivism. Especially for Tamils in the diaspora, Brahmanical and modern interpretations are echoed in representations of the Śaiva tradition. Neo-Hindu organizations, which reflect the “sensible Hinduism” established by Nāvalar, influence popular, diasporic understandings of Śaivism. The Art of Living Foundation, for example, is extremely popular among Sri Lankan Tamils in Montreal.<sup>28</sup> The Foundation defines itself as a transnational, non-denominational, non-profit organization, which incorporates Brahmanical and Buddhist yogic practices with self-help

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<sup>27</sup> Tamil Eelam is the name used to refer to Tamil-dominated (in terms of population) regions of Sri Lanka, particularly the Northern and Eastern provinces. Tamil nationalists hope to unite these regions, and establish them as the Tamil nation. Although Tamil Eelam is not technically a nation-state, in this thesis I refer to it as such because its inhabitants claim to be united on the basis of shared history and experiences (Anderson 1983). Therefore, they are, in a way, citizens of Eelam.

<sup>28</sup> Devotees at the Montreal Durkai Amman Temple’s annual festival in June of 2008, clamoured to register for an Art of Living course at a booth set up for the event. In addition, at tri-weekly pūjās at the Montreal Sri Aiyappan Temple, devotees often encourage me to sign up for Art of Living courses and events, and proudly inform me that the organization’s founder, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar is himself a Tamil Hindu.

programs based on science and spirituality. It promotes a type of universal humanism that resembles, strikingly, the ideology of colonial modernity subscribed to by Nāvalar. Although the leadership of the foundation might disagree, for Sri Lankan Tamil Śaivas, the Art of Living is a testament to the contemporary relevance and scientific verifiability of their faith.

The Śaiva Siddhānta Church is another neo-Hindu movement that indexes both the present-day relevance and ancient wisdom of Śaivism. Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami (1927-2001), a descendent of Christian parents who was raised in California, was named the 162<sup>nd</sup> preceptor of the Nandinātha Saṃpradāya's Kailāsa Paramparā during a trip to Sri Lanka when he was twenty-years old. The acceptance of a white man from California into the upper echelons of Śaiva orthodoxy reflects Nāvalar's contention that Śaivism is transculturally applicable because of its rational validity. Recognized by many Sri Lankan Tamils as one of the most important Śaiva mystics, Subramuniyaswami spent his life spreading his interpretation of Śaivism.

Subramuniyaswami's vision, like Nāvalar's, appeared through the lenses of Śaiva Siddhānta and modernity. He augmented devotion and Sanskritic learning with rational, reasonable justifications of Śaivism in the monastery and school he founded, Kauai Aadheenam and The Himalayan Academy, respectively, as well as in his numerous publications. In

Subramuniyaswami's oeuvre, *Dancing with Siva*, he poses and answers the question, "How does Saivism stay contemporary? Inner truths never change," he explains, "but outer forms of practice and observance do evolve. Saivism seeks to preserve its mystical teachings while adapting to the cultural, social and technological changes of each recurrent age" (Subramuniyaswami 1990, 37). *Hinduism Today*, the journal he founded, remains the most influential Śaiva publication to date and continues to promote a transnational, modern, high-caste vision of Śaiva thought and

practice.

The understanding of Śaivism promoted by the Śaiva Siddhānta Church directly impacts the Sri Lankan Tamil men who are at the heart of this study. The Quebec Śaiva Mission, the organization that founded and continues to oversee the Montreal Murugan Temple, is linked to the Śaiva Siddhānta Church. According to one of the temple's priests, the Kauai Aadheenam in Hawaii is partially responsible for funding the construction of the temple.<sup>29</sup> Further connections between the Sri Lankan Tamil community in Montreal and the Śaiva Siddhānta Church are underscored by a 1990 article in *Hinduism Today*, boasting the achievements of the Quebec Śaiva Mission (Bhatti *et al* 1990). Finally, the writings of Subramuniyaswami occupy a prominent position in the temple. During the course of my research, a member of the temple managing committee let me into the temple library. From the first shelf, he extracted a thoroughly dog-eared book. "This is the true doctrine of Śaivism," he said as he handed me *Dancing with Śiva*.

The prevalence of the Śaiva Siddhānta Church and other neo-Hindu organizations in Montreal reinforces the ideal of modern, "refined" Śaivism, which requires men to be contemporary and intelligent. Scientific explanations for Śaiva faith and practice were the lingua franca of many of my male informants, who explained topics as diverse as the physical benefits of yogic practice and the psychological value of festival celebration for a refugee community. At the Ayyappaṇ temple, devotees eagerly highlighted the social egalitarianism of the Ayyappaṇ cultus, which is, more amenable to our modern and Western sensibilities than rigid forms of social stratification. They also foregrounded the health benefits of rigorous fasts. At the Murugaṇ temple, however, some devotees found it difficult to align elements of Śaiva practice with the

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<sup>29</sup> Perhaps to emphasize the amenability of Śaivism to my North American sensibilities, the temple priest informed me that the founder of the Aadheenam was a white person with a keen interest in Śaivism, just like me.

discourse of modernity. They denied the importance of “folk practices,” such as *kāvaṭi*. No doubt eliciting Nāvalar’s posthumous approval, some claimed that *kāvaṭi* is a depraved habit of the uneducated, lower castes, a degradation of “true Śaivism.”

While the presence of such opinions and the popularity of Nāvalar and neo-Hindu organizations suggests that more traditional images of Śaiva masculinity have been replaced by the ideal of the high-caste intellectual, the importance of the Caṅkam and *bhakti* periods fail to perish in the popular imagination. Though vexed, contemporary Sri Lankan Tamil Śaiva masculinity integrates the moral ideals of heroism and self-sacrifice with notions of cultural refinement and modernity. While on the one hand men are assured that Śaivism is compatible with modern beliefs, on the other hand, they treasure the link it provides them to the hoary landscapes of the Caṅkam and *bhakti* cultures. Warrior-heroism and *vannaṇpu* are embedded in men’s religious expressions despite the currents of modernity. As I argue in the following chapter, the Sri Lankan Tamil nationalist movement has played a major role in keeping older ideals of Śaiva masculinity relevant.

## Chapter Two:

### **Ethnic Conflict and Tamil Masculinity in the Diaspora**

Masculine ideals which developed in early Tamil literature and in the rhetoric of Śaiva reform have been both reified and disputed by the experiences of Sri Lankan Tamil men in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. While Sri Lankan Tamil men turn to traditional paradigms for masculine ideals, social reality is characterized by ambiguity and fragmentation. This chapter charts the historical reasons for the production of particular types of masculinities among Montréal-based Sri Lankan Tamil men today. It provides a general overview of the recent political crisis in Sri Lanka, and a brief analysis of men's experiences as refugees in Canada. I argue that both the political crisis in Sri Lanka and the realities of refugee life engender fragmented masculine identity. Various political, religious, and personal narratives exert force on Sri Lankan Tamil men, resulting in ambivalence and anxiety.

Tamil constructions of masculinity oscillate between moments of fracture and reconstruction, which are shaped by the Sri Lankan political crisis and the resultant diaspora. The ethnic conflict is a direct affront to conceptions of Tamil masculinity, as aggressive violence against Tamils challenges self-images of protective heroism. Moreover, the *de facto* expulsion of Tamils from the Sri Lankan nation-state fragments images of Tamil men as harbingers of modernity. In the Tamil diaspora, new challenges to masculinity emerge. For some, the socio-economic challenges of refugee life present difficulties in terms of protecting and providing for the family. Others are troubled by isolation from their "motherland."

The voice of the Tamil nationalist militant insurgency attempts to reconstruct a fortified sense of masculinity in order to combat fragmentation on many levels. In the discourse of the

Tamil nationalist movement, men are summoned to “carry the sword” of the warrior-hero and practice the *vannanpu* of the self-sacrificing *bhakta*. In turn, combatants consciously personify Cankam period warrior-heroes and zealous *bhaktas* as they sacrifice themselves for the nation. At the same time, in the political rhetoric undergirding the movement, Tamil men champion their modernity. Tamil men must be courageous and heroic; they must also be restrained and modern. Thus, while the Tamil nationalist movement posits itself as a return to the firm ground of the past, the social reality of Tamil men reflects a shattered identity. Traditional ideals of courage and protective self-sacrifice, which are ideologically reinforced by the movement, are sometimes difficult to fulfill as Tamil men are ambushed with the unexpected brutalities of the war. Feelings of inadequacy are also prominent among refugees in Canada. Having left Sri Lanka, many Tamil men fear that they are not “man enough” to be included in the ranks of their increasingly militant brethren.

Although not all Sri Lankan Tamils subscribe to the paradigms of masculinity emerging from the nationalist movement, very few Sri Lankan Tamils are unaware of them. The influence of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (henceforth LTTE), the notorious organization that heads the movement, is ubiquitous. Many regions of Tamil Sri Lanka are controlled by the LTTE. In those areas, the LTTE extends its influence through a tax-collecting government and a school system. In addition, the LTTE publishes a wide range of books and political pamphlets, and operates radio and television stations. Tamils in Sri Lanka are continuously inundated with pro-LTTE propaganda through various media. How many Tamils genuinely support the LTTE is, however, difficult to determine. No census has been taken in Tamil-dominated regions since 1981, and the LTTE has been known to “win support” through coercion (Lawrence 1997, 31).

Nonetheless, most scholars agree that the LTTE gained the backing of the majority of Sri Lankan Tamils after the riots of 1983 (Wickramasinghe 1996, 284; DeVotta 2006, 181-82; Narayan Swamy 1994, 174).

In the diaspora, and specifically in Canada, the proportion of LTTE adherents is even more difficult to determine. Since the LTTE has been labeled a terrorist organization by the Canadian Government and is continuously calumniated in Canadian media, Tamils are not eager to broadcast their support for the organization. Regardless, wide support is attested to by a number of events and practices. The Sri Lankan Tamil community in Canada is widely believed to be the greatest source of funding for the LTTE (Morris 1995; Hyndman 2003). In addition, Heroes' Day, the LTTE's annual commemorative holiday, is celebrated annually in Toronto with attendance soaring into the tens of thousands. Similarly, in Montréal, on 29 July 2008, hundreds of Tamils gathered to hold a vigil commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of ethnic riots in Sri Lanka (Hustak 2008). Not surprisingly, all of my informants confirmed their support for the LTTE. While their degree of support varies from complete devotion to tenuous political approval, for most, images of the LTTE loom large [Figure 2]. Photos and lithographs of LTTE heroes circulate widely among the Sri Lankan Tamil community in Montréal: they are found in homes, in cars, on key chains, and even in some domestic shrines.

In addition to demonstrations and images, the internet plays a crucial role in keeping my informants connected to the LTTE.<sup>1</sup> My informants claim that pro-LTTE websites, such as "EelamWeb," "TamilEelam," and "TamilNet," are their main source of information on the progress of the struggle and on new platforms and policies presented by the movement's leaders.

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<sup>1</sup> In an article about the internet, nationalism, and popular anthropology, Mark P. Whitaker notes that his twenty-five Sri Lankan Tamil informants in London and Toronto employ websites as their primary bridge to the LTTE-led nationalist movement (Whitaker 2004, 480).

Websites are the main artery connecting my informants to the LTTE. Not surprisingly, my informants also point me to websites for knowledge about the movement and about Sri Lankan Tamils generally. While these websites are not scholarly sources, they are useful here because they bear such an influence on the views of my informants – on Sri Lankan Tamil identity generally, and Tamil masculinity specifically. The LTTE, which posits itself as the “true foundation” of Sri Lankan Tamil identity, continues to play an integral role in the multivalent and vexed construction of contemporary Tamil masculinities.

### **Crisis of Ethnicity and Subjectivity**

The twentieth-century political crisis in Sri Lanka has resounding affects on Sri Lankan Tamil men. The progressive decline of Tamil men’s positions in the nation is telling. Compared to their Sinhalese counterparts, Tamil men were afforded a greater degree of socio-economic power under colonial rule. Many were the well-educated, well-to-do men that Nāvalar had hoped for.<sup>2</sup> They held a significant proportion of the prestigious jobs in the private sector; they had stakes in law firms, agency houses, banks, and the world of trade (Roberts 1979, 196-99).<sup>3</sup> In addition, the divide-and-rule tactics of the British ensured that Tamil-speakers were over-represented in the colonial administration (DeVotta 2004, 29). In fact, the predominance of Tamils in the legislative council enabled them, rather than the Sinhalese, to act as the pioneers of formal political agitation against colonial rule (De Silva 1981, 366). Over and above acquiring the wealth and respectability that came to represent the modern Tamil man, Tamils were key

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<sup>2</sup> The strength of American missionary efforts in Jaffna, from the early nineteenth century onwards, meant Tamils had better access to English education than the Sinhalese (Harvey 1998, 259).

<sup>3</sup> Tamils’ dominance in the private sector continued up until the 1980s sometimes at the cost of the Sinhalese (Wickramasinghe 2006, 285). Wickramasinghe notes that the protracted economic dominance of Tamils fueled the ethnic conflict (ibid.).

players in the struggle for Sri Lanka's independence from the British. Decolonization, however, was followed by the rise of Sinhalese ethno-nationalism and, eventually, the outbreak of civil war. Both ensured that Tamil men were no longer afforded privilege or prominence.

The Tamils' roles as leaders in colonial Sri Lanka is exemplified by Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan (1851-1930). An English educated politician, who was a lauded member of the Colombo elite, Ramanathan embodied the masculine ideals envisioned by Ārumuka Nāvalar. Along with other Sinhalese and Tamil members of the Westernized gentry, he accepted modernity, rejected communalism as barbarous, and believed that a Western-style liberal democracy would unite the diverse populations of the island (Kumarasingham 2006, 344). His familiarity with the "modern ways of the West" led to his nomination to represent Ceylon as the delegate to the Golden Jubilee celebrations of Queen Victoria in 1897.<sup>4</sup> Ramanathan was also recognized as a premier member of society among natives of Ceylon. He assumed numerous positions in the colonial administration: he was an elected member of the Legislative Council of Ceylon, and he was appointed Solicitor General by the Governor of Ceylon. While he greatly respected the British model of societal organization and governance, in his capacity as a politician, he resisted British rule (DeSilva 1981, 313; 367). In the first half of the twentieth century, he was involved with the Ceylon Reform League, which was established by his brother, Sir Ponnambalam Arunachalam, in 1917 (Tambiah 1986, 135). With the Ceylon Reform League, which later became known as the Ceylon National Congress, he fought to secure responsible self-government for Ceylon (Kumarasingham 2006, 345). The successes of the Ceylon National Congress fomented the departure of the British and establishment of independent Sri Lanka.

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<sup>4</sup> Even more telling was his marriage to Australian-born R.L. Harrison in 1870.

Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan, Sir Ponnambalam Arunachalam, and other members of the elite were key players in the establishment of the modern nation. As celebrated representatives of the Tamil community, such men underwrote the modernity of Tamil men on the whole. Their achievements suggested that Sri Lankan Tamil men could hold positions of power and prestige, and were Western-savvy, intellectual, and refined. Elite Tamils were well versed in the ideology of universal humanism, the apogee of Western modernity, as they championed liberal democracy in Sri Lanka.<sup>5</sup> As the Ponnambalams and the vast majority of the Colombo elite were Vēlāḷars from Jaffna, their cultural and political mastery highlighted the status of that segment of the population especially.

Despite their vital role in the freedom struggle, the subjugation of the Tamil people in Sri Lanka began immediately following the departure of the British regime in 1948.<sup>6</sup> In the process of state formation, Sinhalese Buddhists emboldened their community to overturn what they saw as the undue privilege afforded to the Tamils. They rallied around Buddhism, claiming that Sri Lanka had always been the ancient Buddhist promised land. Not surprisingly, they excluded non-Buddhist Tamils from Sri Lanka's imagined past and their vision of the future nation (Harvey 1998, 259). Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism resulted in the institution of a slew of discriminatory policies, which had devastating effects on Tamil men.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> In a way, their accomplishments even implied that Sri Lankan Tamil men were courageous leaders, who embodied the ancient spirit of masculine, protective self-sacrifice as they fought against the British.

<sup>6</sup> Although Tamil leaders, such as Sir Ponnambalam Arunachalam, resisted the British granting of self-government without adequate safeguards for minority populations, communal politics commenced as soon as the nation was granted independence (De Silva 1981, 445).

<sup>7</sup> Although the ideological and later physical exclusion of Tamils from the nation was of great consequence for all Sri Lankan Tamil people, the effects were particularly damaging for men because of the nature of the nation. The nation is largely a masculine institution. Occupying the vast majority of positions of power and influence, men organize, run, and "man" the machinery of government (Nagel 2005, 397). In fact, the idea of the nation evolved in step with modern masculinity, as the culture of nationalism was constructed to emphasize masculine cultural themes such as

Systematically excluded from access to education and employment, the roles of Tamil men shifted from leaders to outcasts. The drafting of the *Sinhala-Only Act* of 1956 intended to make Sinhalese the single official language of Sri Lanka, enjoining its exclusive use in government and education. Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandarnaike, rigorously implemented the act, and introduced discrepant requirements for university entrance in order to limit the number of Tamils with access to education and employment (DeVotta 2006, 113). The effects of such policies resonated loudly. In 1956, thirty percent of the Ceylon Administrative Service, fifty percent of the clerical service, sixty percent of engineers and doctors, forty percent of the armed forces, and forty percent of the overall labor force were Tamil (Phadnis 1979, 348). By 1970, those numbers had dropped to five percent, five percent, ten percent, one percent, and five percent respectively (ibid.). In 1978, discrimination against the Tamils became a bona fide, permanent policy. Ethnic exclusion was written into the Constitution of the First Republic of Sri Lanka, which gave Buddhism the foremost place and instituted Sinhala as the one official language (DeVotta 2006, 113).

The economic difficulties of Tamil men were augmented by their exclusion from political process. Opportunities to emulate leaders such as the Ponnambalam brothers became scarce. A number of political parties, such as the Tamil Congress (established 1944), the Tamil Federal Party (established 1949), and the Tamil United Liberation Front (established 1976), or TULF, initially sought to engage in parliamentary democratic process to protect the interests of the Tamil community (Sangarasivam 2003, 62). At every turn, their efforts were met with the fierce resistance of the Sinhalese. While the *Sinhala-Only Act* was under debate in 1956, the Tamil

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honour, bravery, and duty (Springhall 1987, 52). For Sri Lankan Tamil men, exclusion from the nation was tantamount to exclusion from their own masculine identity.

Federal Party organized a *satyagraha* protest outside parliament.<sup>8</sup> The protesters were met by a mob of members of the United Buddhist Front, who killed nearly one hundred and fifty of them (DeVotta 2006, 109).<sup>9</sup> In 1961, the Federal Party organized another protest in response to the implementation of the *Sinhala-Only Act* (DeVotta 2005, 152). The government responded by physically attacking the protesters, imposing emergency rule, detaining the Federal Party's leaders for over six months, and banning the party for a year (ibid.).

Following the attacks in 1956 and 1961, several waves of violence swept the nation. In 1976, TULF officially called for an independent Tamil state and received overwhelming support from Sri Lankan Tamils. Such open dissent led to violent anti-Tamil riots. At least one hundred Tamils lost their lives and thousands were displaced (Wickramasinghe 2006, 284). The sheer brutality of the riots is underscored by the fact that Sinhalese hospital personnel attacked both their Tamil superiors and Tamil patients (DeVotta 2004, 149). In response to the riots, Prime Minister Jayawardene instated the *Prevention of Terrorism Act*, which “made terrorists out of security forces, who were empowered to arrest, imprison, and hold all suspected subversives incommunicado for eighteen months without trial” (ibid., 149). After anti-Tamil riots broke out again in 1981, the *Prevention of Terrorism Act* was made a permanent law (Wickramasinghe 2006, 285).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Satyagraha* is a philosophy and practice of non-violent resistance, which was promulgated by Mohandas Gandhi during the Indian Independence Movement. In practice, *satyagraha* is associated with peaceful protest.

<sup>9</sup> The United Buddhist Front, or the Eksath Bhikkhu Peramuna, was a political umbrella organization for diverse groups of *bhikkhus*, Buddhist monks, who had been divided along caste lines prior to the ethnic conflict. Members of the United Buddhist Front campaigned for the *Sinhala-Only Act* and contributed to the rhetoric of Sinhalese Buddhist ethno-nationalism. One prolific member, Walpola Rahula, justified killing people in order to “liberate” religion and country (DeVotta 2004, 64).

<sup>10</sup> During the riots of 1981, a Sinhalese police riot ravaged the city of Jaffna, and the government responded with apathy and repression. The Jaffna Public Library, considered to hold the greatest record of Tamil literary heritage in the world, was burnt to the ground (Wickramasinghe 2006, 285). Tamils were devastated by the loss as they considered the library an indicator of the modern and ancient achievements of their people. The fact that the

These atrocities pale in comparison to the unspeakable brutality of 1983. In July, 1983, a small group of LTTE cadre killed thirteen members of the Sri Lankan army outside Jaffna city; Sri Lankan soldiers retaliated “by going on a rampage, burning and destroying vehicles and property, and beating any Tamils they encountered” (O’Ballance 1989, 21). Although strict censorship prevented any mention of the violence in media, rumours circulated, and bloodshed began in the capital (ibid., 21-22). The violence reached its apex on July 25<sup>th</sup> in Colombo and surrounding towns, as rioting mobs of Sinhalese youths burnt, destroyed, and looted Tamil property and Tamil people (ibid., 23). Vehicles were burnt in the streets, and people were dragged from their cars and beaten or hacked to death with knives and axes (ibid., 23). Within a few days, mob violence had spread to Kandy, Gampola, Nuwara Eliya, and Deniyawa in the central highlands (ibid., 24-25). After a brief pause, violence again broke out in Colombo; a mob seized nine young Tamil boys at a railway station and burnt them to death in front of a crowd of onlookers (ibid., 24).

In addition to discrimination and exclusion from the nation, Tamil men’s subjectivity was fragmented by acts of physical violence. Following their loss of socio-economic status and political power, Tamil men faced the psychologically emasculating affects of physical attacks. A sense of emasculation is a common consequence of war, as men are often stripped of honour and courage in desperate situations. In the Tamil case, gendered devastation is even more acute because of explicit cultural links between Tamil masculinity and selfless bravery. Paradigms of warrior-heroism and self-sacrificing devotionism become difficult to adhere to in the uncertain throes of war. In many cases, Tamil men are targeted so truculently and so suddenly that

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perpetrators were never taken to task and speculation about direct government involvement fueled Tamil anger (ibid.).

courageous defense is impossible.

Besides the more explicit ways in which physical attacks are assaults on masculinity, the silence surrounding violence means that men are denied a social and cultural voice. Exiled from a nation they helped create, Tamil men are silenced by the Sri Lankan Government. The leaders of the Sri Lankan state ensure that Tamil narratives go untold by destroying Tamil newspapers and radio-stations and prohibiting any media coverage of the war.<sup>11</sup> For many Tamils, the inability to voice their loss contributes to psychological pain. As Susan Brison explains, traumatic experiences, such as violent assaults on the body, deconstruct subjectivity (Brison 1999, 39-42). An individual's sense of self is severed by trauma, and can only be reconstructed when traumatic experiences can be recounted as a narrative to a willing listener (ibid.).<sup>12</sup> For many Tamil men, the enforced silence of wartime Sri Lanka inhibits opportunities to mend shattered subjectivity. Neither the Sri Lankan nation nor the international community is willing to listen to Tamil narratives about war and trauma. The Tamil community's psychological pain persists.

### **Fragmented Masculinity and Echoes of Antiquity**

To say that Tamil men are innocent victims of the Sri Lankan state would be both a patronizing repudiation of their agency and a broad misrepresentation of the situation. While most scholars agree that the progression from Tamil nationalism to violent, militant insurgency

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<sup>11</sup> This pattern continues to the present day. In 2001, Sri Lankan newspapers were forbidden by law to carry reports about the torture of Tamil people (Whitaker 2004, 477).

<sup>12</sup> Susan Brison argues that the devastation to one's sense of self that is coupled with traumatic experiences is partly due to the loss of individual agency over the body (Brison 1999, 46). Pointing to the numbers tattooed on Holocaust survivors, she claims that trauma victims' bodies become the language of the attacker (ibid., 46). In Sri Lanka, Tamil men experience a similar loss of agency over their own bodies. Tamils bodies have come to narrate the war. Piles of Tamil corpses, devoid of individual human characteristics, signify the power vested in the Sri Lankan state, and lines of regimented, camouflaged soldiers signal the achievements of the Tamil nationalists in dislodging that power. In the context of war, the political struggle is inscribed on the male body. Individuality and agency are diminished.

occurred in reaction to the policies of the Sri Lankan state (Wickramasinghe 1996; DeVotta 2004, 2005, 2006; O'Ballance 1989; Little 1994), it is important to recognize the active role of Tamil men in shaping the turbulent trajectory of Sri Lankan history and representing themselves in the process. From the early stages of the ethnic conflict, Tamil men have not hesitated to take an aggressive stance against the Sinhalese. The discourse of nascent Tamil nationalism began circulating in 1949, just one year after independence, when S.J.V. Chelvanayagam founded the Tamil Federal Party, which called for the "unity of the Tamil-speaking peoples" (Wilson 2000, 134).<sup>13</sup> Militancy followed. At least thirty, often conflicting, Tamil militant groups were established in the late 1960s and 1970s (Hellmann-Rajanayagam 1994, 169). The rhetoric and physical actions of such groups have shaped the conflict and recast Tamil men in combative roles, which are appropriate to the explosive landscape of war. Tapping into the cultural vocabulary of masculine ideals, militant organizations have called upon Tamil men to embody warrior-heroism and self-sacrificing devotionism.

From its conception Tamil militancy was inextricably linked to expressions of masculinity. Early on, little cells of militant youth, fondly referred to as "the boys," exemplified the rebellious machismo typical of downtrodden groups (Higate and Hopton 2005, 432-47). Their behaviour largely adhered to what Connell calls "protest masculinity," which occurs when "Growing boy[s] put together a tense façade making a claim to power where there are no real resources for power" (Connell 1995, 109). In such cases, exaggerated claims of potency are accompanied by violent resistance to authority, criminal activity, and substance abuse (ibid., 109). This masculine code was aptly demonstrated by numerous cells of Tamil youth, who

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<sup>13</sup> Although he was always concerned with Tamil rights and Tamil unity, Chelvanayagam initially advocated a model of federalism, which would provide the Tamil people with increased autonomy. By 1976, he had abandoned federalism and was arguing for the creation of an independent Tamil state (Wickramasinghe 2006, 282).

resorted to assassinations, robberies, and defiant acts (Roberts 1996, 251). Tamil youths denied education and employment adopted this mode of behaviour as a way of acting out their (lack of) masculine power.

These expressions of machismo and rebellion were soon replaced by a consolidated construction of Tamil masculine power, one that reached back to the ancient Tamil past in order to project the Tamil nation into the future. The LTTE, which was established in 1975 and has since consolidated its hegemonic reign over the Tamil nationalist movement, is largely responsible for the shift from practices of protest masculinity to more controlled expressions of Tamil masculine identity.<sup>14</sup> The rhetoric and action of the LTTE, which came to be *the* voice of the Tamil nationalist insurgency, reoriented Tamil masculinity towards the abstemious ethos of self-sacrifice, while simultaneously underscoring the importance of modernity.<sup>15</sup> The disciplined practices of the LTTE are not reflective of the protest masculinity of earlier militant youth cells. Rather, the LTTE incorporates traditional Tamil understandings of masculinity, in which men's selfless sacrifices are drawn from their pure devotion. In contrast to "the boys," members of the LTTE are heroic not only in their bravery but in their extremely austere lifestyles. Such behaviour recalls the Cankam period warrior-hero, the medieval Nāyaṇār, and even the modern Tamil man of Nāvalar's reforms.

The LTTE deploys a paradigm of masculinity that extends self-sacrifice to its apogee, martyrdom. For the LTTE and its supporters, "being a man," is synonymous with being a martyr.

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<sup>14</sup> The LTTE's dominance is underscored by the fact that "LTTE" has become a generic term for Tamil militancy (Hellmann-Rajanayagam 1994, 169).

<sup>15</sup> In 1975, the LTTE established itself by changing the name of the Tamil Students' Federation and immediately began consolidating power on the island. Following their ruthless leader, Vellupillai Prabhakaran, the LTTE assured its dominance by murdering the leadership of the other groups (O'Ballance 1989, 31; Wickramasinghe 2006, 289).

Recalling the Caṅkam-period warrior-hero, Tamil men are expected to spill their blood on and for the soil of Eelam. The legend of the first martyr of the movement, which is recounted in LTTE publications and on websites, echoes tales of the Caṅkam period, and sets the standard for the type of fastidious devotion required of LTTE soldiers. Ponnadurai Sivakumaran joined the father organization of the LTTE, the Tamil Students' Federation (TSF), at the time of its establishment in 1970 (Narayan Swamy 1994, 25). He agreed to take the blame if any of his cohorts were caught.<sup>16</sup> The other members of the TSF gave him a vial of cyanide, which he consumed in 1974 in order to protect other members of the movement. He thus became the first martyr of the movement, the first Tamil man to sacrifice himself for Eelam.

Understandings of Sivakumaran's funeral glorify his martyrdom. According to local lore, thousands of Tamil people from all over the island attended his funeral (Roberts 1996, 252). They arrived in droves, on bicycles, which had become completely enshrouded in the red soil of Jaffna (*ibid.*, 252). The powerful image of the incipient Tamil nation approaching the funeral as one united, body, resolutely embedded in the land, poetically emphasizes the glory of martyrdom. The blood of the martyr, like the red soil of Jaffna, permeates each and every Tamil person and is the unifying strength of the movement.

Despite the poetic nature of the Sivakumaran narrative, his sacrifice is not memorialized as a laudable event of the past. It is taken as a model for behaviour. All LTTE soldiers are required to carry vials of cyanide around their necks, which are to be broken open and swallowed

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<sup>16</sup> Sivakumaran may have become the movement's first sacrifice because he was an unsuccessful revolutionary. He failed in his attempt to assassinate a Sinhalese minister in September 1970, and in his endeavour to kill Alfred Duriappah, the Tamil Mayor of Jaffna town. He also failed in his attempt to rob a bank at Kopai on 5 June 1974 and to assassinate a senior policeman (Narayan Swamy 1994: 25-6, 29; Sivarajah 1995, 128). His numerous blunders do not, however, figure in the popular imagination where his sacrifice is understood to have been motivated by selflessness and utter devotion.

in the event of enemy capture. Moreover, members of the Black Tigers, the elite suicide squad of the LTTE, extend their interpretations of martyrdom beyond the ingestion of cyanide in dire circumstances and the obvious risks to life that are inherent to war.<sup>17</sup> They execute planned suicide bombings and are honoured as heroes by the LTTE community. They are highly esteemed for their bravery, and for the practical utility of their sacrifices. Without them, the LTTE would be hard pressed to sustain itself against the numerically and economically superior Sri Lankan Army.<sup>18</sup> Like the actions of the Caṅkam-period warrior-heroes, the self-sacrifices of the Black Tigers are understood to be absolutely essential to the maintenance of the community. Neil DeVotta corroborates the view, arguing that the Sri Lankan Army's "higher fire power and deployment level does not really match the LTTE's power of supreme sacrifice" (DeVotta 2006, 181).

Besides encouraging martyrdom, the LTTE self-consciously embeds itself in the culture of the Caṅkam period through political rhetoric, ritual production, and poetry.<sup>19</sup> As Peter Schalk notes, the LTTE pursues an explicit policy of secularism, which it claims mirrors the

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<sup>17</sup> The Black Tiger unit is not composed of a ragged assortment of desperate men, but a handpicked lot of the LTTE's best. People vie for membership, apply, and wait to be accepted for years. Once accepted, they execute strategically planned (and usually successful) suicide attacks. Statistics point to the effectiveness and relative numeric strength of the Black Tigers. Of the top twelve groups engaged in suicide bombings worldwide between 1983 and 2000, the LTTE was the most prolific (DeVotta 2004, 167). The LTTE was responsible for one hundred and seventy one attacks, while the other eleven groups combined perpetrated a total of one hundred and fifteen attacks (ibid.).

<sup>18</sup> "The importance of suicide attacks ... progressively increased in circumstances where the [LTTE] organization suffered from military inferiority and was in need of military gains in order to renew a balance of deterrence" (Pedazhur 2005, 79-80). When the LTTE faced extinction at the hands of the Indian Peace Keeping Force, they launched a barrage of suicide attacks (ibid.). In 1995, the Sri Lankan Army regained control of Jaffna, and the LTTE immediately deployed a number of suicide bombers to force retreat (ibid., 78). Again in 1996, the LTTE was on the brink of collapse when they deployed "the most severe campaign of suicide attacks since the commencement of operations" (ibid.).

<sup>19</sup> The prominence of Caṅkam-period themes relative to religious themes is not surprising given the religious diversity within the LTTE. Not all members of the LTTE are Śaivites. In fact, a number of active members identify as Christians. The Karaiyars, for example, are largely Catholic and comprise a large faction of the LTTE. Caṅkam motifs appeal to both Śaiva and Christian Tamils, as the Caṅkam period is seen as a glorious golden age in which *secular* Tamil culture flourished. The Caṅkam period remains disjointed from religious identity while uniting Tamils on the basis of language and ethnicity.

organization of society during the ancient Tamil “golden age” (Schalk 1997, 151-53). The LTTE has also revitalized practices referred to in the Caṅkam corpus, which revolve around the warrior. In accordance with descriptions in *puṇam*, the LTTE erects hero stones, or *naṭukaḷ*, for fallen warriors, to which they make offerings in order to propitiate the spirits inhabiting them (*Puṇāṇūru* 232, in Hellmann-Rajanayagam 2005, 120). Additionally, poems produced from within the ranks of the LTTE, and distributed in pamphlets, liken contemporary fighters to Caṅkam-period warrior-heroes.<sup>20</sup>

Like the ancient warrior-hero found in the *Puṇāṇūru*, the ideal soldier of LTTE-produced poetry dies young and in the prime of his strength (ibid., 115). His death is not, however, in vain. He is lauded for his bravery and selflessness, which protects the kingdom (in this case, Tamil Eelam). Many LTTE ideologues argue that activities of LTTE soldiers actually keep the Tamil “golden age” alive. They consider the martyrdom of the LTTE warrior dually virtuous because it maintains the ancient cultural values of the Caṅkam period in the contemporary setting. In the following poem, the narrator summons the public to celebrate the death of the LTTE soldier, who trod the righteous path and spilled blood that renewed the nation. The idea that in death the LTTE fighter brings life to the nation recalls the image of mother’s milk flowing at the sight of her slain son in the *Puṇāṇūru* (*Puṇāṇūru* 295, in Ramanujan 1985, 183). In both cases, the destruction of a young man sustains and revitalizes his homeland and its inhabitants:

The great heroes’ great sacrifice  
Fighting and dying for Tamil history ...  
They lie buried as seeds—for the race’s

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<sup>20</sup> Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam selected and translated the poems I cite from a brochure entitled *Curiyap Putalvar* (“Children of the Son”), which was published in 2001 by the LTTE International Secretariat (2005, 126-27).

Daybreak lives with full consciousness  
They donated for the nation ...  
Our golden Tamil Ilam national leader's  
Path of righteousness they trod  
The heroic poems created in Cankam  
times again ...  
Broadcast them loudly—the flower  
Garden, house, palace, street,  
crossroads all  
Honour their name ... (Katiravan in Hellmann-Rajanayagam 2005, 138)

In addition to the idea of renewed life through death, writers within the LTTE community reflect the convictions of Cankam-period poets with their fervent praise of the king. In the LTTE, Velupillai Prabhakaran (born 1954), the organization's infamous leader, is honoured as the supreme king of exemplary virtue. The fact that his personal life is shrouded in mystery facilitates idealizations in the popular imagination, where he is depicted as a just and self-sacrificing leader.<sup>21</sup> His followers claim that he forgoes his own personal desires and wishes to protect the people of Tamil Eelam. For example, Joseph Chandrakanthan, a contemporary Canadian scholar and supporter of the LTTE, claims that Prabhakaran is “audacious, committed, and willing to endure personal deprivation” (Chandrakanthan 1998, 159). Prabhakaran is also widely believed to be celibate and self-restrained, strictly avoiding alcohol and intoxicants. Some admirers claim that he has entirely renounced family life. Prabhakaran corroborates these views by describing the way he has devoted his life to the movement. In a rare interview in 1984, Prabhakaran claims that he has not seen his family in eleven years because he is “not an ordinary person leading an ordinary life ... [but] a guerilla warrior ... concerned with advancing towards

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<sup>21</sup> Very little is known about Velupillai Prabhakaran's life. He usually makes public appearances only twice a year when he addresses the Tamil community. His whereabouts are unknown to the Tamil people and to the international community.

our goal.”<sup>22</sup>

Mirroring the king of the Caṅkam period, Prabhakaran fashions himself as an exemplary role model. He exacts strict discipline, shuns alcohol and tobacco, and strictly forbids his soldiers from having extra-marital affairs (Hellmann-Rajanayagam 1994, 172). Prabhakaran is able to wield such authority because his position as a king renders him divine. Like the Caṅkam-period ruler, his exigent role as leader and chief protector endows him with divinity. Because of their supreme allegiance to and admiration for the king-cum-god, Prabhakaran’s disciples are driven to mirror his behaviour. In the following passage, the poet-soldier, like the Caṅkam-period bard, assigns Prabhakaran ontological supremacy. Prabhakaran, “the great one,” is the essence of the world:

Face and address is he only—our  
Face and address is he only—of the  
Whole  
World indeed the essence is  
Prabhakaran  
Keen eyes ...  
Words from his mouth in  
Fragrant golden Tamil  
In an effort uniting  
The soil of Jaffna thrusting (heaving)  
Forever the great one  
Burning love (Cellappa in Hellmann-Rajanayagam 2005, 114)

As Prabhakaran is apotheosized, ideals from the *bhakti* era also emerge.<sup>23</sup> Although they

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<sup>22</sup> ([www.eclam.com/interviews/leader\\_march\\_84.html](http://www.eclam.com/interviews/leader_march_84.html); accessed 2008).

<sup>23</sup> According to official policy, the LTTE abjures religion, which it sees as a divisive force within the Tamil community. Sri Lankan Tamils are religiously diverse. Around eighty percent of Sri Lankan Tamils are Hindu (Ponnambalam 1983, 31), fifteen percent are Christian (Hellmann-Rajanayagam 2005, 117), and seven point four percent of Sri Lankan Tamil-speakers are Muslim (Tambiah 1986, 4). Of the Christians, seventy-five percent are Catholic (Hellmann-Rajanayagam 2005, 117). Members of the LTTE reflect this religious diversity, and tend to understand the organization as free of religious ties. However, reverberations of Śaiva ideology resonate rather loudly.

Although a discussion of Christian elements in LTTE devotional rhetoric is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is important to note that Christians are not isolated from the LTTE. Basic Christian themes play a role in

are officially a secular organization, the LTTE invokes *bhakti* ideology in order to summon Tamil men to the battlefield. Among LTTE fighters, devotion to Prabhakaran elicits fervid expressions of *vannanpu*, love so excessive it spills into the realm of violence (Vamadeva 1995). Although only some understand Prabhakaran as an incarnation of a specific deity (Murukan), the vast majority of his followers agree on his position as a divine being worthy of devotion.<sup>24</sup> Like Kaṇṇappar's sacrifice of his eyes and Kaliyar's sacrifice of his life, members of the LTTE willingly embrace death to serve Prabhakaran and the community.

Yet devotionism within the LTTE is not centred solely on Prabhakaran. *Tamiḷttāy* – the Tamil language imagined as a goddess or semi-divine being – plays an important role in encouraging Tamil men to sacrifice themselves. The paradigm of the protective son who must forgo his own life to ensure the well-being of his mother, which is developed much earlier in Caṅkam and *bhakti* literature, reverberates in representations of *Tamiḷttāy* in the LTTE. Images of *Tamiḷttāy* suffering or being violated elicit impassioned responses from Tamil men who understand her as a divine being and mother of the Tamil people (Ramaswamy 1997). For example, a short publication entitled *Tamiḷttāyin Kaṇṇūr* (published in 1977) refers to the suffering goddess weeping at the destruction of her children (the Tamil people), and implicitly calling for protection.<sup>25</sup> As her sons, Tamil men are implored to protect her. In some Tamil

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the way that martyrdom is constructed in LTTE imaginations. The LTTE martyr is comparable to the Christian hero-martyr, exemplified by Jeanne d'Arc (Hellmann-Rajanayagam 2005, 115). LTTE conceptions of asceticism are also linked specifically to the Catholic tradition. According to Catholicism, asceticism may be envisaged as a substitute for martyrdom, and therefore extreme acts of self-denial are encouraged (ibid., 147). In accordance with Catholic views, the LTTE takes forms of austerity quite literally, prohibiting smoking and alcohol and requiring celibacy for some active soldiers (ibid., 147).

<sup>24</sup> ([www.lankaweb.com/news/items01/150901-1.HTML](http://www.lankaweb.com/news/items01/150901-1.HTML); accessed 2007).

<sup>25</sup> *Tamiḷttāyin Kaṇṇūr* is a short Tamil text written by Puttoli that describes the anti-Tamil riots of 1977 in gruesome detail. It maligns the Sinhalese and depicts the Tamils as innocent victims who were too "cultivated" to respond violently (Puttoli 1977, 2). The length and partisan language of the text suggests that it was circulated as a political pamphlet.

nationalist literature, Tamilttāy's summoning is more explicit; she is thought to extract the debt of filial duty. In one poem, authored by an LTTE soldier, fallen heroes are lauded for fulfilling their obligations to Tamilttāy: "Decorated with flowers, wrapped in the red flag go the ones who command respect. Having paid the great debt to the soil of good Tamilttāy" (Ko. Tirunamam in Hellmann-Rajanayagam 2005, 129). The author suggests that paying one's debt to Tamilttāy is both a necessary obligation, and an act that garners deserved admiration. After paying his debt with honour, the soldier is praised.

The deployment of *bhakti* ideology alongside notions of Caṅkam warrior-heroism recasts Tamil masculinity in terms of bravery, self-sacrifice, and self-control. The ideal man becomes intrepid and altruistic in his willingness to give his life for his king and community. But he is not driven by the excess virility we saw in the ancient warrior-hero of Caṅkam literature, or even in "the boys" who launched the militant movement. Notions of masculinity deployed by the LTTE emphasize self-control and fastidious restraint. Men are to follow Prabhakaran's path, demonstrating austerity in thought and action. For the members of the highest echelons of the LTTE, dedication requires vegetarianism, the avoidance of intoxicants, and restraint from sexual intercourse.<sup>26</sup> Even for entry-level soldiers, life is highly regimented and the excesses of sexuality and pleasure must be avoided (Hellmann-Rajanayagam 1994, 172).

For their dedication to the movement, their courage and solicitous devotion, members of the LTTE have access to preternatural, liberating power. They are enshrined in the memorial archive of national martyrs. In addition, self-sacrifice has soteriological benefits. Reflecting the hagiographies of the Nāyaṇārs, LTTE soldiers win Prabhakaran's *aruḷ* ("grace") through their

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<sup>26</sup> These are highly idealized representations of the LTTE lifestyle that circulate in media, among scholars, and in the popular imagination. It is difficult to know the degree to which such ideals are a social reality. Ideologically, however, such regulations impact popular understandings of Tamil masculinity.

self-sacrifices, and subsequently achieve liberation. In the following excerpt attributed to Prabhakaran he bestows his *aruḷ* on the fallen warriors of the LTTE, ensuring us that they have exceeded the ordinary boundaries of life and death. Through love, devotion, and martyrdom, LTTE fighters transcend their corporeality and are immortalized:

A liberation warrior's death is not a normal death ... it is a miracle of a high ideal becoming a reality. In fact, a liberation fighter does not die. The ideal which was his life never burns out. That fine ideal becomes a historical force and the hearts of others.<sup>27</sup>

### Modernizing the Men of Eelam

While on the one hand Prabhakaran and his acolytes call on Tamil men to embody the ideals of the Caṅkam “golden age” and mimic the sacrifices of *bhakti*-period heroes, they also demand elements of modernity in their constructions of Tamil masculinity.<sup>28</sup> Reflecting the rhetoric of Ārumuka Nāvalar, Prabhakaran assures his followers that theirs is a wholly modern movement. Tamils, and especially Tamil men, are *au courant* and even progressive. LTTE propaganda asseverates Tamil modernity by demonstrating that Tamil men are familiar with the discourse of universal humanism, well versed in the nuances of rational argumentation, and supportive of women's rights.

The LTTE employs the ideology of modernity to justify the ethnic conflict. Images of the Caṅkam warrior-hero and the selfless *bhakta* are cast aside and replaced by the image of the modern Tamil man who is aware of both his history and his rights. Two preeminent LTTE websites, Tamil Eelam and EelamWeb, rationally justify the conflict. Their contributors argue

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<sup>27</sup> ([www.bebo.com/Profile.jsp?MemberId=3802912315](http://www.bebo.com/Profile.jsp?MemberId=3802912315); accessed 2008).

<sup>28</sup> In a 1994 interview with *Velicham*, a Tamil literary magazine published in Jaffna, Prabhakaran stated his concern for the advancement of the Tamil people. Prabhakaran claimed to “deeply desire that ... [his] people should develop scientifically and intellectually” in order to widen their horizons ([www.tamilnation.org/Ltte/vp/interviews/94velicham.htm](http://www.tamilnation.org/Ltte/vp/interviews/94velicham.htm); accessed 2007).

that the Tamil people of Sri Lanka have rights that have been violated, and that the violent tactics of the LTTE are a last resort in the face of protracted oppression. The Tamil Eelam website includes a six-page essay, "The Legitimacy of the Armed Struggle of the Tamil People," which defends the struggle of the LTTE on the grounds of human rights violations.<sup>29</sup> After recounting the historical disenfranchisement of the Tamil people, the authors refer to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and cite a number of human rights commissioners (ibid.). Tellingly, the authors go on to claim that the *Prevention of Terrorism Act* was described by the International Commission of Jurists as a "blot on the statute book of any civilised country" (ibid.). The invocation of global standards of "civilization" underscores the LTTE's claim that Tamils are an advanced people, in contrast to the Sinhalese who (they imply) still retain the barbarism pointed out by missionaries and representatives of the colonial regime. Prabhakaran confirms this understanding of the Tamil people in his annual Heroes' Day speech, where he presents the "reasonable" grounds for the Tamil liberation struggle.<sup>30</sup> For example, in 1993, he argues that, according to "international norms and principles," the LTTE's actions are just:

We are fighting for a just cause. Our political objectives conform with international norms and principles. Our people are eligible for the right to self-determination. They have the right to statehood. Under international law this right cannot be denied.<sup>31</sup>

Beyond references to international law, the LTTE positions itself as a progressive organization through its official stance on women. As the recognition of women's suffrage and

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<sup>29</sup> ([www.eelam.com/introduction/legitimacy.html](http://www.eelam.com/introduction/legitimacy.html); accessed 2007).

<sup>30</sup> Heroes' Day is an annual holiday observed in November by the LTTE and their supporters. It commemorates the deaths of LTTE soldiers and provides a venue to discuss the state of the movement. Every Heroes' Day, Prabhakaran gives an address, which is usually one of two public statements of the year. He also addresses Eelam during Women's Day International. His speeches are made available to Tamils around the world on the internet, where they are preserved in audio recording and in Tamil and English text ([www.eelamweb.com/leader/messages/heroesday](http://www.eelamweb.com/leader/messages/heroesday); [www.eelam.com](http://www.eelam.com); accessed 2008).

<sup>31</sup> ([www.eelamweb.com/leader/messages/herosday/1993](http://www.eelamweb.com/leader/messages/herosday/1993); accessed 2007).

equality is a sign of an advanced state, the LTTE's official attitude towards women affirms the modernity of Eelam. Like the men of wealthy, Western countries, male followers of the LTTE supposedly regard women as equal to themselves. The LTTE's annual celebration of Women's Day International (since at least 1992) contributes to its image as a progressive organization.<sup>32</sup> In Prabhakaran's speeches delivered during the festivities, he underwrites the civilizational and social advancement of the nation of Eelam by advocating women's equality. He expresses his desire for the Tamil people to be on par with "the developed world...[where] women have been successful in securing many of their political and social rights," and underscores the importance of women's education.<sup>33</sup> He also argues that the movement headed by the LTTE advances the Tamil people: "[Tamil] society is continuing to metamorphose. The tornado of ideological war gusting in the shape of our liberation struggle is eradicating the giant trees of hoary dogmas deeply rooted for eons in our soil. The superstitions ensconced in the dark recesses of our mind are being expelled."<sup>34</sup>

Within the LTTE, notions of women's equality are not merely for show. Women have been encouraged to take an active role in the movement.<sup>35</sup> In 1984, a women's wing of combatants, the Freedom Birds of Tamil Eelam, was established. According to Yamuna Sangarasivam, membership in the Freedom Birds has allowed Tamil women a greater degree of

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<sup>32</sup> For obvious reasons, the LTTE's official social and economic ideology and policy, socialism, implies that their movement is progressive. While a discussion of the LTTE's formulation and execution of socialism is beyond the scope of this thesis, Hellmann-Rajanayagam's observations are useful: "Sincerely as it is peddled, [socialism] is at best a thin veneer over a profoundly indigenous and nationalist movement. Yet at the same time, aims of social justice have been realized best by the LTTE who are as mixed by caste and religion as one could wish" (Hellmann-Rajanayagam 1994, 136).

<sup>33</sup> ([www.eelamweb.com/leader/messages/women/1992](http://www.eelamweb.com/leader/messages/women/1992); accessed 2008).

<sup>34</sup> ([www.eelamweb.com/leader/messages/women/1996](http://www.eelamweb.com/leader/messages/women/1996); accessed 2008).

<sup>35</sup> Even prior to the LTTE's establishment of its official stance, women actively participated in the struggle for Eelam. Women have taken part in and staged their own political protests since the very beginning of the movement (Balasingham 1993, 19).

mobility and has relieved them of their domestic duties (Sangarasivam 2003, 73). Unlike women in the domestic sphere, Freedom Birds can roam the streets at their leisure and are not expected to adhere to the norms of modesty for women (ibid., 65). But, as Sangarasivam notes, membership in the Freedom Birds in no way erases gender obligations; women are still expected to maintain their beauty and chastity (ibid., 67).<sup>36</sup>

Although women may live and die for the cause, Prabhakaran and his followers do not genuinely locate women in a position equal to men. More than anything, the rhetoric of women's equality underscores the advancement of men. Casting gender equality in terms of men's enlightenment, Prabhakaran claims that, "The struggle against male chauvinistic oppression is not a struggle against men. It is an ideological struggle against the ignorance of men. This ideological struggle should [be] aimed at the mental transformation of men, at the distorted perceptions of men about women."<sup>37</sup> More importantly, behind the façade of women's rights, Prabhakaran emphasizes the supreme value of women's domesticity. He argues that women must be respected because their reproductive capacity has a divine source and is essential for human development.<sup>38</sup> Again focusing on the advancement of men, Prabhakaran calls on them to recognize the importance of family life: "It is only when ... men understand the profound significance and meaning of this love relationship, that male chauvinism and the structures of

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<sup>36</sup> Members of the Freedom Birds themselves tend to link the virtues of their chastity with their involvement in the movement. For some women, concerns with protecting their chastity incited them to join the Freedom Birds. For example, a 23-year-old female soldier interviewed by Sangarasivam reported, "I decided that ... I was not going to be raped ... in the hands of the army. I saw the courage of other girls ... joining the movement and decided that this was really the only way to survive" (Sangarasivam 2003, 60). Another Freedom Bird, Captain Vanathi, drew an inextricable link between a woman's auspicious, chaste married state, and devotion to the LTTE. She understands devotion to the LTTE as parallel to a woman's chaste devotion to her husband. Captain Vanathi writes: "Her forehead shall be adorned not with *kunkumam* but with red blood ... On her neck will lay no tali, but a cyanide flask" (Wickramasinge 2006, 299).

<sup>37</sup> ([www.eclamweb.com/leader/messages/women/1992](http://www.eclamweb.com/leader/messages/women/1992); accessed 2008).

<sup>38</sup> ([www.eclamweb.com/leader/messages/women/1992](http://www.eclamweb.com/leader/messages/women/1992); [www.eclamweb.com/leader/messages/women/1993](http://www.eclamweb.com/leader/messages/women/1993); accessed 2008).

power and domination arising from it will be resolved.”<sup>39</sup> Not surprisingly, Prabhakaran ultimately demonstrates an ambivalent attitude towards the Freedom Birds. In all of his annual Heroes’ Day speeches, women’s roles as combatants go unmentioned. Even in most of his Women’s Day International addresses, Prabhakaran fails to mention female cadres. Evidently, ideas about women’s equality are most ideologically useful when they highlight the modernity of the Tamil nation, and particularly the modernity of Tamil men.

For supporters of the LTTE, and those inured to its ideological formations, constructions of Tamil masculinity are composite. Men who reflect the bravery of the Caṅkam warrior-heroes and the selfless devotion of the Nāyaṇārs are idealized. Their actions are lauded for upholding the cultural ideals of a past characterized by righteousness, in the context of the current degenerate state of the nation’s affairs. At the same time, Prabhakaran depicts the organization as progressive and egalitarian, and imagines his devotees as beacons of modernity. While such a composite Tamil masculinity serves to piece together the fragments of identity left in the wake of the ethnic conflict, tensions are evident. For diasporic Sri Lankan Tamil men in particular, masculine ideals reified by the LTTE are troubling because they are often out of reach.

### **Renegotiating Masculinity in the Diaspora**

In the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora, men face new challenges. Having been excluded from Sri Lanka, they have sought membership in other nation-states, and in these contexts, labour to preserve their collective history and experiences. Although the Tamil community in Canada has been relatively successful in safeguarding its language and culture (Brunger 1994), many

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<sup>39</sup> ([www.eelamweb.com/leader/messages/women/1992](http://www.eelamweb.com/leader/messages/women/1992); accessed 2008).

refugees face significant hardships. The maintenance of gender norms and ideals, for example, is difficult. For my informants in Montréal, issues of nationlessness, economic hurdles, and varied sexual norms pose serious threats to Tamil masculine identity.

Sri Lankan Tamils cross great physical and cultural distances to come to Canada, a nation that is as foreign in custom as it is in climate. While Canada's official policy of multiculturalism ostensibly functions to welcome Tamils, many face implicit and explicit forms of discrimination.<sup>40</sup> Even for an ethnically Sri Lankan Tamil man, born and raised in Canada, racism fails to recede into the background. According to Mithun, an eighteen-year-old first generation Sri Lankan Tamil-Canadian, racism continues despite citizenship:

In Montréal, our biggest problem is that we don't have priority for everything ... If we go for a job interview, they're going to take the white guys first ... I have a friend who interviewed for a job and he was better, but the white guy got the job. Here brown guys can't get the jobs. We're not white ... Sometimes people call me Paki and I'm like, 'yo I was born here ... I'm not a Paki, first of all,' and they're like, 'whatever, you look the same. Every Paki is the same ...' They bring you down.

In addition to common forms of racism, Canadian opinions about the LTTE can lead to feelings of isolation and exclusion for Sri Lankan Tamil men. Many Sri Lankan Tamils, especially those who strongly support the LTTE, consider themselves citizens of the nation of Eelam, inextricably linked to other Eelam Tamils by shared history and collective experience (Anderson 1983). In Canada, however, their nation, their homeland, is discounted and even demonized. In accordance with the international community, Canada does not recognize the legitimacy of Tamil

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<sup>40</sup> The term multiculturalism generally refers to a state of racial, cultural and ethnic diversity within the demographics of a specified place. In Canada it refers to the nation's official policy of valuing diversity and providing equal opportunities for all. The Liberal Party government of Pierre Trudeau promulgated the "Policy of Multiculturalism within a Bilingual Framework" in the House of Commons in 1971, the precursor to the Canadian *Multiculturalism Act* of the Brian Mulroney Progressive Conservative government. Both policies call for open immigration regulations and employment opportunities for "New Canadians," and encourage all Canadians to welcome diversity. On a more practical level, federal funds are distributed to ethnic groups to help them preserve their cultures. Projects typically funded included dancing competitions and the construction of ethnic community centres.

Eelam. In addition, the LTTE was added to Canada's list of terrorist organizations in 2006.<sup>41</sup> As a result, Canada has recently begun criminalizing all organizations it suspects are associated with the LTTE. In June of 2008, the World Tamil Movement, which has been operating in Canada since 1986, was criminalized; its funds were frozen and its leaders were tried. While the leaders of the World Tamil Movement are seeking a judicial review in federal court, they lament the loss of programs and services they had provided to Tamil immigrants.<sup>42</sup>

In a way, the fact that Eelam is not recognized as a state, and the admonishment of the LTTE in the international community abrogates Eelam Tamils as a people, an affect that weighs particularly heavily on men. For strong supporters of the LTTE living in Canada, self-identification as "Eelam Tamil" is met with either the ignorance or disapproval of others.<sup>43</sup> Public attitudes about Sri Lankan Tamils tend to be negative because of media reports discussing the "Tamil Tiger terrorists." For many Canadians, such reports are the only source of knowledge about the Tamil community. The criminalization of the LTTE also leads to more concrete forms of marginalization in the Canadian polity and public sphere. Very few Tamils work in the Canadian government, and many Tamil political and community organizations have been shutdown because of suspected connections with the LTTE. Such types of organizational disenfranchisement are more troubling for Tamil men than for Tamil women because state and community organizations have traditionally been masculine institutions. As Joanne Nagel notes,

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<sup>41</sup> ([www.cbc.ca/canada/story/2008/06/16/day-tamil.html](http://www.cbc.ca/canada/story/2008/06/16/day-tamil.html); accessed 2008)

<sup>42</sup> ([www.cbc.ca/canada/story/2008/06/19/tamil-terrorist.html](http://www.cbc.ca/canada/story/2008/06/19/tamil-terrorist.html); accessed 2008).

<sup>43</sup> Feelings of occlusion are reinforced by some Canadian's attitudes towards immigration generally and the Sri Lankan Tamil community specifically. In an online forum posted alongside a CBC article about Canada's banning of the World Tamil Movement, one angry Canadian wrote: "I am so sick of reading/hearing about immigrants living in Canada supporting political protests in their home land [sic]. You're here in Canada and many unwelcomed so start being Canadian [sic] ... if your homeland is so important to you then go back. The fact that this legal investigation will be paid for by Canadian taxpayers, while these terrorists continue to find ways to filter millions of dollars back to the rebels in their homeland is just disgusting! Wake up Canada!!!!!" (ibid.).

men occupy the vast majority of positions of power and influence in governments; men organize, run, and “man” the machinery of government (Nagel 2005, 397). In Sri Lankan Tamil communities, non-government organizations have followed a similar pattern.

Among some of my informants, omission from the polity and public sphere in both Sri Lanka and Canada is compounded by feelings of isolation from the LTTE. Many of my informants feel guilty that they are living relatively comfortable lives in Canada while their friends and kin in Sri Lanka are entrenched in war. Filled with respect for the LTTE, my informants are haunted by the notion that active Tigers consider them disengaged from the conflict and thus excluded from Eelam. Although they support the movement in other ways, they fear the disdain of their families and communities for failing to engage in combat.<sup>44</sup> Like their feeling of exclusion from Sri Lanka and Canada, they feel less masculine because they are not engaged in the conflict directly. Not surprisingly many of my informants claim that members of the LTTE resent them for not being “man enough” to stay in Sri Lanka and struggle for the liberation of Eelam.<sup>45</sup>

For some Sri Lankan Tamil men in Montréal, economic issues also contribute to feelings of inadequacy. Although some of my informants had already encountered economic disenfranchisement due to the conflict in Sri Lanka, others had retained fairly prestigious posts. Some were teachers, office administrators, and shopkeepers. In Canada, they have had to accept jobs that are less prestigious and less lucrative. For many Sri Lankan Tamil men, manual and blue-collar jobs render it difficult to live up to the image of the educated, modern Tamil man.

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<sup>44</sup> As Nagel notes, “Patriotism is a siren call that few men can resist, particularly in the midst of a political ‘crisis;’ and if they do, they risk the disdain or worse of their communities and families, sometimes including their mothers” (Nagel 1998, 252).

<sup>45</sup> As I explain in the remainder of this chapter and in Chapter Three, the relationships of Montréal-based Tamils to the LTTE are complex. While many Montréal-based Tamils are involved in funding and propounding the ideological discourse of the LTTE, they are obviously not presently involved in combat.

Moreover, the hegemonic position of what R.W. Connell calls “transnational business masculinity” in urban centres around the world increases the economic pressure on men (Connell 1998). The polished shoes of “transnational business masculinity,” which require a man to be power-oriented, individualistic, and cerebral rather than muscular (Connell 2005, 84), are impossible for some Sri Lankan Tamil men to fill when they are employed as manual labourers and send what little they earn back to Sri Lanka.

Sexual norms also pose problems for Sri Lankan Tamil men in Montréal. Most of my informants believe that marriage – becoming the courageous protector of wife and family – is essential to masculinity and to the maintenance of society as a whole. My married informants are proud of their wives and families, while those who are unmarried (and of marriageable age) are anxious and ashamed. For the unmarried, “wanton relations” between Canadian men and women are partially to blame. They point to the degradation of the institution of marriage in the West as a major impediment to their eligibility for marriage, and ultimately to their fulfillment of masculine ideals. Jeya, a middle-aged, self-described Eelam Tamil and Prabhakaran devotee who immigrated to Montréal in 2005, explains the way marital norms in the West threaten the masculine identity of Tamil men. Juxtaposing the degenerate masculinity of men whose wives remarry with the “real” masculinity of LTTE men whose wives are unquestionably devoted to them, he expresses anxiety about gender norms in Canada:

Here [in Canada] you get married three times or four times ... women can't even tell which child they have from which husband. Back there [in Sri Lanka] it's not like that. We marry only once ... The Tigers, we are real men, strong men. Our women, our wives ... they are for us only.

Tamil men of the LTTE assert their masculinity in a variety of ways, fashioning themselves as heroic, altruistic, warriors, as they counteract assaults with ruthless militancy; and

harbingers of a progressive future, as they proclaim the truths of international law and the equality of women. The masculine ideals the LTTE propounds resonate deeply with my informants in Montréal. However, the LTTE's efforts to reclaim Tamil masculinity, unifying Tamil men in their courageous militancy and single-minded devotion, have ultimately failed. The masculine identities of Sri Lankan Tamil men remain multivalent, heterogeneous, and ambiguous. The modern, disciplined warrior-hero entrenched in the public persona of Prabhakaran fails to unite Tamil men in a single, stable masculine identity.

In Montréal, the ever-shifting pattern of fragmentation and reunification continues to characterize the construction of Tamil masculinities. As I explain in the following chapters, in the non-Brahmin Śaiva community, exclusively male ritual practices have become the terrain for relocating masculine paths. Ritual actions allow men to perform a cultural masculinity, in an attempt to become "real Tamil men" again.

### Chapter Three:

#### Taking Kāvaṭi, Inscribing Masculinity: Tamil Men and Votive Rituals for Murukaṇ

Sri Lankan Tamil men in the diaspora attempt to solidify their fragmented masculine identities in the performance of *kāvaṭi*. Here, ritual performance is not merely allegorical, but is a living language through which contested and ambiguous identity can be discussed, and, in some ways, solidly reconstructed. In performing *kāvaṭi*, men posit themselves as “traditional” Tamil masculine figures. They fulfill obligations to protect family and community, and selflessly devote themselves to the deity. On the other hand, *kāvaṭi* is a site of contestation and negotiation. It expresses masculine anxieties and traumatic memories that are rooted in ethnic conflict, war, and refugee life. Finally, in articulating masculine aspirations, uncertainties, and traumas, *kāvaṭi* enacts catharsis and a type of temporary liberation. Through *kāvaṭi* men are relieved of the multivalent pressures of masculinity.

This chapter focuses on the way *kāvaṭi* is both an expression of and a relief from composite masculine identity. I cover five main themes. (1) First, I discuss mythological understandings of Murukaṇ and *kāvaṭi*, underscoring the way they glorify warrior-heroism, and selfless *bhakti*. I argue that Murukaṇ is the personification of ideal Tamil masculinity, and highlight the ways performers of *kāvaṭi* are depicted according to similar paradigms. (2) I discuss the politics of representing *kāvaṭi*, pointing to its contention in Montréal’s Sri Lankan Tamil community. Some depict *kāvaṭi* as a degenerate form of “folk” Hinduism, which diverges from “true” Śaivism, while others understand it as the apogee of Tamil spiritual heritage. (3) Next, I shift the discussion to experiences of *kāvaṭi* among five primary informants. I argue that *kāvaṭi* is

an exemplification of masculine virtue, which enables men to link themselves to the imagined stability of their masculine heritage. Through *kāvaṭi* men embody traditional masculine ideals, which are otherwise difficult to actualize. In a way they are transformed into warrior-heroes and militant *bhaktas*. (4) I then provide an analysis of individual and collective catharses that ensue from expressions of vexed masculine identity in *kāvaṭi*. For many non-Brahmin (usually Vēḷāḷar) Sri Lankan Tamil men, enforced silence is a recurring problem related to war, migration, caste, and class. In both Sri Lanka and Canada, their voices have been relegated to the margins. Through performances of *kāvaṭi*, however, non-Brahmin men loudly assert themselves. They publicly express masculine anxiety and pain, an articulation that results in deep emotional relief. (5) Finally, I close the chapter with a discussion of the growing importance of *kāvaṭi* performance in the Canadian diaspora as a means to solidify collective identity and assert it against the forces of assimilation.

While this chapter emphasizes the performance of *kāvaṭi* as an act of reifying “primordial” Tamil masculinity, it also underscores the anxieties and ambiguities entrenched in masculine ritual productions. For the performers themselves, understandings of the ritual and its relationship to masculine identity are multiple and sometimes even contradictory. While *kāvaṭi* may anchor one to Tamil heritage, it also establishes new forms of Tamil identity in Canada. *Kāvaṭi* performances in Montréal are complex, multivalent expressions of fluctuating, composite Tamil masculine identity. The ritual itself indexes the fraught nature of masculinity.

In the Montréal Sri Lankan Tamil community, performing *kāvaṭi* involves carrying a large, heavy wooden structure across the shoulders, which is itself called *kāvaṭi*. The *kāvaṭi* is carried in procession around the temple for a minimum of three hours. As the performers

circumambulate the temple, they dance ecstatically to loud, rhythmic drumming [Figure 3]. At the same time they sustain a number of ritual piercings. Some are pierced with small spears in their tongues, lips, and cheeks. Most are pierced with large hooks through the flesh around their spinal columns, which are attached to a number of strings tied to a single rope [Figure 4]. Other men pull the ropes, exerting significant force, which is resisted by the performers.

In the performance of *kāvaṭi*, male bodies are burdened, contested, and liberated. The act of bearing the weight and cumbersome form of the *kāvaṭi* is tantamount to fulfilling trying masculine obligations. The resistant pressure of the taut ropes pulling on the flesh suggests challenge and contestation. Those performing *kāvaṭi* exhibit their strength as they pull against those handling the ropes. However, in displays of power, weakness surfaces. Performers often go into semi-conscious states, writhing, stamping, and falling onto the ground. Embodying masculinity is a protracted struggle. Finally, the ecstatic dancing and semi-consciousness of *kāvaṭi* performers suggests a type of release, even a liberation. Vociferously articulating the entangled strains of Tamil masculinity, hooked to both the challenges of past and present, men are temporarily emancipated.

### **Murukaṇ and Masculinity**

As Murukaṇ exemplifies ancient Tamil masculine ideals, his cultus is an apposite stage for performances of masculinity. Although Murukaṇ is embedded in the wider landscape of Śaivism, his worship, rather than Śiva's figures prominently here because Śiva transgresses gender norms. Living as both ultra-ascetic and loving householder, Śiva refuses to conform to boundaries of Hindu masculine behaviour, and his transgressive power threatens the stability of

the universe.<sup>1</sup> In terms of gender and sexuality, Śiva inhabits a liminal realm – he haunts the cremation grounds, naked, and at times becomes androgynous.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, he passionately loves his wife, and fathers two sons. Śiva’s ambiguity renders him less manly and less approachable than Murugaṇ. He is enigmatic, distant, and unrelated to the experiences of human men. Not surprisingly, among Tamil communities, devotion to Murugaṇ tends to outstrip devotion to Śiva (Geaves 2007, 57).

In contrast to his ambiguous father, Murugaṇ directly relates to the experiences of human men. He exemplifies Tamil manhood: he is courageous warrior-hero, just king, and austere *bhakta*. In early literary references and oral narratives that circulate today, his position as warrior-hero and just king is firmly established. For example, some of the most well known myths about Murugaṇ revolve around his war against Cūraṇ. This theme is introduced in the Caṅkam-period anthologies, reappears in the medieval *purāṇas* (the *Kantapurāṇam* among others), and remains prominent in the Tamil collective memory (Clothey 1978, 26; Zvelebil 1991, 80-6). According to the various accounts, Murugaṇ is a brave warrior-hero who protects the universe from Cūraṇ, a pernicious demon who has been wreaking havoc on divine and human kingdoms and who has attempted to kidnap a number of beautiful women. Striving to protect others,

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<sup>1</sup> Popular purāṇic narratives recounting Śiva as Naṭarāja (literally “king of dancers”) point to his ominous tendency to threaten cosmic stability. Many of the myths of Śiva as Naṭarāja are localized at the Cidambaram Temple in Tamil Nadu, where he is thought to have first danced. According to (an extremely abridged version of) one myth associated with Cidambaram, Śiva and Viṣṇu went into the forest as mendicant and beautiful woman, respectively. They aroused the sages’ lusts, and the sages attacked them. After defending himself and Viṣṇu with ease, Śiva began dancing his *ānandatāṇḍava* (literally “dance of bliss”) (Smith 1996, 31). His dance was so powerful that it caused fear in the sages, the other gods, and even in his wife Pārvatī. In another popular narrative, he engages in a dance contest with the fierce goddess Kālī, and his movement again threatens the stability of the universe. Many narratives surround the efforts of the other gods to prevent Śiva from performing his *ānandatāṇḍava*.

<sup>2</sup> Śiva as Ardhanārīśvara (literally “half-woman-lord”) has a rich iconographic, meditative, and devotional tradition within the larger framework of Śaivism. Ardhanārīśvara is imaged as a half male and half female being; his right half is Śiva and her left half is Pārvatī. He/she represents the interplay between material (*prakṛti*) and non-material (*puruṣa*) energies that results in creation. Although Śiva as Ardhanārīśvara is androgynous, his male side dominates (Goldberg 2002).

Murukaṇ slays the demon in battle.<sup>3</sup> In addition to his altruistic bravery and martial prowess, Murukaṇ's sexual virility reflects that of the ancient warrior-hero. His potency is such that it cannot be contained by just one woman; he elicits the devotion of two wives, Valli and Devasenā, or Tēyvaṇṇi Ammaṇ.<sup>4</sup> From the position of warrior-hero, Murukaṇ develops into a divine king. In the late Caṅkam period, he becomes a king of justice and virtue and by the fifth century he has been ascribed the ten insignia of Tamil kingship (Clothey 1978, 178). This motif continues through the medieval period and obtains in the popular imagination today.

In some ways Murukaṇ also embodies the ideals of the self-sacrificing devotee of the *bhakti*-period.<sup>5</sup> Murukaṇ is imaged as a *brahmacāri* – a celibate, ascetic, and devout student – in two renowned South Indian temples, Paḷaṇi and Vadapaḷaṇi.<sup>6</sup> Even for those who are familiar with neither temple, Paḷaṇi's *talapūraṇam*, or foundation myth, has popularized understandings of Murukaṇ as *brahmacāri*. According to the narrative, Murukaṇ rebelled against his family by renouncing the pleasures of material life and fully devoting himself to religious pursuits (Clothey

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<sup>3</sup> Besides protecting the kingdom in general, Murukaṇ ensures that women's chastity is safeguarded. Keeping them out of Cūraṇ's hands, he maintains the sexual purity of Tamil women, which underwrites the sanctity of Tamil culture. As Sumathi Ramaswamy notes, women's chastity is understood as a benchmark of the strength and virtue of the Tamil community at large (Ramaswamy 1997). Murukaṇ, therefore, does not just protect Tamils from martial intrusion, but safeguards them from cultural degradation.

<sup>4</sup> Like the female lovers of Caṅkam literature, Valli and Devasenā love Murukaṇ unconditionally. They are not jealous that he splits his love between them. In fact, prior to their engagement, Valli pines away in Murukaṇ's absence – unconditionally in love with him – though he is already married to someone else (Zvelebil 1991, 83).

<sup>5</sup> Murukaṇ is directly associated with the Nāyaṇārs through their hymns and hagiographies. They visited Tiruvarur, and sung of Murukaṇ as Somaskanda, who remains the main object of devotion there (Geaves 2007, 38). More importantly, Campantar, one of the three *māvar* is considered an incarnation of Murukaṇ (Clothey 1978, 87).

<sup>6</sup> According to classical Hinduism *brahmacārya* is the first of four ideal stages of life for an upper caste man, which are called āśramas. The four stages are: *brahmacārya*, *gṛhastha*, *vānaprastha*, and *saṃnyāsa*. While these ideal stages first developed in Sanskritic Hinduism, they are well integrated into Tamil Śaivism. *Brahmacārya* is the student stage, which requires celibacy and a more general renunciation of pleasure. The *brahmacāri* is required to devote all of his time to the study of Sanskrit texts and prayer. The next three stages of life require man to enter a householder phase (*gṛhastha*), work towards renouncing the materiality of household life (*vānaprastha*), and, finally, fully renounce the material world and work towards the attainment of spiritual goals (*saṃnyāsa*).

1978, 86).<sup>7</sup> Murukaṇ's position as a devout student also comes to the fore in ubiquitous understandings of him as a young boy. According to such conceptions, he is a beautiful and brilliant young boy who devotes himself to religious scholarship. Although he has many names, the fact that the appellation "Murukaṇ" is most common underscores the predominance of such understandings. Murukaṇ, means "he who is of a tender, youthful age." Ultimately, his youth and freedom from the material world render him capable of great religious and intellectual accomplishments. Not surprisingly, he is considered the first teacher of Śaiva Siddhānta (ibid.).<sup>8</sup>

The presence of Murukaṇ as *brahmacāri* suggests that he, like Śiva, posits challenges to masculine norms. He is both householder and ascetic.<sup>9</sup> However, compared to Śiva, Murukaṇ's transgressions are not portentous. First of all, his roles as *brahmacāri* and householder are not considered contemporaneous; his celibate student stage does not occur at the same time as his marriages. Moreover, he is not as extreme as Śiva in any of his pursuits. Unlike Śiva, his expressions of sexuality are not considered excessive and they in no way disturb the order of the universe. Likewise, his asceticism is not extended into the realm of fanaticism. He is not subject

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<sup>7</sup> According to the narrative, a sage gave Śiva and Śakti a mango, which was also the fruit of knowledge (Clothey 1978, 86). Their two sons, Murukaṇ and Piḷḷaiyār (Gaṇeśa) both coveted the mango so their parents, not wanting to diminish its power by cutting it, suggested they race around the world in competition for it (ibid.). Piḷḷaiyār outsmarted Murukaṇ by circling his parents, who are themselves the world, and Murukaṇ was infuriated by his loss (ibid.). In rebellion, he stormed off to a mountaintop in Paḷaṇi and took an eternal vow of *brahmacārya*, renouncing the pleasures of family life and fully devoting himself to religious pursuits (ibid.).

<sup>8</sup> Śaiva Siddhānta is a school of Śaiva thought and practice, which dominates orthodox South Indian and Sri Lankan Tamil Śaivism today. It was one of the most influential schools of thought during the pan-Indic dissemination of Śaivism during the medieval period. It has a strong scholarly tradition, and is defined by elaborate theological, philosophical, and ritual doctrines. It also consists of a four-fold doctrine of practice, which requires knowledge, ritual, proper conduct, and discipline.

<sup>9</sup> Fred W. Clothey reconciles the discordance between Murukaṇ's marital status and his renunciation by arguing that his marital situation actually signifies his renunciation. According to Clothey, Murukaṇ's two consorts represent passions to which the god is no longer attached (Clothey 1978, 86). "This interpretation is made explicit when it is said that Valli represents volition (*icchā śakti*), Devasenā represents action (*kriyā śakti*), but the lance which the god grasps in lieu of the consorts represents wisdom (*jñāna śakti*). By appropriate use of intelligence and discrimination the god (and the true devotee) is believed to be able to control the passion and action resident in emotion and will" (ibid., 86).

to trying fasts, but instead pursues religious goals intellectually.

The masculine ideals woven into the figure of Murukaṇ are particularly important because of the deity's deep connection to Tamil identity. Although the Murukaṇ cultus incorporates many elements of Sanskritic Hinduism, its origin in the Tamil-speaking region is well-established among practitioners and scholars (Zvelebil 1991, 15-70; Clothey 1978, 15-35; Geaves 2007, 15-34). Such convictions inextricably link Murukaṇ to the Tamil language. According to purāṇic accounts and oral tales, Murukaṇ taught Tamil to the sage Agastya, who is ordinarily considered the founder of the language. He also corrected a Tamil grammar that had been written by Śiva himself, and became an eminent Tamil scholar while still a small boy. Mythology emerging from the worship of Murukaṇ during the *bhakti* period similarly presents Murukaṇ as both the source and the fruit of the best Tamil literature. The greatest poets sing of Murukaṇ. For example, the famed saint Aruṇakirinātar wrote the Tiruppukal after receiving Murukaṇ's divine redemption. The god himself is said to have sung the first few lines, as Aruṇakirinātar was initially speechless (Clothey 1978. 87).

In addition to his association with the Tamil language, Murukaṇ is embedded in the Tamil land, which he renders sacred.<sup>10</sup> In Tamil Nadu, devotees enthusiastically accept his divine immanence at the cultus' six main shrines. Due to Murukaṇ's presence, the six centres constitute a maṇḍala that provides numerous access points, where breakthrough to transcendence is possible (Clothey 1978, 177). Murukaṇ's immanence also sacralizes the soil of Sri Lanka. The island's most esteemed Murukaṇ temple at Katirakāmam is considered a location where the

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<sup>10</sup> While Murukaṇ's presence renders the Tamil land sacred, the relationship can also be posited in the opposite direction. Murukaṇ is sacred because he is connected to the Tamil land, which is itself inherently auspicious. As Clothey notes, Murukaṇ personifies the magnanimous, fertile hills of the Tamil country (Clothey 1978, 155).

divine world comes to earth (Geaves 2007, 55).<sup>11</sup> Ultimately, Murukan's firm connections to the Tamil language and land render him the embodiment of Tamil identity. As Kamil Zvelebil argues, "Murugan's association with Tamil is broader and goes deeper than the purāṇic motif: Murugan is not only Tamil deity *par excellence*; in the collective Tamil consciousness, Murugan *is* Tamil" (Zvelebil 1991, 23).

Not surprisingly, the pressures of ethnic exclusion in Sri Lanka have led to the mobilization of Tamil identity around Murukan. Ron Geaves argues that Murukan's mythological position as a god of war and justice, who sanctifies the Tamil land and protects it from malignant forces (Cūraṇ, for example), renders him an appropriate figure for nationalist discourse (Geaves 2007, 59). As political processes have become increasingly intractable, Murukan has become a powerful symbol of religious and ethnic identity (ibid., 51).<sup>12</sup> In the last forty years, communal, public acts of Murukan worship have become more prominent as they are employed to sanctify Tamil territory, marking it distinct from the sacred spaces of Sinhalese Buddhism (ibid.). Moreover, Murukan has come to overwhelmingly predominate the religious landscape of war-torn regions of the island where people have to face repudiations of their collective identity (ibid., 57). In such instances, Murukan has become a receptacle for prayers calling for the victory

<sup>11</sup> Many devotees take the land's sanctification quite literally; they believe that hidden caves and tunnels in the temple lead to the realm of the gods (Geaves 2007, 55).

<sup>12</sup> The politicization of Murukan actually began relatively early. The following story, attributed to the Sri Lankan Tamil politician Ponnambalam Ramanathan, was initially printed in documentary pamphlets about the Katirakāmaṁ temple, and points to early uses of Murukan as a signifier of communal identity. It is surprising that Ramanathan would print such a story as he, unlike his brother, is not remembered as a Tamil nationalist. While in this case, Murukan stands for Hindu identity, the Sinhalese are nonetheless depicted as others. According to Kamil Zvelebil's translation, "a saintly woman ... the eldest child of a North Indian *raṇṇa* [king] was promised by her father to the god [Murukan] if he would be blessed with children ... she came ... and devoted herself to spiritual life. The fame of her beauty reached the [Sinhalese] king of Kandy who sent her offers of marriage which she rejected. He then sent troops to fetch her but the god intervened: he brought British troops to Kandy, the king was taken prisoner and deported to Vellore (1814)" (Zvelebil 1991, 49). The story reflects a nascent sense of Tamil separatism by maligning the Sinhalese king for his insatiable sexual appetite and highlighting Murukan's ability to protect the sanctity of a Hindu woman's chastity. The narrative suggests that Murukan protects the purity of Hindu culture against the deplorable Sinhalese.

of the Tamil people (ibid., 51).

Signifying the strength of ethnic and religious identity, Murukaṇ also dominates Canada's Sri Lankan Tamil Śaiva religious landscape [Figure 5].<sup>13</sup> For Sri Lankan Tamil men, he serves as a masculine role model and the embodiment of the ideals and hopes of the Tamil community (Geaves 2007, 30). Reflecting the themes embedded in literature on Murukaṇ, my informants describe the deity as learned Tamil scholar, great hero, and munificent but harsh king. In addition to bread-and-butter descriptions, many of my informants describe Murukaṇ in mythical terms, which point to the importance of his roles as ascetic and warrior.<sup>14</sup> Paḷaṇi's *talapūraṇam* was recounted by a number of informants, and tales of Murukaṇ's defeat of Cūraṇ were just as common.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to exemplifying the ideals of Tamil masculinity, Murukaṇ's tendency to imprint sacredness on the terrain he inhabits is of particular importance in the diaspora. The establishment of sacred geography due to Murukaṇ's presence marks Canada as home. In accordance with the regulations of daily *pūjā* in Śaiva Siddhānta, the *arcakar* must bring the

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<sup>13</sup> Compared to other Tamil Śaiva deities in Canada, Murukaṇ receives the most temple worship. In Québec, there are two large Murukaṇ temples, while there is one Goddess temple, one small Pillaiyār temple, one large Ayyappaṇ Temple, and one very small Ayyappaṇ Temple. In all of Canada, there are at least seven Murukaṇ and seven Goddess temples, five Pillaiyār temples, four Ayyappaṇ temples, and two Śiva temples.

<sup>14</sup> In contradistinction to mythical accounts and the priest's authoritative opinion, some members of the temple community see Murukaṇ in a different light – as a pioneer of peace. Weekly discourses led by laymen of the temple's managing committee often focus on Murukaṇ's role in ushering in a new, more peaceful era. Likewise, one of my informants, Rajkumar, who has grown up in Canada but keeps abreast of the situation in Sri Lanka, roots Murukaṇ's virtue in his ability to facilitate peace. According to Rajkumar, "Murukaṇ protects and brings peace. We should all think like this. If we did, there would be peace." For men who associate Murukaṇ with peace, the deity remains a vessel for their hopes. Men project their desires for peace and their frustrations with the prolonged war onto the deity. In such cases, masculine heroism shifts its focus from victory to amity. Protection remains paramount, but the goal is reoriented towards reconciliation.

<sup>15</sup> For example, the temple's most senior *arcakar*, who is commonly referred to as Sri Ayyar, or esteemed Brahmin, and is considered a knowledgeable Murukaṇ scholar, provided me with the following explanation: "Murukaṇ is a Tamil hero who was born to protect everyone and everything from Cūraṇ who was proud, violent, and terrorizing the universe." For Sri Ayyar, Murukaṇ's Tamil identity and martial, protective capacity are most important.

divine, in this case Murukan, to the temple's precise geographic location. At the beginning of *pūjā*, the *arcakar* recites the date, time, country, city, and temple in which he is located in order to invite the deity to presence himself there. Thus summoned, Murukan manifests himself in Canada, marking the land sacred and Tamil. Additionally, during the annual temple festival, the performance of Śaiva rituals publicly consecrates the diasporic landscape, and orders a chaotic and impure world (Ceaves 2007, 207). By bringing the temple's chariot and practices into the streets, lay Tamils mark Canadian territories as their own.

### Mythical Origins of Kāvai

While the presence of Murukan in Canada affirms Tamil identity generally, the performance of *kāvai*, in propitiating Murukan, asserts specifically masculine Tamil ideals. *Kāvai* mythology foregrounds traditional Tamil masculinity, as themes of austerity and protective selflessness repeatedly resurface. Like the self-sacrifice of the Caṅkam-period warrior-hero, *kāvai* is sometimes seen as an act that proliferates and renews the life of the Tamil people. Through sacrificing their bodies, *kāvai* performers revitalize Tamil civilization at large.

The story of Iṭampan, which explains the origin of *kāvai* in Tamil Nadu, highlights bravery and self-sacrifice. Iṭampan is an *asura*, or demon, whose display of audacious altruism through *kāvai* fully redeems him, rendering him an appropriate guardian for the deity's residence. According to the oral legend, when Agastya went to Mount Kailāsa to worship Śiva, he was given two hills to take to Poṭikai, the god's mountain abode. To accomplish the task, Agastya decided to commission Iṭampan, who was a strong and fearless warrior, although he was born an *asura*. Well-versed in archery, Iṭampan had served in the army of Śūrapadma, and was the only

one to have survived a great slaughter. In addition to his martial prowess, he was humbly devoted to performing *śrāddha* rites (funerary rituals) for his fallen comrades and undertaking difficult *tapas* (austerities) in the forest. Not surprisingly Iṭampaṇ agreed to Agastya's request. He employed a *kāvaṭi* prototype to carry the mountains, letting them hang from his shoulders on a pole. Upon entering a forest near Paḷani, Iṭampaṇ rested and set his burden down. After regaining his strength, he attempted to lift the mountains up and found that they were fixed to the spot. Befuddled, he climbed the taller of the two mountains upon which he found a young man who claimed to own them both. Seeking to defend the mountains, Iṭampaṇ confronted the young man, and immediately fell lifeless at his feet. Both Agastya and Iṭampaṇ's wife rushed to the scene and begged the youth for mercy. The young man was, of course, Murukaṇ who restored Iṭampaṇ to life and granted his wish to stand guard eternally at the god's portal. (Zvelebil 1991, 32; Clothey 1978, 119).

In addition to the well-known myth of Iṭampaṇ, members of Montréal's Sri Lankan Tamil community recount other legends that underscore the themes of self-sacrifice and heroism. Uyiravan, a Tamil schoolteacher, author, and esteemed member of the community, told me an extended version of the following story to explain the origin of *kāvaṭi*: More than ten thousand years ago, an immensely destructive tsunami hit Sri Lanka. Murukaṇ, who was king at the time, commanded each member of the kingdom to pack their belongings in baskets and attach the baskets to sticks that they would lay across their backs (a proto-*kāvaṭi* structure). Everyone followed the king's wishes and ascended a mountain in order to escape the rising flood. The kingdom was destroyed, but the king and his subjects survived. People continue to perform *kāvaṭi* in order to commemorate the salvation of Murukaṇ's kingdom and to please the deity.

This narrative links *kāvaṭi* to traditional understandings of Tamil masculinity: It depicts Murukaṇ as a Caṅkam-period king and men as his brave and loyal subjects. According to the narrative, Murukaṇ is the archetypal Caṅkam-period king; just and magnanimous, he saves his faithful subjects. Like Iṭampaṇ's tale, the story also highlights the importance of bravery, forbearance, and devotion for everyday men, in this case, Murukaṇ's subjects. Murukaṇ's subordinates are so devoted to him that they abandon their homes and climb the mountain without hesitating. In turn, their devotion, like the allegiance of the Caṅkam-period warrior-heroes, ensures the survival of Tamil civilization. As Murukaṇ is imagined as the king of the Tamil people and the men his loyal subjects, mutual salvation occurs because everyone adheres to "the order of things." The dharmic behaviour of the king and his devotees sustains society at large. Finally, Uyiravan's explanation of the persistence of *kāvaṭi* in contemporary practice suggests that Śaivites must perform *kāvaṭi*, reenacting the devotion of Murukaṇ's subjects, in order to celebrate the deity's divine kingship and the longevity of Tamil civilization. Performers of *kāvaṭi* sustain Tamil society.

### Contemporary Representations of *Kāvaṭi*

Despite the many ways in which the mythology of *kāvaṭi* highlights masculine ideals, its performance is an ongoing issue of contention in Tamil communities.<sup>16</sup> Certain communities, such as Smārta Brahmins, have long denounced its practice. Although contested understandings of *kāvaṭi* are not solely the result of post-colonial reforms, certainly movements such as the one spearheaded by Ārumuka Nāvalar were influential. Nāvalar's positing of Brahmanical custom as

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<sup>16</sup> Controversy surrounding *kāvaṭi* is somewhat surprising given its antiquity. Zvelebil suggests that *kāvaṭi* has been performed in Tamil areas since the eighth century BCE (Zvelebil 1991, 76).

“true Śaivism” and public admonishment of “folk practices” abetted those already wary of *kāvaṭi*. Generally, self-conscious efforts to “refine” Hinduism in the aftermath of colonization heightened critiques of *kāvaṭi* and other “folk practices” that already existed among the elite. In late colonial South India, for example, elite Indians, missionaries, and British officials denounced pain-inflicting penances, which they saw as barbaric and absurd (Oddie 1995, 82-156). Specifically, they decried the practice of *tūkkukkāvaṭi* (literally “lifting *kāvaṭi*”), or hook-swinging, which is the practice of suspending devotees by hooks in the back (ibid.). Their polemics resulted in its prohibition in 1894, which continues to this day (ibid.).

Contemporary diasporic contexts reflect enduring anxieties. In the 1940s and 1950’s the Tamil Reform Movement in Singapore campaigned to expiate “superstitious” and “outmoded” practices, such as *kāvaṭi*, from Śaivism (Krishnan 2000, 5). While the reformers failed in their attempts to convince the British to ban “folk” practices, articles in the local Tamil language newspaper point to widespread, negative views on *kāvaṭi* at that time (Geaves 2007, 97). Likewise, in Malaysia, some Jaffna Tamils who arrived as refugees were initially wary of *kāvaṭi* (Belle 2000, 3-4).<sup>17</sup>

In Montréal, *kāvaṭi* remains contentious. Despite the ubiquity of its performance, many members of the Tamil community relegate *kāvaṭi* to the margins of the Śaiva tradition and describe it in an apologetic tone. Such strained portrayals reflect the onerous tensions characteristic of the ritual itself, and shed light on caste and class relations in the community. For Brahmins, *kāvaṭi* is at best ritually polluting, and at worst deplorable. Not surprisingly, at annual

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<sup>17</sup> Ron Geaves, however, notes that by the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries, attitudes about *kāvaṭi* were different. In Malaysia and Singapore, *kāvaṭi* has been accepted as a signifier of the richness of cultural identity (Geaves 2007, 97).

temple festivals, *arcakars* keep a safe distance from *kāvaṭi* performers; they do not take part in dancing, drumming, piercing, de-piercing, or cooling the bodies of practitioners at the end of performances. They never touch the *kāvaṭis*. All such tasks are undertaken by non-Brahmin males. In interviews, the temple's *arcakars*, all by definition Brahmins, censured *kāvaṭi* and warned me several times about the fruitlessness of studying it. For example, Sri Ayyar informed me that unlike Śaiva Siddhānta and the recitation of *Tēvāram*, *kāvaṭi* is not an "important" part of the Śaiva religion.

Uyiravan also adopts the apologetics of *kāvaṭi* and adduces a gentrified vision of Hinduism.<sup>18</sup> However, his interpretation is more reflective of class position than caste position as he is himself a member of the Vēḷālar *cāti*. Staving off images of the "barbaric" and reflecting the influence of Nāvalar-inspired reform, Uyiravan presents "true" Śaiva practice as silent and reposed rather than loud and flamboyant. He believes that "peaceful religion is at the heart of Hinduism ... [and] meditation is the best form of religious expression." He also regards *kāvaṭi* as an inconsequential practice compared to *tiyāṇam* (*dhyāna*, or meditation) and yoga. Not surprisingly, Uyiravan argues that those who perform *kāvaṭi* today are poor, uneducated, and backward. He attempts to distance the Sri Lankan Tamil community from such people and practices. According to Uyiravan, "*Kāvaṭi* is undertaken by uneducated and people with lots of hardships and problems. Such people don't even know where *kāvaṭi* came from. *Kāvaṭi* is mostly done in India, but in Singapore and Sri Lanka, we have a more modernized Hindu religion."

While reproaching contemporary performances, Uyiravan points to an "unadulterated,"

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<sup>18</sup> Uyiravan's opinions carry considerable weight because he is a schoolteacher who incorporates religious pedagogy into his language lessons. He teaches at least two hundred Tamil children, ranging from ages six to sixteen about religious ideology and practice. He emphasizes *tiyāṇam* and *Tēvāram*, and has incorporated both into his classes. He also weaves the assumptions of science into religious discourse in order to underscore the contemporary palatability of Śaivism, which is simultaneously, he argues, the oldest religion in the world.

“authentic” form of *kāvaṭi*, which is not characterized by degraded, violent corporeal action. Referring to the story about Mūrukaṇ and his kingdom, Uyiravan declares that *kāvaṭi* initially had nothing to do with piercing the flesh. Rather it was part of a celebratory dance to commemorate Murukaṇ’s kingship. At the same time, Uyiravan also provides a contemporary rationale for the prevalence of piercing. He informs me that “*kāvaṭi* piercing has scientifically proven benefits similar to those supplied by acupuncture.” For Uyiravan, *kāvaṭi* is problematic, and must either be excluded from representations of Hinduism or rationalized by references to history and the principles of modern science.

Opinions similar to those of Uyiravan are apparent at the Montréal Murukaṇ Temple, where upper-caste, text-based Hinduism is synthesized with notions of transnational, “scientific” neo-Hinduism. As in most diasporic Sri Lankan Tamil temples, practice is dominated by Brahmanical, subdued forms of religious expression, which are easily amenable to Canadian religio-cultural norms. The temple’s four *arcakars* are Brahmins trained in Vedic Hinduism who conduct temple ritual according to Āgamic prescriptions. In addition, the temple calls itself the Quebec Saiva Mission, and adopts a protestant style of religious pedagogy. In Montréal, learned Brahmins and esteemed members of the temple committee lecture the masses on the proper understandings of Śaivism. Not surprisingly, the sermons often focus on peaceful religion and the importance of study. The *arcakar*, Sri Ayyar, reflects the overarching temple culture in conversation; like Uyiravan, he focuses on *tiyāṇam* and yoga. He explains all of Śaiva practice through the discourse of Kuṇḍalinī Yoga, and argues that the piercings involved in *kāvaṭi* awaken the subtle body at specific *cakras*, or energy points. Again, like Uyiravan, he legitimates *kāvaṭi* by relating it to acupuncture. In doing so he appropriates mystical, Eastern

knowledge, which has acquired considerable authority in the West. For the Montreal Murugan Temple, authenticity and authority rest in both the antiquity of Sanskrit Hinduism and the ability to inhabit contemporary Western epistemologies.

The Brahmanical, neo-Hindu culture of the temple marginalizes the religious practices of non-Brahmin men who constitute the vast majority of the community's population. Aside from the two-week festival, rituals are performed by Brahmins and women. Attendance at daily *pūjās* is dominated by women who colour the scene with recitations of *Tēvāram*, votive offerings, and earnest prostrations. The few men who do attend stand quietly at the back of the temple and step forward only to receive *prasādam*. Their scarcity and lack of enthusiasm may be due to the paucity of roles available to them in quotidian temple ritual; offerings for fertility and marriage are generally the domain of women and *arcakars* have exclusive access to the most direct forms of ritual propitiation. Not surprisingly, none of my informants attends *pūjā* at the Murukan Temple on a regular basis. The annual temple festival, however, provides non-Brahmin men a space to express their religiousity, and is anticipated all year. As customary restrictions are overturned during the festival, religious expressions of non-Brahmin men resonate loudly in performances of *kāvaṭi* before solicitous crowds.

Despite the importance of exhibiting their devotion during the temple festival, many *kāvaṭi* performers have internalized some elements of apologetic rhetoric. Mirroring elite apologetics, *kāvaṭi* performers take the Western gaze into account. While they deeply value *kāvaṭi*, my informants reconstruct it to align with the Christian, science-dominated, Canadian cultural milieu, which would normally perceive piercing the flesh as “uncivilized” and archaic. They often explain *kāvaṭi* in terms of the medical benefits it provides, and liken it to

acupuncture. Many of them explain the experience of *kāvaṭi*, the thoughts and feelings generated during its performance, as *tiyāṇam*. Since meditation of all kinds has been sanctioned in the West – its benefits proclaimed by medical doctors – it is a valid justification of *kāvaṭi*.

### Diverse Diasporic Experiences

Turning away from the politics of representation, the remainder of this chapter focuses on experiences and effects of *kāvaṭi* explained by five primary informants. While all five *kāvaṭi*-performing informants are non-Brahmin refugees, the trajectories of their lives are diverse. However, the theme of fragmented masculinity reconstructed through the performance of *kāvaṭi* emerges in all of their testimonies.

Kannan, a man in his thirties, is married, and has two preschool-age daughters. He has been in Canada for twenty-two years and owns a gourmet grocery store. He is from a small village in the Northern Province called Kondaavil and left Sri Lanka because of the political crisis. After enduring property damages and financial hardship due to the first wave of riots, his village was attacked in the mid-1980s. Many of his relatives were killed, and he swiftly departed. Before coming to Montréal, Kannan lived in Paris, but left because of immigration difficulties. In Montréal, he is a well-established, senior member of the Murukan temple community, and has taken *kāvaṭi* five times. Even when he is not bearing *kāvaṭi* himself, he takes part in the ecstatic dancing that accompanies the ritual, and vigorously pulls the ropes hooked into the backs of other performers [Figure 6].

Mohan, a married man in his thirties, is a proud husband and father of a two school-age sons and a third two-year-old son. He works in the evenings in the kitchen of a restaurant

downtown. He came to Canada in 1992, initially alone, and then sponsored his wife's immigration. He is originally from the war-torn Vanni District in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka, and left because of the conflict. His village was affected by numerous attacks – air raids and bombings – and its population has been decimated. After departing from Sri Lanka, Mohan lived in Germany for one year and then in Italy for four years. When Mohan first arrived in Montréal, he suffered financially. While in Sri Lanka his family was very successful in the agriculture industry, in Québec he found it difficult to find employment of any kind. When he finally found a job, the pay was insufficient. He and his wife struggled for about two years before he became adequately employed. Mohan is a very religious man whose *bhakti* is recognized and applauded by other members of the community. Others point out that he has taken *kāvaṭi* for nine years, gets possessed during the temple festivals, and never misses a *pūjā* at the Montreal Sri Aiyappan Temple (discussed in Chapter Four) [Figure 7].

Vinoth, a few years younger at thirty, remains unmarried. He is from a small village in the Northern Province called Parititurai, and came to Canada, following his two brothers, in 2000. He is distressed, however, that his mother remains in Chennai (Madras). When he first arrived, he had a great deal of trouble learning French, but is improving. He currently works at the airport doing interior installation, attends high school part-time, and teaches karate at the temple four times a week. He has taken *kāvaṭi* once at the Murukan temple and once at the Durkai Amman Temple. Like Kannan, when he is not bearing *kāvaṭi* himself, he assists others in their performances [Figure 8].

Sutha arrived in Montréal three years ago and he too has been having a difficult time. He is from Nelliddy, a small village in the Northern Province, and had to wait four years to receive

approval for immigration. In Sri Lanka he was a Karṇāṭak (South Indian Classical) music teacher with a relatively comfortable life, which was interrupted by the political violence he remembers well. Sutha recounts abductions, shootings, and brutal beatings carried out by the Sri Lankan Army against Tamil men, especially youths. Having departed in fear, Sutha arrived alone in Canada and began his life as a refugee. Without a working knowledge of either French or English, he initially had trouble finding employment. Now he works as a painter for a small company owned and operated by Sri Lankan Tamils. He quietly complains that he has to work long hours at least five days a week, just to survive. Living alone in a small basement apartment, he feels isolated because of his financial troubles. At thirty-four years old, his single status greatly troubles him. He has taken *kāvaṭi* three times, and has assisted others in the performance of *kāvaṭi* at least six times [Figure 9].

Rajkumar is twenty-two years old and has been in Canada since the age of three. Unlike Sutha, he is fluent in both French and English, and lives surrounded by his immediate family. He works at an electronics store and plans to go to technical school next year. Although he was raised in Canada and has only been back to Sri Lanka once, Rajkumar still feels connected to “his homeland.” He notes experiencing extreme bouts of sadness and distress when reading about the situation in Sri Lanka. He also laments Canadian perceptions of Sri Lankan Tamils. According to Rajkumar, Canadians don’t know that the LTTE is composed of freedom fighters rather than terrorists. After seeing *kāvaṭi* and *tūkkukkāvaṭi* performed at the Val Morin Temple as a young boy, Rajkumar became fascinated with the ritual and decided to perform it himself.<sup>19</sup> He is proud that both *kāvaṭi* and *tūkkukkāvaṭi* are now performed at the Montreal Murugan

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<sup>19</sup> The Val Morin Temple, which is owned and operated by the International Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centres, is a shrine to both Murugan and Ayyappan. It hosts a *kāvaṭi* festival every year in July, which is an extremely popular event.

Temple, and has taken *kāvaṭi* twice [Figures 10 and 11].

### **“Taking” Kāvaṭi: Protection and Transformation**

Despite the diverse experiences of my informants, Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah’s performative-symbolist approach to ritual may be a useful tool for examining their performances of *kāvaṭi*.

Drawing on the work of England Austin, Tambiah describes rituals as “speech acts” (Tambiah 1990, 73). He argues that they are communicative performances that (1) create an intense, transformative experience for both actors and observers, and (2) affect change in the world as it is understood by the culture or community (Tambiah 1985, 126-66). As it actively communicates, ritual is a type of language (ibid., 17-59). Like language, Tambiah argues, ritual does not rely solely on symbolic meaning, but rather reflects values and attitudes that are attested to by the effects of the ritual (ibid., 126-66). Interpreting Tambiah, Catherine Bell writes, “[Rituals] act upon the real world as it is culturally experienced” (Bell 1997, 51).<sup>20</sup> In the end, the performative efficacy of ritual – the social and psychological states it creates – is the key to its meaning and purpose (Tambiah 1985, 60-86). In other words, the changes it affects on participants are a microcosmic representation of its reordering of the world. Simply stated, rituals do not just stand for something; they do something, and what they do tells us what they are.

Tambiah’s argument is reflected in the active, world-altering, communication that occurs in my informants’ performances of *kāvaṭi*. Through *kāvaṭi*, men communicate anxieties, and inscribe changes onto themselves and into the world they inhabit. They reconstruct their

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<sup>20</sup> In terms of masculinity, the legacy of Caṅkam and *bhakti* literature, as well as colonial reform movements and transnational neo-Hinduism provide the internal scaffolding for what Catherine Bell calls “the real world as it is culturally experienced” (Bell 1997, 51).

fragmented identities by literally coming to embody Tamil Śaiva masculine ideals. While the solidity of cultural, religious, and gendered identity have been challenged – creating a lived-in reality characterized by uncertainty – performing *kāvaṭi* is a strong assertion of Tamil Śaiva masculinity, which is understood to be linked to an enduring heritage. For the audience, performances create the type of awe deserving of an ideal man who is both fearless hero and selfless devotee. For performers, *kāvaṭi* establishes the relieving experience of solid identity. Men are filled with relief as they drag the *kāvaṭi* many steps closer to the fulfillment of their obligations as Tamil men. Performing *kāvaṭi* is not, however, simply mimetic of masculine ideals, rather it is an incorporation of those ideals into the self, which creates ecstatic feelings for both performer and observer. Inciting such social and psychological states, *kāvaṭi* is also an act of catharsis that reclaims contested bodies. *Kāvaṭi* (literally, “stick of protection”) is a way for Tamil men to appropriate the collective ideal of the courageous community protector, and simultaneously protect their own personal disputed identities. Through *kāvaṭi*, some men are even able to alleviate traumatic memories and experiences of conflict, war, and refugee life.

Understandings of *kāvaṭi* as a vehicle for the cathartic reconstruction of identity enrich more common conceptions of the ritual as a producer of apotropaic benefits, such as health, wealth, and fertility. As devotees and scholars note, *kāvaṭi* is typically undertaken as a ritual vow, or *nērtikkaṭaṇ* (literally, an “effort that is just or fitting”), which is linked to the fulfillment of devotees’ worldly needs (Collins 1997, 8; Harman 2006, 32-3).<sup>21</sup> A type of transactional exchange, *nērtikkaṭaṇ* involves the performance of an often-taxing physical action in front of a

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<sup>21</sup> *Nērtikkaṭaṇ* refers to a wide gamut of heterogeneous ritual performances, ranging from head shaving, to carrying pots of fire or milk, to bearing the *kāvaṭi* with its great weight distributed through hooks in the back (Raj 2006, 249-54).

deity upon receipt of a requested boon (ibid.). The implicit contract between divine and human embedded in *nērtikkaṭaṇ* is obeyed fastidiously, as “failure to give the gods their ‘due’ (*nērtikkaṭaṇ*) can leave one vulnerable to divine retribution, even death” (Nabokov 2000, 34).

Although the belief that quotidian needs can be met through *nērtikkaṭaṇ* obtains in Canada, for my informants, *kāvaṭi* performances involve much more complex goals. Rather than entering into a simple exchange with the deity, my informants perform *kāvaṭi* to fulfill their roles as Tamil men, roles that are otherwise hard to realize. While vows are often oriented towards material benefits, such as health and wealth, those same elements mark masculinity. A strong, wealthy, and healthy family indexes masculine success. A “real Tamil man” gives up everything to ensure the prosperity of his family. In performances of *kāvaṭi*, Tamil men give their bodies to benefit others, exemplifying protective courage. Not surprisingly, the act of performing *kāvaṭi* is described as “taking *kāvaṭi*.” *Kāvaṭi* involves the two-pronged process of taking on the burdens of masculinity and gratefully incorporating a solid sense of self. Taking the stick of protection is both a responsibility and a relief.

### **Embodying Warrior-Heroism**

For my informants, mirroring the courage and valour exemplified by the ideal warrior-hero is an essential component of embodying masculinity. While in most cases my informants focus on defending their families rather than the community at large, the self-sacrificing courage of the warrior-hero resonates loudly. In this context, one of the physical circumstances of the ritual – the requirement to be bare-chested – is telling. In *kāvaṭi* the chest, which is considered the site of masculine valour and bravery, is prominent. According to Rajkumar, it is important to

showcase the chest in Hindu ritual and in Tamil culture generally. Recalling his trip to Sri Lanka, he mentions that he was very proud of being shirtless. Smiling, he explains, “Back there you don’t wear shirts. At first I felt very shy and everyone knew that I came from a different country. Then it became a very good feeling. It feels good to do something that your ancestors did.” In addition to bringing Rajkumar closer to his Tamil heritage, shirtlessness seems to be part of a wider sub-continental tendency to see the chest as “the privileged locus of masculine essence and the qualities associated with it: devotion, friendship, bravery, pride” (Jain 2004, 335). By exhibiting their chests during the performance of *kāvaṭi*, men put their heroic attributes on display. Further still, in Montréal’s Tamil religio-cultural milieu the bare chest is a sign of dominance. Except for the two weeks of the temple festival, shirtless worship is almost entirely the domain of Brahmin priests. During regular *pūjā*, non-Brahmin men appear in Western clothing – slacks and shirts. However, the festival affords non-Brahmin men the opportunity to showcase their masculine strength and valour. Through bare-chested performances of *kāvaṭi* at the festival, non-Brahmin men assert their collective strength.

By taking *kāvaṭi*, men do not just proudly display their heroism; they also take on the responsibilities of the warrior-hero in very real ways. All five of my informants describe *nērtikkaṭaṇs* directly related to protecting their family members. For Vinoth and Rajkumar, the well-being of their parents is the main focus of taking *kāvaṭi*. Vinoth’s mother is in Chennai and has been trying to immigrate to Canada for the last few years. The distance between her and the rest of the family is a major concern for Vinoth. Feeling the heavy weight of his duty as a son, he realizes there is very little he can do for her, in terms of financial and emotional support, until she settles in Canada. His feeling of obligation to his mother reflects the gendered paradigm of the

brave, protective son and the giving mother discussed in the first and second chapters. When asked about his life in Montréal, he notes that the absence of his mother is his most pressing concern:

When I first came here, it was hard. I worked in a restaurant. I did lots of really hard work. Now that I've found [easier] work here, I definitely have god's grace (*aru!*) ... Now I am really happy. I only need my mom to come here. Except for that, I am really well ... If my mom came here, I would be even happier ... My mom and my aunt are there [in India]. I send money to them. They are having a difficult time so I take *kāvaṭi* for my mother.

For Vinoth taking *kāvaṭi* is a way to help his mother. Realizing that simply sending money is not enough to provide for her, and feeling frustrated by his inability to effect change, Vinoth acts on the immigration process through his performance of *kāvaṭi*. He took *kāvaṭi* at the Murukan Temple when the first step of the paper work cleared through immigration. He also plans to take *kāvaṭi* again alongside his brothers when his mother finally arrives. He hopes that she will arrive in time for the 2009 festival. Vinoth's use of *kāvaṭi* to overcome the barricades of immigration – processes that are wholly out of his control – is telling. Performing *kāvaṭi* enables him to abide by filial obligations, which are otherwise difficult to meet. For Vinoth, calls to filial duty are loud, and dominate religious life. He hopes to safeguard his mother, and enthusiastically undergoes self-mortification to do so.

Similarly, Kannan focuses on his wife and children when he describes his performances of *kāvaṭi*. Like Vinoth, Kannan sought to overcome the obstacles of the immigration process to bring his family together. "*Kāvaṭi*," he suggests, "can't be just done like that, you need to have a *nērtikkataṇ* to take *kāvaṭi*. I took *kāvaṭi* when I wanted my family to come to Montréal from back home. There were a lot of immigration problems. I also took *kāvaṭi* for the welfare of my siblings. Since Murukan granted my wishes, I took *kāvaṭi* for five consecutive years."

Although Rajkumar's circumstances are very different, his *nērtikkattams* are also directed towards family, specifically his parents. Rajkumar mentions that he had to take a year off from his studies due to family problems. As he reiterated every time I asked him about Tamil culture, "for Tamil men, helping and respecting the family comes first." This particular problem, however, seemed impossible to solve. Thus, for Rajkumar *kāvaṭi* was the only way to help his family and console himself. Not only did his performance improve his familial situation, but it provided personal relief. When being the protector of the family is a practical impossibility, taking *kāvaṭi* is a viable option for fulfilling one's masculine duties. As Rajkumar himself explains, "[*Kāvaṭi*] is for problems you think won't be solved ... When I did *kāvaṭi*, it improved the [familial] situation. When I did *kāvaṭi*, I felt better ... I don't know how to describe it, but it just feels better."

For Mohan, *kāvaṭi* has also been a problem-solving implement. Through performing *kāvaṭi*, he was able to rectify his financial difficulties and even restore his son to health, fulfilling his duties as family protector. He explains:

I had financial problems before [performing *kāvaṭi*] and job-related problems ... I [also] started to take the *kāvaṭi* for my son's sake. My son was very sick and he had many allergies. He had a tube down his nose through to his stomach. After I took *kāvaṭi*, he became cured. I started to take *kāvaṭi* ... in all the temples in Montréal. I became happy. I achieved happiness for my family.

In addition to the selfless protection of family, my informants performances of *kāvaṭi* are linked to safeguarding the nation. Performers of *kāvaṭi* are able to express courageous heroism, redeeming themselves for having apparently forsaken their devotion to Prabhakaran and Eelam. While all of my informants support the cause, they find it impossible to avoid feeling guilt and shame as they carry out their lives in Canada, while their friends and relatives are inured to a relentless war. Many believe that those physically involved in the war remember them as cowards.

In Sutha's words, "They [members of the LTTE in Sri Lanka] think that we are not doing enough to help. They think that we are cowards." Likewise, Vinoth more thoroughly explains:

I without a doubt feel sorry that I cannot be involved directly in the war ... We're affected by their problems there. We think about the people there and wonder how they are ... In one's heart, there is worry and sadness. [Members of the LTTE] say, "we have land so why did you go to another country?" They think that we can all stand together and build our place ... They think people who left Sri Lanka are selfish."

For some Sri Lankan Tamil men, stoic bravery in the performance of *kāvaṭi* indirectly contributes to the war effort. Rajkumar, for example, explains the benefits that performances of *kāvaṭi* in Canada accrue for Eelam. According to Rajkumar, the preservation of culture and the socio-economic effects that result from *kāvaṭi* aid Eelam. Although common sense would dictate that those raised in Canada would feel less of an obligation to fight in the liberation movement, this does not seem to be the case. For Rajkumar, the heavy burden of remorse is relieved through *kāvaṭi*. He explains:

There is no war [in Canada], but we still need to work hard to make money and keep our culture ... Sometimes our families and community can grow and become richer because of *nērtikkaṭaṇ* ... *kāvaṭi* keeps our culture alive ... We [also] send money [to Sri Lanka] to help ... [so] the fact that we are here is good for Eelam ... we will go back and use our educations to help the country.

For Rajkumar, *Kāvaṭi* is a way to deal with feelings of guilt and remorse, and help "his homeland." It thus provides a type of liberation from the pressures of nationalism and the obligations of the male protector.

Despite the challenges of living in Canada, for all five of my informants the performance of *kāvaṭi* is a means to protect, sustain, and revitalize the gendered values of the culture. *Kāvaṭi* does much more than just symbolize the culture; it exemplifies and expresses it. As my informants explain, the correct performance of the ritual maintains the principles of Tamil

society. Like the battles waged by warrior-heroes, *kāvaṭi* upholds the sanctity of the culture. Thus, like the battles, *kāvaṭi* must be taken with pure allegiance and unparalleled bravery.

### **Liberating *Bhakti***

*Kāvaṭi* is an expression of masculine *bhakti*, which has relieving, even liberating effects on men. During *kāvaṭi*, my informants assert their *bhakti* through their single-minded devotion, and through the enthusiasm with which they yield their bodies to the deity. Asked what they thought of during their ritual performances, my informants were befuddled. For them, the question is silly; the answer is obvious: they think of the deity, and only the deity, while taking *kāvaṭi*. In Vinoth's words, "I won't have any bad feelings. During that time I will only be thinking of god."

Taking *kāvaṭi* is an opportunity to display the *bhakti* that men harbour but find difficult to express during other times of the year. As mentioned above, the Montreal Murugan Temple is ritually administered by Brahmins and tends to favour quiet, "refined" expressions of religiosity. Additionally, for many of my informants, finding time to attend *pūjā* regularly is a major problem, which is related to socio-economic status. Because they work long hours to remain financially afloat, many of my informants do not attend the temple as much as they would like to. Kannan claims that finding time to come to temple and spend time with his family and other members of the community there is his biggest problem living in Montréal. For Sutha time is also a regrettable issue, which prevents him from worshipping regularly. Finally, Vinoth – who works, goes to school, and teaches karate – notes that he has practical difficulties expressing his religious devotion, which cause feelings of guilt. He explains, "If I don't go to the temple, for

example, on a Friday, I will feel badly and think of the temple. I will think, ‘I did not go to the temple. I did not pray.’” *Kāvaṭi* affords the time and place for the expression of devotion.

Moreover, through *kāvaṭi* Sri Lankan Tamil men are able to attest to the potent strength of their *bhakti*. The performance of *kāvaṭi* allows my informants to express an extremity of devotion reminiscent of the poems and hagiographies of the Nāyanārs. Like the famed Śaiva saints, their intense devotion to the deity is *vannaṇpu*, violent love. Although the piercing process is physically painful, performers eagerly, lovingly participate. None of my informants reports feeling hesitant or fearful before, during, or after their ritual performances. As Rajkumar explains, “No one is asking us to do this. Murukaṇ does not ask us to do this ... I don’t do it for other people. It creates a strong feeling of a bond between Murukaṇ and me.” Through the performance of *kāvaṭi*, each informant is able to, at least temporarily, become the ideal devotee, who is utterly selfless in giving his body to the deity. The bond between self-sacrificing devotee and magnanimous deity is what Rajkumar refers to. As my informants repeatedly emphasize, *vannaṇpu* expressed through *kāvaṭi* should not be taken lightly. Pain must be experienced fully and undertaken with the deepest humility. In fact, those who take *kāvaṭi* to impress others, Kannan assures me, will sustain serious injuries.

An anecdote recounted by Kannan boldly underscores the necessity to willingly and completely experience the pain of *kāvaṭi* in order to express authentic *bhakti*. According to Kannan, a few years ago many members of the ISKCON community asked the Tamil temple community if they could teach them how to perform *kāvaṭi* and join them in performing it

publicly.<sup>22</sup> A few senior members of the community, Kannan included, agreed to help. In fact, they paraded through downtown Montréal carrying *kāvaṭis* with the Hare Krishnas and continued this tradition for about two or three years. Then one year, the Hare Krishnas asked members of the Tamil community for drugs to help them bear the *kāvaṭi*. Realizing that the Tamils bore the *kāvaṭi* with no help from painkillers, the Hare Krishnas found their own sources and began to mount *kāvaṭis* in states of intoxication. Kannan was disgusted: “That was morally wrong. It was against our culture. *Kāvaṭi* must be taken out of a sense of pure *bhakti*. After they started taking drugs, we refused to help them or take *kāvaṭi* alongside them.” For Kannan, displaying cowardice in the avoidance of ritual pain is offensive. “Proper” Tamil religious practice requires the stoic endurance of suffering.

Again in a mood reminiscent of the Śaiva saints, my informants understand their pain to have redemptive benefits. Their accounts reflect the motifs embedded in the hagiographies of Appar and Aruṇakirinātar recounted in Chapter One.<sup>23</sup> After converting to Jainism Appar was afflicted with agonizing stomach pains that were only cured when he converted back to Śaivism. Likewise, Aruṇakirinātar was saved by Murugaṇ after his destitution and depraved behaviour drove him to attempt suicide. For both, straying and suffering led to redemption. My informants share a similar understanding of the redemptive qualities of ritual pain. As Mohan claims, “We torture and punish of ourselves because of the sins we commit ... Then we are made to feel happy

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<sup>22</sup> The International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) or Hare Krishna movement is a modern, globalised Vaiṣṇava sect. ISKCON’s founder, Swami Bhaktivedanta brought Vaiṣṇava teachings to the West in 1965, and formed the organization after attracting young Americans eager for Indian spirituality. The Hare Krishnas have preached all over North America, in Europe, and in certain parts of India. Most of the organizations members, however, are North Americans and Europeans.

<sup>23</sup> Having lived hundreds of years after the Nāyaṇārs, Aruṇakirinātar is not officially counted among them. However, he is understood in ritual and in the popular imagination as on par with the earlier Śaiva saints. He is worshipped alongside them and his works are often referred to as part of the Nāyaṇārs’ corpus.

and free.” For Mohan, redemption is rooted in intense physical suffering. Rajkumar also explains the redemptive qualities of participating in *kāvaṭi* as it pertains to Tamil youth in the diaspora.

“Sometimes kids take the wrong paths. At first their parents are proud of them when they see them speaking English. Then they stop studying and start smoking weed [marijuana] ... but when we take *kāvaṭi*, we get connected to our culture. It makes us proud and makes our families happy.” For Rajkumar *kāvaṭi* has the power to redeem young men who have strayed from purer paths by connecting them to their heritage. The hooks of *kāvaṭi* can draw young men away from the “wanton ways of the West” and towards more wholesome, Tamil styles of living. When young Tamil men stray from both their religio-cultural heritage (like Appar) and from moral behaviour (like Aruṇakirinātar), they find redemption through the physical pain of *kāvaṭi* and return to their religio-cultural, morally righteous roots. The pain of *kāvaṭi* is redemptive because it re-inscribes the fortitudes of religion and culture into the body of the performer.

It also provides liberating relief. As my informants endure the physical pain of *kāvaṭi*, they receive Murukan’s *aruḷ*, and are liberated. After the initial pain of the piercings, my informants claim that they feel happy and at peace during the performance. Kannan even suggests a feeling of oneness with the divine. He explains that during *kāvaṭi*, he feels that he, “shares his sadness with Murukan.” Likewise, Vinoth claims, “I will do such things [*kāvaṭi*] for the sake of the deity ... Although it may be painful at the time ... up until the end, we will receive *aruḷ* ... and feel peace.”

## Healing Old Scars with New Articulations

Theoretical understandings of trauma, pain, and memory shed light on the cathartic effects of performing *kāvai*. As E. Valentine Daniel succinctly explains, the Sri Lankan Tamil community is a collective body in pain (Daniel 1996, 145). All members of the community suffer at the hands of discrimination, violence, and trauma. Even for those not living amid the war, trauma is transferred through media coverage, which enables the war to be experienced by the global collective (Whitaker 2004). Each event of the war, each death, each suicide bombing is reported on Tamil nationalist websites. Not surprisingly, the discrimination and violence of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka resounds deeply for all of my informants. Regardless of whether or not they lived in Sri Lanka during the war, it has lasting emotional affects on them. As Vinoth and Sutha assure me, thoughts and memories of Sri Lanka intrude on every conscious moment of the day. Likewise, Rajkumar, who left Sri Lanka at the age of three, experiences extreme emotional difficulty when he reads of the events there. For my informants, pain attempts to invade everyday life, but is rarely attended to through verbalization. Some note that they would rather forget the painful past and establish successful, new lives in Canada. As Rajkumar explains, “My family does not talk about it [the situation in Sri Lanka] because we have enough to worry about here.”

Despite the ubiquity of traumatic memories and experiences, all of my informants attempt to suppress trauma from intruding on quotidian existence. While life in Sri Lanka seems to be constantly on the minds of refugees, it is rarely discussed. The collective silence surrounding the painful political crisis may be a phenomenon that is inherent to trauma. Some scholars claim that silence is both an effect of trauma and a means to its perpetuation. In other words, silence results from trauma and breeds further trauma. Lawrence J. Kirymayer and Susan

Brison argue that trauma is inherently unspeakable, beyond words, and beyond ordinary experience (Kirmayer 1996, 177-190; Brison 1999; 39-46). They also point out that difficulties narrating traumatic experiences render them dehumanizing (ibid.). Daniel's understanding of anthroposemiosis asseverates their views. According to Daniel, anthroposemiosis, the activity of translating experience into readable signs, such as language, is the *sine qua non* of human existence (Daniels 1996, 121). Anthroposemiosis makes us human. Experiences that are beyond descriptive and linguistic means, and induce silence, therefore, deny the fundamental practice of humanity. While traumatic experiences are not generally discussed, trauma is perpetuated behind the dehumanizing curtain of silence.

In the diasporic community in Montréal, the performance of *kāvaṭi* helps overcome the silence of trauma. *Kāvaṭi* reconstructs and heals the painful memories of participants by giving voice to their silenced experiences. As a speech act, *kāvaṭi* is a way to activate anthroposemiosis and voice the trauma of the past and present. The stoicism with which men must sustain the pain of bodily piercing for the sake of others, mimics the structure of war and the emotional pain of loss. Their self-inflicted violence may also be a simulacrum of violence inflicted by the other, and an expression of implicit forms of psychological suffering. Such mimetic performances reenact traumatic events, transgress the silence trauma initially entails, and result in catharsis and healing. As Brison and Mieke Bal explain, a principle way to heal traumatic memory is open discussion (Brison 1999, 39-42; Bal 1999, 8-10). In other words, unraveling trauma requires lifting the curtain of silence.<sup>24</sup> As *kāvaṭi* discusses trauma and anxiety, it temporarily eases such

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<sup>24</sup> In Sri Lanka, the process of unraveling may already have begun as expressive, aesthetic culture has begun to flower within the last thirty years (Daniels 1996, 145-6). Now, more than ever, Sri Lankan Tamils are producing poetry, drama, and dance, that explicitly discuss the political situation, and enable Tamils to emerge from the silence of trauma (ibid.; O'Shea 2008, 187-90).

thoughts and feelings, and engenders deep relief.

The relief created by *kāvaṭi* is an embodied experience occurring on both psychological and physical levels. In describing the act of taking *kāvaṭi*, all of my informants note the onset of semi-consciousness and numbness a few minutes after the initially excruciating piercing, an affect they attribute to the deity's protective powers. Feelings of numbness and dulled consciousness are a type of "liberation" from trauma and anxiety. Rajkumar, for example, describes sensations of freedom during the performance of *kāvaṭi*. Like others, Rajkumar notes that one is unable to tap into memories for the duration of the ritual production, nor can one recall the experience of the performance after the fact. He struggles to explain the sensation: "It's a different kind of a feeling, like when you get tipsy on *bhakti*. You forget everything during that time. It's a kind of joy as the movements of the brain work according to the beats of the drum." By taking *kāvaṭi* my informants are temporarily freed of traumatic memories. As they enter trance-like states, guided only by rhythmic drumming, they are also released from everyday pressures that weigh heavily on Sri Lankan Tamil men in Canada [Figure 12]. Instead of feeling the tensions of familial, nationalist, and religious duties pulling them in every direction, they feel nothing at all as they resist the taut ropes of the *kāvaṭi*. For all of my informants descriptions of numbness and amnesia speak to the efficacy of the ritual. During *kāvaṭi*, they are temporarily liberated from the troubles of the refugee experience. Thus *kāvaṭi* does not just represent catharsis and emotional relief; it *is* cathartic relief.

Beyond healing trauma, *kāvaṭi* plays a particularly important role in Canada because it embeds non-Brahmin Tamil Śaiva identity into the soil of the new nation. Tellingly, both Sutha and Mohan (and, of course, Rajkumar) began participating in the performance of *kāvaṭi* only

after settling in Montréal. For Mohan *kāvaṭi* is not even a family tradition. As far as Mohan knows, he is the only member of his family to ever have performed *kāvaṭi*. *Kāvaṭi* may play a particularly important role in Canada because it embeds non-Brahmin, Tamil, Śaiva identity into the soil of the new nation. While the annual chariot procession during the temple festival and the public performance of rituals more generally order the unfamiliar landscape, moulding it according to the topography of Tamil terrain, the performance of *kāvaṭi* specifically asserts non-Brahmin (especially Vēḷāḷar) identity.

### **Being a Tamil Man in Canada**

The preservation of traditional masculinity in the new socio-cultural milieu is a key locus of interest for Sri Lankan Tamil men in Montréal, which is addressed through *kāvaṭi*. My informants believe that Sri Lankan Tamil men and “Canadian men” (a general term referring to anglophone and francophone Caucasian men) are essentially different: Canadian men are mainly concerned with themselves and tend to indulge in life’s pleasures, while Sri Lankan Tamil men remain intent on helping others. For my informants, selflessness is the defining feature of Tamil masculine identity, which they are able to reify through *kāvaṭi*. Many of my informants’ explanations of their ritual performances highlight the way *kāvaṭi* enables them to construct themselves as eternally oriented towards self-sacrifice, in contrast to their more self-indulgent Canadian counterparts. For example, after listing the ways that *kāvaṭi* is always taken for the benefit of others rather than as a vain exhibition of strength, Vinoth explains,

If you take a white Canadian man, at the age of about eighteen or twenty-four at the maximum, he will only think about himself and his life. However, a Sri Lankan Tamil man will always think about his family. For example, whatever earnings he makes, he will take some, share it, and spend it on the rest of his family members ... But a Canadian

white man will be enjoying his life. Only about ten to twenty percent of Sri Lankan Tamil boys enjoy their lives.

Corroborating this view, my informants emphasize that their *nērtikkataṇs* are carried out with the intent of helping others, especially those within the family and community. Some of my informants emphatically deny desires for personal fiscal rewards and malign those who have such goals in mind. According to Rajkumar, *kāvaṭi* is not to be taken for material ends. He explains, “I don’t take it to get this or that or to get money. It’s for my family’s happiness. I don’t expect anything else.” Kannan also emphasizes the selflessness of *nērtikkataṇ* performances among Tamil men, which he contrasts with the avaricious goals of the Val Morin temple community. He argues that the leaders of the Val Morin temple have strayed from correct expressions of Tamil religiousity and focus solely on the acquisition of wealth. Their progressive moral degeneration, he argues, is linked to their increasing appeal to Caucasian people:

You must perform *nērtikkataṇ* with a pure mind and heart. It is not performed to gain this or that or to be a hero in front of everyone, but at Val Morin all they care about is money ... All of us at the Murukan temple were the ones who helped them enter the community in the first place, but now their ashram is rich and attracts many Canadian people ... they won’t even let us use their facilities!

For Kannan the corruption of intentions at Val Morin is related to the temple’s leadership and to its tendency to cater to Caucasian yoga practitioners. As he notes, the temple at Val Morin used to be firmly rooted in the Tamil community, but the growing wealth of the ashram, due in part to the support of non-Tamil Canadians, has led to its degenerate state.

Finally, my informants attempt to safeguard their masculinity in Canada by holding onto traditional Tamil gender roles. Asked how a Tamil man should be, Rajkumar emphasizes the man’s role in protecting the woman and tending to matters in the public sphere. Rajkumar claims: “He [a Tamil man] should not let the woman work. She takes care of the family ... The

father's part is to make money and overcome hardship. We should fight for what we want and be brave ... In our culture, the man takes care of the outside, while the woman takes care of the inside ... but in Canada they think men and women are equal." Despite Rajkumar's succinct explanation of Tamil gender roles, which all my informants reiterate, none seems hopeful that such roles can be preserved in Canada. My informants' perceptions of the decay of "proper" gender norms in the Canadian socio-cultural milieu cause significant anxiety. As Tamil conceptions of male-female relations are challenged, men's gender identities come under significant pressure. Again *kāvaṭi* is one of the ways Tamil men reassert their masculinities by performing the "fundamentals" of the Tamil gender order.

However, the masculinity my informants express through their experiences and explanations of *kāvaṭi* remains complex and troubled. Having to negotiate between ancient ideals, post-colonial standards of modernity, and the pressures of nationalism and refugee existence, my informants' understandings of even their own masculinity is often multiple and contradictory. The following anecdote about Vinoth sheds light on the complexity of Tamil masculinity.

After karate class one evening, Vinoth sat with me for about a half an hour explaining *kāvaṭi*. His three friends, two young Tamil men who study karate under him, and one twenty-year-old girl of Romanian descent, sat with us and listened intently as Vinoth explained *kāvaṭi* in terms of selflessness, discipline, and *bhakti*. He emphatically asserted that *kāvaṭi* is not to be performed in order to show off or impress members of the audience. However, after our discussion seemed over and we all started to file out of the temple, Vinoth's friends began to applaud his impressive achievements. One of Vinoth's students, who forcefully pulls the rope

hooked into Vinoth's back during *kāvaṭi* performance, described Vinoth's strength. He told me that Vinoth is a, "tough guy," who resists the rope so intensely that he is almost lying down. Likewise, the girl described the way his skin turns white with the pressure, and reported that his flesh ripped in many places last year. Adding to the description, Vinoth turned and informed me that they now need two people to hold the rope while he performs *kāvaṭi*. Then Vinoth's other student noted that Vinoth pulls hard in order to demonstrate his strength, and the girl nodded in agreement. In response, Vinoth smiled broadly, maybe even proudly, and told me that I definitely have to come watch this year.

## Chapter Four:

### Constructing New Tamil Masculinities Through the Worship of Ayyappan

This chapter focuses on rigorous fasts called *viratam*, dedicated to the god Ayyappan. Like Murukan, Ayyappan is a heroic deity, and like *kāvaṭi*, *viratam* is physically trying. Yet, *kāvaṭi* for Murukan and *viratam* for Ayyappan are performed with different goals in mind. While *kāvaṭi* is usually undertaken as *nērtikkaṭaṇ*, a ritual vow, for the well-being of the family, propitiating Ayyappan through the performance of *viratam* is almost exclusively performed in order to accrue spiritual benefits and respect for the devotee himself. In the worship of Ayyappan men relieve themselves of the duties that are the primary motivation for the performance of *kāvaṭi*. The ideal of the militantly selfless *bhakta* remains central to the worship of Ayyappan, but the men at the heart of this cultus have become wary of their roles as unwaveringly brave protectors of their wives and children. Their abrogation of the real-life emotional and fiscal pressures of protecting their families appears tantamount to releasing the heavy hooks of traditional Tamil masculine identity.

I will analyze male ritual performances at the Montreal Sri Aiyappan Temple as productive discussions about masculine identity (Tambiah 1985, 17-59). As I have argued in the previous chapter, ritual operates as a language through which devotees take action, often at times when no other course of action is available to them. In performing *viratam* in honour of Ayyappan, practitioners reconstruct their identities as Tamil men according to multiple models. While, men renounce their roles as familial protectors, they adopt the hyper-masculine characteristics of bravery and selflessness that enjoin both the ideals of the Cankam warrior-hero and the *bhakta*. The purpose of performing *viratam* is threefold: men associate themselves with

the lofty goals of contemporary, transnational neo-Śaivism; dissociate themselves from the materiality of quotidian existence in Montréal; and immerse themselves in what they see as primordial Tamil masculine identity.

This chapter focuses on the new models of Tamil masculinity that are both constructed and lived in by Ayyappaṇ's devotees. It is divided into five major sections. First, I discuss mythological understandings of Ayyappaṇ, underscoring the way they glorify masculine selflessness, *bhakti*, and continence. Second, I discuss the particular ritual context that is at the centre of Ayyappaṇ worship in South India and in Montréal. Although the ritual performances in Montréal appear to be merely an abridged version of the fasting and pilgrimage that defines Ayyappaṇ worship in India, they more rigorously enforce the masculine ideals of the Ayyappaṇ cultus, encouraging men to re-orient themselves towards other-worldly religious goals. Fourth, I move on to some theoretical frameworks that are useful in analyzing the ways that Ayyappaṇ worship allows men to reassert their multivalent masculine identities. Here I include a brief discussion of the way caste politics affect constructions of masculinity. Fifth, I provide a detailed analysis of the personal testimonies of three Ayyappaṇ devotees. Their voices – their experiences as devotees, as Sri Lankan Tamils, as immigrants, and as men – elucidate the growing importance of Ayyappaṇ worship as an iconic embodiment of Tamil masculine identity, and highlight the way that masculinity is being reformulated in the diaspora.

### **Ayyappaṇ's Divine Masculinity**

The mythology of Ayyappaṇ highlights the traditional masculine ideals of heroic selflessness and *bhakti*. Like Murukaṇ, Ayyappaṇ sacrifices himself for others. Stoically

enduring the most trying of hardships, Ayyappaṇ is in some ways the ideal man lauded in early Tamil literature and mirrored in the figure of Murukaṇ. Ayyappaṇ diverges from Murukaṇ, however, in his insistent separation from women and all things female. A hyper-masculine, vaguely misogynist sentiment uniquely penetrates the narratives surrounding Ayyappaṇ, and finds an audience in Sri Lankan Tamil men in Canada.<sup>1</sup>

One of the defining features of Ayyappaṇ's legendary life is his slaying of the buffalo demoness, Maḥiṣi. In fact, he is said to have been born to kill Maḥiṣi, a belief that points to the cultus' overarching desire to keep women and everything they stand for in Brahmanical Hinduism – matter, reproductive energy, desire – at a safe distance. According to legend, Maḥiṣi was an incarnation of Līlā, a beautiful and divine woman whose beastly carnal desires resulted in her reappearance in such a hideous form. Līlā was born as Maḥiṣi after she refused to allow her husband Datta to abandon household life in pursuit of spiritual goals (Younger 2002, 22-23). Her carnal desires “had not been satiated and so she refused to let him withdraw” (ibid., 17). Although Datta tried to teach her about the futility of her desires and the importance of spiritual growth, she was insolent with avarice, so he cursed her to be born as the buffalo demoness (Vaidyanathan 1978, 18). As Maḥiṣi, she was a dreadful nuisance, wreaking havoc on the universe, until Ayyappaṇ finally killed her.

This myth is rich with the hyper-masculine, world-renouncing sentiment that colours the Ayyappaṇ cultus. Līlā signifies feminine desire and attachment which must be conquered. Not only does she crave sex and the companionship of her spouse, but she blocks his path to spiritual attainment. In this narrative, selfishness and desire are unambiguously associated with the

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<sup>1</sup> Although plenty of myths about Ayyappaṇ circulate in scholarly accounts (Pyappaṇ 1966; Vaidyanathan 1978; Sekar 1992; Younger 2002), I have chosen to focus primarily on myths that are well known among my informants.

feminine, while selflessness and renunciation are coded as masculine. Even contemporary scholarly accounts of Ayyappaṇ's mythologies malign Mahiṣi, claiming that "Mahiṣi represents the beast within us all, that tempts one away from the spiritual path and therefore has to be subdued" (Sekar 1992, 104).

The story of Ayyappaṇ's birth contains similar themes. Ayyappaṇ, we are told, was not born of a mother and father, but of two fathers, Śiva and Viṣṇu. Evidently, his divine nature is due in part to his eternal freedom from the defiling touch of a woman's body. At the Montreal Sri Aiyappaṇ Temple, the creation of Ayyappaṇ by two men and his subsequent purity is of the utmost importance. Not just my primary informants, whose testimonies are recounted below, but nearly every person I spoke with at the temple proclaimed that Ayyappaṇ was born of two men. Given the rather rigorous enforcement of heterosexuality in Tamil culture, I was surprised that Ayyappaṇ's unconventional conception was the first thing that my informants recounted. Moreover, while many accounts of the tale explain Ayyappaṇ's extraordinary birth by recalling that Mahiṣi had been granted a boon – which made it impossible for her to be killed by anyone except a child born of the two male deities Śiva and Viṣṇu (Younger 2002, 22; Vaidyanathan 1978, 20) – such apologetic explanations do not figure at all in the accounts provided by devotees at the Montreal Sri Aiyappaṇ Temple. For them, Ayyappaṇ's unique conception is one of the defining features of his divinity. Mithun, the young but still highly esteemed *pūcāri* (non-Brahmin temple priest), compares Ayyappaṇ's birth by two fathers to the Virgin Mary's immaculate conception.

Two popular chapbooks, considered authoritative by members of the temple community, provide important details about Ayyappaṇ. One of the texts provides an account of Ayyappaṇ's

life, which the devotees at the temple corroborate.<sup>2</sup> Although a divine being, Ayyappaṇ lived the first twelve years of his life as a human boy; a perfect human boy whose bravery and martial skill were matched only by his selflessness and righteousness. After Ayyappaṇ was born, Śiva and Viṣṇu left him on the banks of the Pampa River and he was adopted by the childless king, Rājāśekhara of Panṭālam. He became a servant of the royal household (Nityananda 2000, 14). As he grew up, he excelled in his martial training, quickly surpassing his friends in his proficiency at archery, swordsmanship, and military strategy. Commanding the royal forces, Ayyappaṇ was lauded for his military genius and bravery. He defeated Udayayaṇ, an outlaw who had been plundering all the small kingdoms in the region for decades. He also demonstrated a superhuman sense of justice, which led the king to seek his advice in all important matters of the court (ibid.). The parallels between Ayyappaṇ's and Murukaṇ's legendary lives are striking.

Their stories diverge, however, in the way that their relationships with women are developed. While Murukaṇ is suckled on the breast of his caring mother – Pārvatī – and is later famed for his virility as a lover (easily able to satisfy two wives), Ayyappaṇ's encounters with women are always fraught with danger. The legend continues: Ayyappaṇ's excellence as a military leader and *de facto* court minister led to king Rājāśekhara's plan to appoint him as heir (Nityananda 2000, 14). The queen, pregnant with her own child, became extremely jealous. She devised a plan to rid herself of Ayyappaṇ. "She feigned an insufferable headache," and the royal physician, an accomplice to her plot, prescribed tiger's milk as the only viable cure (ibid.).

Without hesitation, twelve-year-old Ayyappaṇ volunteered to venture into the treacherous jungle

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<sup>2</sup> Many legends and scholarly sources discuss the events of Ayyappaṇ's youth, but I will recount the myths that circulate in the community of devotees in Montréal by word of mouth and by way of the text given to me by the devotees themselves, namely Swami Nityananda's *The Light of the Sabari Hills* (Mumbai: Central Chinmaya Mission Trust, 2000).

and return with the milk. Despite the protests of the king, Ayyappaṇ set out into the forest. There, he encountered Mahiṣi and slayed her effortlessly. He then returned to the kingdom, “riding on a ferocious tiger, followed by a herd of female tigresses with their young ones [in tow] ... He coolly asked the queen to ... take as much milk as she wanted” (ibid., 15). Once again, personal desire is gendered feminine – the queen and Mahiṣi are brimming with desire – while Ayyappaṇ is utterly selfless. He is fearless, strong, and protective; in many ways, traditional Tamil masculinity embodied.

Perhaps because of the malignant nature of all the female beings Ayyappaṇ encounters, he remains eternally unmarried. The idea of the protective husband related to the image of the Caṅkam warrior-hero is not reflected in images of Ayyappaṇ. While one of the temple’s chapbooks, Swami Nityananda’s *The Light of the Sabari Hills*, explains that there are five temples in Kerala where Ayyappaṇ is represented in different stages of life – Kulathuppuḷai as an infant, Aryankāvu as a *brahmacāri*, Acchankoil as a *grhasthin* accompanied by two consorts, Śabarimalai as a *vānaprasthin*, and Kantamalai as a *sannyāsin* – the temple community insists that he is an eternal *brahmacāri*.<sup>3</sup>

The ritual practices at Śabarimalai in Kerala, by far the most popular of the temples, support their opinion, as the temple festival incorporates a well-documented legend about Ayyappaṇ’s refusal to marry. According to the legend, after Ayyappaṇ had slain Mahiṣi, Līlā, the beautiful woman, emerged from the demon’s lifeless body and was immediately full of desire for

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<sup>3</sup> As explained in Chapter Three, according to classical Hinduism there are four ideal stages of life for an upper-caste man, which are called āśramas. The four stages are: *brahmacārya*, *grhastha*, *vānaprastha*, and *sannyāsa*. While these ideal stages first developed in Sanskritic Hinduism, they are well integrated into Tamil Śaivism. *Brahmacārya* is the student stage, which requires celibacy and a more general renunciation of pleasure. The next three stages of life require man to enter a householder phase (*grhastha*), work towards renouncing the materiality of household life (*vānaprastha*), and, finally, fully renounce the material world and work towards the attainment of spiritual goals (*sannyāsa*).

Ayyappaṇ. She wished to marry him, but he refused on the grounds that he already had responsibilities toward his devotees. He agreed to marry her only when new devotees stopped coming to Śabarimalai to worship him. Ayyappaṇ's refusal to marry is ritually reenacted on an annual basis. Līlā in the form of Malikkappurattamma is enshrined near the Ayyappaṇ temple, and each year at the close of the festival, the image of Ayyappaṇ is brought to her in a mock wedding processional only to turn back without marrying her.

For Ayyappaṇ, devotion comes before the preservation of body and family. According to devotees in Montréal, Ayyappaṇ dedicated his life to restoring the temple at Śabarimalai, which had been desecrated by warring tribes. In this role, he embodies many of the characteristics of the warrior-hero and the just king, and unambiguously aligns himself with the virtues of the Nāyaṇār. Like Appar, who spent much of his life raking the temple grounds with great humility, Ayyappaṇ devotes himself to tending the temple. Ayyappaṇ's devotion to religious space also reflects the virtues of the warrior-hero. According to Nityananda, he led a group of warrior-cum-devotees to reclaim the ancient glory of Śabarimalai.<sup>4</sup> As the chapbook given to me at the Montreal Sri Aiyappaṇ Temple explains:

Ayyappaṇ who personified nobility, religious and patriotic fervour, declared that it was the duty of every able-bodied man ... to redeem the desecrated temple of Śabarimalai ... Redeeming the original glory of the temple was the primary objective ... so the training and the fighting assumed [the] colour of sacredness and religious duty, and the march towards the temple exterminating the unwelcome visitors on the way became a crusade – and a pilgrimage which assumed added significance in later years. It was a holy war, and a self-purificatory [sic] pilgrimage, rolled into one. In one stroke Ayyappaṇ planned to restore the sanctity of the temple, redeem the country, and in the process spiritually elevate the people. (Nityananada 2000, 17)

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<sup>4</sup> The image of Ayyappaṇ as a religious and patriotic leader fighting for the restoration of cultural glory and reclamation of that which had previously belonged to the people resembles constructions of Prabhakaran in the popular imagination. Both leaders are understood as self-sacrificing warrior-heroes and *bhaktas* who lead by example in order to help the people take back what is theirs. Their resemblance could, in part, explain the recent explosion of Ayyappaṇ worship among Sri Lankan Tamils.

The ritual nexus surrounding the worship of Ayyappaṇ allows men to temporarily embody the deity and all that he stands for. Following Ayyappaṇ's footsteps through a strenuous pilgrimage to Śabarimalai, devotees in South Asia incorporate the essence of Ayyappaṇ's bravery, selflessness, and heroism. While most Montréal devotees are not able to take these steps, they mirror Ayyappaṇ's virtues through ritual practice.

### **Embodying Ayyappaṇ: South India and Montréal**

Over the last seventy years, a pilgrimage to the Ayyappaṇ temple on Śabarimalai, a mountain in Kerala, has become an exceedingly popular event (Clothey 1978, 202; Younger 2002, 17). It now attracts about ten million pilgrims per annum (Osella and Osella 2003, 731). Although the myths surrounding the cultus date it as far back as the eighth century, the pilgrimage appears to be a modern phenomenon (Sekar 1992, 24), which scholars have attempted to explain as an unintended consequence of Dravidianism.<sup>5</sup> When anti-Brahman sentiment began circulating in the 1910s and 1920s, South Indians started attending temples that “owed little to the Brahman-defined traditions of North India” (ibid., 23). Moreover, a clear link between the Dravidian Movement and Ayyappaṇ worship was forged in the early 1950s when P. T. Rajan, an instrumental figure in the Non-Brahmin Movement, paraded Ayyappaṇ around Tamil Nadu (Clothey 1978, 202). The association of Ayyappaṇ worship with Tamil

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<sup>5</sup> Dravidian (literally, “Southern”) has been used as a term to define the peoples of South India racially, culturally, and linguistically. The Dravidian Movement began in the 1910s with the rise of anti-Brahmin, and anti-Hindi political rhetoric. Claiming that South Indians had a distinct cultural and linguistic identity, which had been oppressed by Brahmin suzerainty, politicians raised militant demands for secession (Subramanian 1999, 7). In the 1920s, Dravidianism took a populist turn, becoming a vehicle for the elevation of emergent groups (ibid.). Under the leadership of E. V. Ramasami Naicker, the first Dravidian political party formed, the Justice Party, and stated its aims to be the upward social mobility of low castes and the establishment of a Dravidian Nation.

identity and Tamil nationalism may also account for his growing popularity among Sri Lankan Tamils, who adhere to their own variety of Tamil nationalism.

Even more than the issues surrounding Tamil nationalism, the features of the pilgrimage itself may partially explain its current popularity. The pilgrimage has three distinctive features. First, it is overwhelmingly dominated by men, as women of child-bearing age are barred from participation. Aside from a very small number of young girls and post-menopausal women, only males undertake this rather rigorous pilgrimage. Second, the cultus fashions itself as egalitarian, free of *cāti* (caste) or sectarian affiliations. Although the preservation of *cāti* is indicated by the temple's Nambūdiri Brahmin priests and the lower-middle caste Hindus who dominate the pilgrimage, devotees claim that all males are equal in the presence of god (Clothey 1978, 202). Third, the pilgrimage is preceded by a forty-one day *viratam*. During this period, devotees must observe strict celibacy, abstain from the consumption of meat and intoxicants, and refrain from any indulgence that could be construed as hedonistic. The worship of Ayyappaṇ at the temple in Montréal reflects these features as women of child-bearing age are banned; participation is ostensibly egalitarian; and fasting is prevalent. Practice in Montréal, however has some distinctive features. Since the pilgrimage to the temple in Kerala is obviously not conducted from Montréal, the *viratam*, which tends to be even more strict than the *viratam* observed in India, is the main event.<sup>6</sup>

In both South India and Montréal, the rituals surrounding the worship of Ayyappaṇ reveal collective desires to escape the pressures of modern day-to-day life, and return to primordial Tamil lifestyles. The idea that the pilgrimage is comprised of a mass of men, all on

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<sup>6</sup> Thangavelu, one of the temple's most well-respected devotees, has been to Śabarimalai three times and draws his authority in the community from the pilgrimage. Nonetheless, many male members of the community accrue equal status through their stringent observation of the *viratam* alone.

equal footing as they trek through the wilderness, is appealing to those whose sense of community and masculine identity has been challenged by “the pressures of modern life ... the tedium of the world of work ... [and the new] economic hierarchies of industrialized society” (Clothey 1978B, 11). The nostalgic, “back to the basics” desires represented by the trek and by the abstemious preparations for it provide an eloquent foil to the rapid urbanization and globalization of South Asia (Younger 2002, 17-18). Similar forces are at work in Montréal.

The rigorous preparation for the pilgrimage, the *viratam*, which is the focus of festivities in Montréal, reflects the importance of escaping from the social and economic pressures of contemporary society: it frees devotees from the increasingly heavy fetters of material life. The forty-one day period begins when a *gurucāmi* (“divine teacher”), a senior devotee who has been to Śabarimalai many times, places the *mālai* (literally, “garland”), the string of holy beads that marks its wearer’s piety and power, on the initiate.<sup>7</sup> After putting on the *mālai*, the initiate must avoid meat, intoxicants, anger, and coarse language. He must avoid shaving, walk barefoot, and wear black or orange (the colours associated with asceticism). In Canada, such corporeal markers are only required on temple grounds in order to avoid racial discrimination. In both contexts, however, initiates must incorporate simple, pious habits into daily life. At this time, they are considered to be Ayyappan himself, and treat each other as such. They address each other as *cāmi* (literally “god” or “deity”) or as Ayyappan, and attend nightly devotional singing groups. The most important behavioural stipulation, however, is the avoidance of sex. All the literature discussing the *viratam* emphatically reminds readers that abstinence is mandatory.

Given the fact that in myths about Ayyappan, women represent the reprehensible desires and

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<sup>7</sup> The etymology of the word *gurucāmi* sheds light on the position. *Guru* means teacher, and *cāmi* literally means god or deity. Thus, the *gurucāmi* is not just a religious teacher, but a divine figure himself. The term *cāmi* is not limited to this context. It is used as respectful term of address or reference.

materiality of household life, avoiding women is a must. Celibacy is especially important because men are understood to be incarnations of Ayyappaṇ himself during the approximately forty days of the *viratam*.

The community of Ayyappaṇ devotees in Montréal goes beyond the requirements of fasting in India in order to embellish their Tamil heritage, and draw themselves together through shared experience. Consumption of food is severely limited. All of my informants claim that they eat once a day during the fasting period, a practice that is not mentioned in sources explaining the *viratam* in South India. Mithun, who does not even drink water until after the late-evening *pūjā* (at nine or ten PM), noted that he loses around twenty-five pounds each festival season. The requirements of *brahmacārya* among Ayyappaṇ devotees in Montréal are also more rigorous than those observed in India. According to a *viratam* manual followed by the devotees, “They should strictly abstain from all sexual activities. They should not allow any sexual urges to come up during this period, and should completely avoid any kind of sexual gratification.”<sup>8</sup> They must refrain from looking at women during their menstrual periods, and “should look upon all ... girls and ladies as their own sisters or mothers ...” Taking this point even further, Mithun informed me that fasting ideally requires the complete avoidance of female contact in terms of both thought and sight.

The comparative stringency of the fast observed by my informants may be due to their location in Canada. The drive for return and renunciation among devotees in Montréal is particularly strong because of the way they understand the culture surrounding them, and their

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<sup>8</sup> The Montreal Sri Aiyappaṇ Temple's *pūcāri*, Mithun, provided me with a pamphlet entitled “Special Fasting Period in Honor of God Aiyappa,” which was printed by the Society of Aiyappa Devotees at the Aiyappaṇ Temple in Scarborough, Ontario. He and other members of the community explain that they abide by this manual as a guide for their ritual practices.

distance from their homeland. Like *kāvati* performers, Ayyappa devotees articulate the difficulties in preserving identity in a cultural milieu that they see as materialistic and even hedonistic. Emphatic proclamations of self-denial seem to be part of a desire to return to Tamil origins. As in South India, the worship of Ayyappa in Montréal enables Tamil men to depart ritually from their busy urban lives and renew their sense of identity as Tamils. Striking out against the homogenizing forces of assimilation, Ayyappa devotees in Montréal become the pure, heroic *bhaktas* of Tamil antiquity. They internalize the virtues of Tamil civilization. The fastidious nature of the *viratam* in Montréal imitates the physical hardship of the pilgrimage, in order to fulfill the drive for renunciation that is magnified by heightened nostalgia in the diaspora.

Replacing the pilgrimage, the *viratam* in Montréal comes to engender the experiences of *communitas* reported by pilgrims in South India (Daniel 1984, 256, 269; Osella and Osella 2003, 738-741; Sekar 1992, 55).<sup>9</sup> The importance of being together, establishing a feeling of ecstatic oneness with others who are performing the *viratam*, is paramount. Although the feeling of empowerment through immersion in a wide, exclusively male body (Osella and Osella 2003, 747) is impossible to establish fully while inhabiting Canada's secular landscape, rigorous, collective self-denial draws men together.

Embodying Ayyappa is not an easy task. In South India and in Canada, the *viratam* involves a type of ritual death as devotees shed their human identities. In order to prepare for the

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<sup>9</sup> Besides establishing communal feelings, severe rules underscore the meritorious nature of self-denial, which tends to reach beyond the scope of similar understandings in India. In addition to the amplified stringency of abstinence, enjoyments and indulgences of any kind are to be avoided. Devotees claim that watching movies and going on vacations are proscribed activities. They also avoid laziness and lethargy, never sleeping during the day. Although this seems like a fairly easy task, it is rendered difficult by the eating habits of many men during the festival.

pilgrimage, “pilgrims are separated from their usual environment and social relations ... they lose their social identity and become *sannyasis*,” while at the same time becoming Ayyappan himself (Osella and Osella 2003, 736). This process of social death is attested to by the funerary symbolism that colours the festival’s ritual performances. In South India, prior to departure, the *gurucāmi* performs *irumuṭi keṭṭal* (literally, “the tying of two coverings or two portions”) in a local temple for each initiate (ibid.; Sekar 1992, 48). The *irumuṭi*, which is a cotton bag with two compartments carried on the head, is packed with offerings to the deity (front compartment) and personal items for the trip (rear compartment), and tied together (Sekar 1992, 48). At this time the relatives of the pilgrims throw three handfuls of rice into the front compartment of the *irumuṭi*. This act resembles the throwing of rice on a corpse before it is taken to be cremated. “By this act,” Daniel explains, “friends and kinsmen symbolically complete their duties towards one who is renouncing the world and shall henceforth be as good as dead” (1984, 248). Then the pilgrims exit the temple facing backwards until they reach the courtyard where they turn around three times, a movement that resembles the transport of corpses to the funeral pyre (ibid.; Osella and Osella 2003, 737). After departing from household life through ritual death, devotees become Ayyappan for the duration of the pilgrimage.<sup>10</sup> In Montréal, *irumuṭi keṭṭal* is performed

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<sup>10</sup> Traditionally setting out from Erumeli, a small town sixty-five miles from the destination, devotees begin a challenging climb through forests and over many steep hills. Along the way, they encounter a number of sacred sights associated with Ayyappan’s journey to retrieve tiger’s milk (Osella and Osella 2003, 737). The journey lasts for a few days, and as Daniel explains it, is characterized by both aching physical pains and ecstatic feelings of *communitas* (Daniel 1984, 256-269). Following in Ayyappan’s footsteps, the pilgrims march forward rhythmically reciting praises to Ayyappan. The *gurucāmi* chants Ayyappan’s praises as they ascend the mountain and the pilgrims respond with recitative answers (ibid., 263). The rhythm and speed of the chanting rises again after having been dimmed by the exhaustion of the journey, as the pilgrims reach the *patinettuppaṭi*, the eighteen steps leading to the main shrine (Osella and Osella 2003, 738). Before climbing the steps, the pilgrims make offerings from their *irumuṭis*. They then ascend the steps, and wait on a long line to receive brief *darshan* of the golden deity. Many devotees are overwhelmed with emotion as the deity comes into sight (ibid.). After making offerings, they then descend the mountain in order to return to their lives as ordinary household men.

identically. For devotees in South India and Montréal, masculine identity as a householder is abandoned as they come to embody Ayyappaṇ.

For initiates at the Montreal Sri Aiyappaṇ Temple, this is not a temporary embodiment, which comes to the fore only during the fasting season, but rather exists year round. The devotees who undertake the *viratam* meet three times a week, on Tuesdays, Fridays, and Saturdays, to propitiate Ayyappaṇ. At the temple, they wear black *veṣṭis*, showcasing their chests, the epicenter of male valour (see Chapter Three), and don the *mālai*, the beads that signify the sanctity of their bodies. They call each other *cāmi* and are called *cāmi* or Ayyappaṇ by other members of the community. Understood to be ritually pure, they perform the *pūjā* themselves, adorning the deity with clothing and jewels and bathing him in milk, ghee, and sandalwood paste. Their identity as Ayyappaṇ is reinforced as they wade through the crowd delivering *prasādam* to all the ordinary devotees who prostrate themselves, touching the feet of the *cāmis* and declaring, “saraṇam Ayyappā” (“I take refuge in Ayyappaṇ”).<sup>11</sup>

### Theorizing Ayyappaṇ

Scholars have speculated about the possible meanings of human deification in the worship of Ayyappaṇ. Daniel argues that pilgrims progressively shed layers of the self as they proceed along the journey, experiencing exhaustion and severe pain in order to ultimately overcome such feelings and merge with the divine (ibid.). Daniel sees the process of merging

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<sup>11</sup> The divinity of the *cāmis* is reinforced at an annual celebration that marks the six-month anniversary of the end of the *viratam*. During this celebration, the *cāmis* are re-sanctified through ritual action. The *cāmis*’ feet are soaked in sandalwood paste, the same auspicious substance that is rubbed on the deity. Mithun ceremoniously garlands them with the *mālai*, and the ordinary devotees prostrate themselves vigorously before each *cāmi*, continuously asserting that they take refuge in Ayyappaṇ. Because of the potential for purity in the male body and because of the self-denial observed by these men, they are understood as pure forms of the divine.

with Ayyappan as a temporary release from the pressures of worldly concerns (ibid.). Sekar tends to agree with Daniel, conceptualizing the pilgrimage as a liminal phase, which frees the householder devotee from his social identity (Sekar 1992, 98). Providing more historically grounded analyses, Clothey and Younger argue that men's sense of self is threatened by contemporary socio-economic pressures and a perceived loss of cultural identity, which is reasserted through self-conscious efforts to adopt the characteristics of the brave, mountain-inhabiting Caṅkam-period hero and the classical Indian ascetic (Clothey 1978, 11; Younger 2002, 24). Finally, Osella and Osella provide the most nuanced analysis of the Ayyappan phenomenon, as they investigate the gendered elements of the pilgrimage. They argue that the pilgrimage "distances and detaches men from everyday life and offers a respite from the demands of domesticity," while at the same time allowing men to draw on the powers of renunciation to fulfill their duties as male householders (Osella and Osella 2003, 741). According to Osella and Osella, the power men accrue through their actions is rooted in the strong sense of gendered self that they gain through communal renunciation. Masculine ambivalence and self-doubt is assuaged by immersion in a "more potent and larger male self" (ibid., 745). Masculine identities that may be weakened by contemporary socio-economic pressures, as Clothey and Younger argue (Clothey 1978, 11; Younger 2002, 24), are reconfigured through the connection to "a collectivity of men: those within the family group, the male guru ... and such hyper-male figures as the deity Ayyappan or idealized masculine iconic heroes such as the *freedom-fighting father of the nation* [emphasis added] ..." (Osella and Osella 2003, 746).

While each scholar's analysis provides some useful insight, the worship of Ayyappan in Montréal is characterized by a number of unique features not discussed by scholars. *Viratam*

cannot correctly be labeled a *temporary* release from quotidian pressures or a liminal phase. Rather, the men at the Ayyappaṇ temple assert their heroic, renunciatory masculinity on a tri-weekly basis and tend to allow the ethos of asceticism to penetrate their daily lives year-round. Additionally, the cultus enables them to construct their senses of masculine self in two divergent ways: On the one hand, it actualizes the desires of Sri Lankan Tamil men to establish themselves as a primordially learned, and yet wholly modern immigrant group in Montréal. Pointing to devotional literature written in English, the popularity of Ayyappaṇ around the world, and the ways that the egalitarian practices of worship are designed to provide peace-of-mind and propel devotees towards emotional health, Sri Lankan Tamil men construct themselves as a group whose currency is only matched by their ability to tap into ancient wisdom. Through understandings and explanations of their ritual performances, they connect themselves with the lofty goals of transnational neo-Śaivism (discussed in Chapter One). Contrary to Osella and Osella's claim that power accrued through mass-male renunciation helps men to fulfill duties as householders, ritual performance at the Montreal Sri Aiyappaṇ Temple is not directed towards the protection of family and nation. Rather, the power men gain through communing with each other is aimed at other-worldly goals. On the other hand, the worship of Ayyappaṇ allows men to assert their masculinity in more traditional ways. In addition to the forces of modernization and urbanization described by Clothey and Younger (Clothey 1978; Younger 2002), Vēḷāḷar Tamil masculinity is endangered by both socio-economic marginalization and ritual marginalization. The practices revolving around the Montréal Sri Aiyappaṇ Temple, however, allow Śaiva Vēḷāḷar men to establish their dominance in terms of strength, bravery, and ritual purity.

In contrast to scholarly accounts of the abrogation of caste identity in the context of Ayyappaṇ worship (Pyyappaṇ 1966; Sekar 1992; Vaidyanathan 1978), the ritual culture of the Montreal Sri Aiyappaṇ Temple is anything but blind to caste. In fact, asserting the elevation of one's *cāti* is one of the primary ways that men construct their masculinity in this context. Since the Montreal Sri Aiyappaṇ Temple is owned and operated by Vēḷāḷars, it allows them to bring their religiousity and their *cāti* culture to the fore. While at the Montreal Murugan Temple, my informants are relegated to the background except during the annual temple festival, at the Ayyappaṇ temple, Vēḷāḷar male *bhakti* defines ritual life. The ritual elevation and social dominance of Vēḷāḷar Sri Lankan Tamil male refugees at the Montreal Sri Aiyappaṇ Temple allows them to assert ritually that they are on par with Brahmins, and to counter-act their feelings of collective marginalization. Ultimately, their ritual performances construct them as men who are wise, modern, and ritually pure. A new type of Tamil masculinity is emerging right here in Montréal.

### Three Ayyappaṇ *Bhaktas* in Montréal

#### a) Thangavelu:

Since my first visit to the Montreal Sri Aiyappaṇ Temple, Thangavelu has stood out as one of the most vital members of the community. The temple seems never to be without the authority of his voice. He rarely misses a *pūjā* and usually arrives about an hour early to help cook and assemble the ritual accoutrements.<sup>12</sup> Proudly donning his black *veṇṇi*, Thangavelu leads the passionate recitation of Ayyappaṇ's praises and *bhajans*, which are both composed and sung in a

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<sup>12</sup> As *pūjās* are held on Tuesday and Friday evenings from 6:30 to 9:30 PM and on Saturdays from 10:00 AM to 2:00 PM, Thangavelu spends about thirteen hours a week at the temple.

call-and-response format. Additionally, Thangavelu and other men in the temple who perform the annual *viratam*, and are thus considered *cāmis*, loudly and passionately shout, “Cāmiyē!” (the vocative form of *cāmi*) at random during the *pūjā* to which we respond immediately, whether in the middle of a *bhajan* or deep in prayer, “saraṇam Ayyappā!” In this way, Thangavelu and his fellow *viratam*-performing compatriots assert their authority at the temple. They control the auditory rhythm and volume of worship. Thangavelu also plays a pedagogical role at the temple’s special *pūjās*. Contentedly clutching a microphone that is rented for the occasions, Thangavelu recounts the history of the Montreal Sri Aiyappan Temple and the mythology surrounding the deity.

Around sixty, Thangavelu first left Sri Lanka at the age of twenty-eight when violence against Tamils was becoming commonplace. After receiving his university education in Jaffna, Thangavelu led a relatively privileged life working in the marketing department of the Sri Lankan government. Yet, as he explains it, “They [the Sinhalese] began taking young [Tamil] men and beating them up and putting them in prison.” Fearing persecution, Thangavelu first went to Germany by way of Italy, where a visa was not required. In 1983, he had to return to Sri Lanka because his mother had fallen ill. At that time, his marriage was arranged, but the political conflict in Sri Lanka erupted. His refugee status in Germany had been cancelled, and he and his wife set out for Canada.

Although Thangavelu has been living in Montréal for about twenty years, he remains conflicted about his immigrant identity. Asked whether he likes Montréal, Thangavelu explains, “I’ve been living here for about twenty years now. It is like a home and I am so used to it.”

Likewise when I asked him if he likes Canadian culture he responds, “Yes, I like it. Everyone

lives here. It's a place of multiplicity." However, about two minutes later I asked him whether he wants to go back to Jaffna and his response is firm, "Yes, I really want to go back there. If there were not any problems, I would be the first one to go there ... I do not like it here. It's a place where our language and our practices are absent. But what can we do? We came here [to Canada] and cannot go back there [to Sri Lanka]." For Thangavelu, the conflicts between his identity as a Sri Lankan Tamil and as a Canadian immigrant resonate deeply.

Thangavelu's anxieties about his identity inform his understanding of the ritual performances surrounding Ayyappan. In some ways, worshipping Ayyappan is a means to escape the displeasing elements of Canadian culture and return to his roots. Specifically, Thangavelu dislikes the strong sense of materialism and the startling lack of traditional authority that he perceives in Canada, and counteracts through his propitiation of Ayyappan. Elaborating on some the differences between the culture of the Tamils and Canadian culture, Thangavelu emphasizes materialism and suggests that Tamils are "sinking into the quicksand of worldly desire."

Nonetheless, he sees the worship of Ayyappan as a route to escape from the magnetic draw of materialism. According to Thangavelu, "In Sri Lanka, our own soil ... and our own religions are the most important things. The problem starts [here] when people distinguish each other according to their income status. This should be stopped. This is what we also ask [Ayyappan]."

Thangavelu is also troubled by the lack of traditional authority he observes in Canada. Outlining the most important elements of Tamil culture in response to my question, Thangavelu began, "First one should give respect to parents and to teachers. Mother is the one who gives life to the child, father enrolls the child into a school, and then the teacher shows the path through knowledge. In our religion, first it is mother, then father, then teacher, and then deity."

Continuing on, Thangavelu laments the decay of this traditional system in Montréal: “Here people behave however they want to. Here it is a culture of multiplicity so everything is mixed up. People do not even recognize their own mothers and fathers. It is difficult to protect our culture here ... ”

Thangavelu acts against this encroaching materialism and the decay of authority by constructing himself as a selfless *bhakta* who bravely and fervently propitiates Ayyappan. Having been to Śabarimalai three times, Thangavelu claims that the first time he performed the pilgrimage he only stopped once to rest over the course of the entire forty-eight miles. He also explains that one has to have courage in order to climb the mountain: “You have to believe in yourself and have courage when you go there. It is very hard to climb the mountain. It is painful ... you just have to keep on going up while yelling out his [Ayyappan’s] name. There are snakes, elephants, bears, and lions, but you only think of Ayyappan.” In his descriptions of the pilgrimage to Śabarimalai, Thangavelu celebrates his bravery and self-sacrifice. Although the journey was trying, he did not rest. Although there were wild animals afoot, he was not afraid. In contrast to the focus on status and income that he sees preoccupying people in Canada, Thangavelu undertakes pilgrimages to Śabarimalai out of pure devotion. The extremity of his devotion – his willingness to endure physical pain – recalls the *vannanpu* of the Nāyaṇārs.

Thangavelu’s appropriation of traditional Tamil masculinity through ritual performance is not, however, limited to his pilgrimages to Śabarimalai. He enacts the process of identity construction at the annual festivals and tri-weekly *pūjās* in Montréal. In his quotidian prayers, Thangavelu reinforces what he sees as his simple, traditional lifestyle. Unlike others who are caught up in the materialism of Canadian culture, he does not hope to acquire any objects

through his propitiation of Ayyappaṇ, and asserts his desire to pray to god. Asked what kinds of benefits he accrues as a result of his prayers, Thangavelu responds, “I am in good health. I do not have any such thought as I want to buy a car or something like other people. I just want food three times per day, to sleep well, and to pray to god. If I have work, I will wake up at 3:30AM. I will do my chores ... [and] conduct *pūjā* ... Even at work, whenever I am on a break, I will pray. Then, when I am back at home, I will pray and then eat.” Thangavelu often preaches the importance of humble service and devotion as he sweeps and mops the floor of the temple.

In this role, Thangavelu also works to reconstruct the boundaries of authority that he believes have been subverted by life in Canada. His performance of *viratam* provides him with the respect that is his due. Thangavelu claims that a man donning the *mālai* is an embodiment of god himself, and is therefore treated with the utmost respect. He proudly informs me of the reverence wearing the *mālai* affords him: “When I am doing the *viratam* and wearing the *mālai* and people see me coming, they will think Ayyappaṇ is coming. They will give me a great deal of respect at that time.” For Thangavelu, performing the *viratam* and praying to Ayyappaṇ reestablishes the traditional boundaries of Tamil culture and disentangles the material desires and confusions of authority that knot contemporary diasporic society.

Thangavelu’s experiences of Ayyappaṇ worship also extend beyond his attempts to establish traditional elements of Tamil culture and identity in Montréal. For Thangavelu and other Sri Lankan Tamil men in Montréal, Ayyappaṇ worship facilitates the construction of new types of non-Brahmin Tamil diasporic masculinity. Thangavelu recognizes the worship of Ayyappaṇ as a new phenomenon, and understands that his acts of worship underscore his wisdom and intellectual sophistication. He emphasizes lofty, other-worldly goals. For

Thangavelu, Ayyappaṇ is a guru who holds the key to universal spiritual attainment, and, ultimately, *mokṣa*. Coming to embody him through ritual practice provides Thangavelu with great spiritual and moral knowledge. As Thangavelu explains, “Ayyappaṇ is a great hero [*vīraṇ*] ... he will show us what is right and what is wrong ... If we are doing something wrong, he will tell us that it is wrong ... He will lead me on the right path. This is what we also ask of him. Show us the right path; don’t harm us. This is what he is doing and will do ...” Again referring to his disdain for material culture, Thangavelu gestures towards the deity and proclaims, “I do not want money, but give me the ability to be honest. Show us the right path.” For Thangavelu, Ayyappaṇ’s moral leadership eventually garners the spiritual and emotional peace of his devotees. He assures me that “we *gurucāmis* exhibit Ayyappaṇ’s purity and peacefulness” [Skt. *sāttvikam*].

Since the *viratam* enables the initiate to become the deity, its performance furnishes complete spiritual and moral knowledge. During and following the *viratam*, Thangavelu does not need Ayyappaṇ’s leadership to find the path. Explaining his *viratam* and post-*viratam* state, he claims, “[I] do not feel like making any mistakes ... I become accustomed to Ayyappaṇ and learn many things. Reciting his name whenever I do chores, I automatically [Eng. automatically] am without sin [*pāpam*].” Through his own ritual transformation, Thangavelu even switches roles with Ayyappaṇ, becoming the teacher, while Ayyappaṇ becomes the student. According to Thangavelu, “Ayyappaṇ is a small child, thus, we need to teach him what we know when we become *gurus*.” This off-the-cuff comment reveals the way the performance of *viratam* leads to supreme enlightenment. For Thangavelu, *viratam* is a vehicle to spiritual enlightenment with deep moral and intellectual repercussions. It enables him to become God’s teacher.

In stark contrast to the *nērtikkāṭans* that underly performances of *kāvaṭi*, here religious goals are oriented away from household life and ultimately away from any type of life in this world. In addition to aligning himself with the Tamil *bhakta*, Thangavelu constructs his identity as a classic Brahmin ascetic, a *sannyāsin*. He lives apart from his wife who has been living in Toronto since April of 2007. Although he is retired, he remains in Montréal in order to pursue spiritual goals by coming to the Ayyappaṇ temple. He explains categorically, “I am staying in Montréal because I need to come to the Ayyappaṇ Temple.” In addition, the goal driving Thangavelu’s religious practices is *mokṣa*, the ultimate goal of a Brahmin male.<sup>13</sup> Thangavelu clarifies his religious goal: “People say they want to go to paradise after their death. That is what I also want. I do not want to be reborn!”

Thangavelu’s abdication of his duties as a householder extend to include his role in the Tamil nation. As he refuses to act as the protector of his family, he is no longer a defender of Jaffna. Contradicting his aforementioned desire to return to Jaffna, in another conversation Thangavelu expresses disengagement from his country of origin. He claims to think rarely of Jaffna. His feelings of defeat and disconnectedness reverberate in the way he understands the efficacy of his ritual performances. While he expresses a certain degree of guilt at not being involved in the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka (like the *kāvaṭi* performers) his compunction never outstrips his feelings of being disconnected from his nation. Thangavelu lauds the Tamil Tigers for saving a whole generation of Tamils, and for sacrificing their lives in order to achieve freedom for the nation. He explains, “They are the people who are fighting for their country’s sake. We are the cowards who ran away from Sri Lanka and are hiding here. They are the heroes.” Despite

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<sup>13</sup> According to the Sanskrit textual tradition, *mokṣa* is the goal of life for all *dvija* [“twice-born”] men. In practice, however, searching for *mokṣa* has been an endeavor undertaken by Brahmins. Certainly, such other-worldly pursuits have not been the traditional domain of Vēḷāḷars.

the guilt he harbours, ritual performances such as *viratam* are not directed towards the war effort. Thangavelu finds the idea of connecting ritual performances to Jaffna absurd: “Of course performing *viratam* does not change or improve the situation in Sri Lanka,” he once replied. In addition, Thangavelu explains the transnational appeal of Ayyappaṇ by pointing to the diversity of devotees. Recalling the universalism embedded in much neo-Śaiva rhetoric, Thangavelu asserts that people from around the world, even people from Western nations, have come to recognize Ayyappaṇ’s power.<sup>14</sup>

The dissociation of Ayyappaṇ from both household life and national identity differs from scholarly accounts of the Ayyappaṇ cultus. As explained above, scholars tend to view Ayyappaṇ worship as a temporary renunciation through which men accrue masculine power, which is then redirected towards fulfilling the goals of household life (Osella and Osella 2003; Daniel 1984; Sekar 1992). In addition, some argue that the source of masculine strength is a strong assertion of Dravidian identity (Younger 2002; Clothey 1978). But Thangavelu refuses to redirect his spiritual power. For him, worshipping Ayyappaṇ involves renunciation – family obligations become peripheral, while religious goals become central. His understandings of culture and nation are more ambiguous. While he does, indeed, see his worship of Ayyappaṇ as a way to reify traditional Tamil ideals in Montréal, ideas about national identity are less important. He sees Ayyappaṇ as a transnational deity, whose power supercedes boundaries of nationality, race, and ethnicity.

Moreover, Thangavelu’s testimony problematizes contemporary scholarship in its implicit focus on caste. While some have foregrounded the supposed castelessness of the

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<sup>14</sup> Clothey points out that there is an underlying sentiment of supra-Tamil identity, of universality, embedded in the Ayyappaṇ cultus (Clothey 1978, 202).

Ayyappaṇ cultus (Pyyappaṇ 1966; Sekar 1992; Vaidyanathan 1978), Thangavelu's understanding of Ayyappaṇ worship is inextricably linked to caste identity. Thangavelu's orientation of his religious practice towards the other-worldly seems to be symptomatic of a deep-seated struggle for authority taking place between Brahmin and Vēḷāḷar Sri Lankan Tamil men in Montréal.<sup>15</sup> The relationship between Brahmins and Vēḷāḷars in Montréal is tenuous at best, and the devotees at the Montreal Sri Aiyappaṇ Temple are particularly wary of Brahmin leadership. Thus, it is not surprising that they assert their authority to conduct *pūjā*, operate the temple, and even travel the spiritual paths ordinarily reserved for Brahmins. Suspicious of Brahmins, Thangavelu argues that he and the other performers of *viratam* are endowed with more knowledge and ritual authority in the worship of Ayyappaṇ than are most Brahmins:

Some Brahmin priests are full of pride. Just because they know a few mantras, they think they know everything. Only a small percentage of Brahmin priests know how to behave properly ... A Brahmin priest is not needed here because we are here for Ayyappaṇ. We only need gurus to teach us the right way to worship lord Ayyappaṇ ... Not all Brahmins know the right way to worship Ayyappaṇ ... [but] if a Brahmin does something in an incorrect way, all of us *gurucāmis* will know, but if we told him he made a mistake some problems may arise ... It is better not to have a Brahmin here so that people will come and sing and pray as they wish. If a Brahmin were here, he would give orders ... I will not continue coming to the temple if a Brahmin priest is hired.

For Thangavelu, the worship of Ayyappaṇ, and especially the performance of *viratam* is an empowering experience. Not only does he make spiritual progress through accessing, and

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<sup>15</sup> Discordance between Brahmins and Vēḷāḷars in Montréal is not at first apparent, as the two groups interact closely at a number of temples, the Montreal Murugaṇ Temple, for example. On closer examination, however, animosity bristles. In addition to the open disdain some *arcakars* express towards other *cāṭi* groups in conversation, the unplanned events of a local temple festival in 2008 point to mutual dislike: One of my informants, a Vēḷāḷar man who is greatly involved in Montréal's Śaiva community, was once a patron of this particular temple. He and the *arcakars* were at odds about a few decisions being made at the temple, and my informant became frustrated with the Brahmins' authority despite their numeric paucity. He withdrew his support, and mutual dislike ensued. At the temple festival, my informant, of course, did not speak to the *arcakars*. At one point he went into a trance-like state, which he claims not to remember, and physically attacked one of the two *arcakars*. The other *arcakar* fled, and a crowd gathered trying to pull the two men off of each other. The fight ended with my informant's arrest by the Montréal police. Although the event was a great source of shame for the Vēḷāḷar community, many agreed that the *arcakar* was to blame.

even becoming, divinity, but he is able to transcend the boundaries of *cāti*, taking on roles ordinarily reserved for Brahmins. While affirming the importance of traditional ideals – such as bravery and self-sacrifice – he constructs himself according to paradigms that are new to Vēlālar men. Through worshipping Ayyappan, Thangavelu fashions himself as both traditional man and universally wise *guru*.

**b) Kuganesan:**

Like Thangavelu, Kuganesan is a dedicated member of the Montreal Sri Aiyappan Temple. Although he is a bit more reserved than Thangavelu, what Tamils might describe a “shy type,” he sings the *bhajans* enthusiastically and never passes up the opportunity to belt out “cāmiyē!” several times during the *pūjā*. As the *pūjā* concludes, he dutifully serves *prasādam*. With deep hospitality, he returns with additional servings again and again.

Kuganesan and his wife Ruby have been living in Canada since July 1988. They left their natal village because of political violence, although they refuse to discuss such issues. They came by way of Argentina and Brazil deciding to settle in Canada because of its lenient policy towards refugees. Kuganesan used to work at a factory, but is currently unemployed, and Ruby is a part-time schoolteacher. In Sri Lanka, Kuganesan worked in grocery stores that were owned by his uncle.

Having lived in Canada for twenty years, Kuganesan’s juxtapositions of Sri Lankan Tamil and Canadian culture reflect both a persevering undercurrent of nostalgia and a willingness to embrace his surroundings. Kuganesan finds what he sees as an overemphasis on materialism and pleasure in Canada disturbing. Like Thangavelu, he fears Tamils themselves are beginning to adopt this lifestyle at the expense of traditional values. Kuganesan also laments the lack of familial

obligation he observes in Canada. Commenting on the state of familial anomie, he claims: "Here people do whatever they want. Parents can live without their children if they want and just enjoy."

Kuganesan does, however, praise some of the freedoms people are afforded in Canada. Gesturing to the spaces beyond his home, Kuganesan begins: "Canadian life is very open ... here the chores and responsibilities are divided equally between the men and women. But in Sri Lanka the men had more responsibility than the women ... In Sri Lanka, she will take care of the children and do the chores. In Canada, the women also go to work, like my wife, Ruby." For Kuganesan, the more egalitarian division of domestic labour in Canada is laudable. In addition, Kuganesan claims to enjoy living among non-Tamil people, especially in his Anglophone Jewish neighbourhood. In fact, he expresses little desire to return to Sri Lanka. For Kuganesan and his family, Canada has become a kind of "homeland." He explains: "We have lived here for twenty years and we like it here. We do not need to have Tamil people for neighbours. We are very used to it here ... If the war ends in Sri Lanka, I am not sure if we would go back. I would have to think about it when it happens."

Kuganesan's enthusiastic acceptance of his new cultural surroundings aligns well with his devotion to Ayyappan, a deity whose novelty seems to be one of his most appealing features. For Kuganesan, Ayyappan is dynamic and new. Unlike more classical deities, who have retired to their heavenly abodes, Ayyappan is a deity of the contemporary era. According to Kuganesan, Ayyappan is currently present on Earth, and is thus, particularly accessible to his devotees. Asked about the origins of the Ayyappan cultus, Kuganesan insists that his worship is a wholly contemporary and rapidly growing phenomenon: "It is only now that people are starting to learn about Ayyappan ... It has been about fifty years since Tamils starting worshipping Ayyappan and

going up the mountain [Śabarimalai] ... Now it is the *kali yuga*.<sup>16</sup> In this world Ayyappaṇ and Aiyaṇār are the main gods.<sup>17</sup> They are controlling the world. They are the most powerful ... Now there are about eight hundred people who wear the *mālai* in Toronto. This year there will be more than one thousand people!” On his own experiences with the deity, Kuganesan notes that he too is a recent devotee and explains his conversion to Ayyappaṇ devotion at a particularly difficult time in his life. Because of his presence in the here and now, Ayyappaṇ was able to help Kuganesan: “I ... believed in other gods before ... [and] I used to work in a factory, but due to some problems I quit that job. One of Ruby’s co-workers is an Ayyappaṇ devotee. Ruby asked me if I could do the *viratam* for forty-five days. I knew that it was a little bit hard, but I still decided to give it a try. This is how it all started. Now I like Ayyappaṇ very much.”

Kuganesan’s explanation of his conversion to Ayyappaṇ devotion mirrors the paradigm of the absolved *bhakta* discussed in Chapter One. Reminding us of the hagiographies of Appar and Aruṅkirinaṭar, Kuganesan’s turn to Ayyappaṇ lifted him out of his morally dubious life. Prior to becoming an Ayyappaṇ *bhakta*, Kuganesan had adopted some of the intemperate habits he finds common in Canada. He had taken to eating beef and drinking alcohol seven days a week, even at work. He has quit both habits since first performing the *viratam* for Ayyappaṇ, and is pleased with his new lifestyle. In fashioning himself as a *bhakta*, Kuganesan has also steered clear of the materialism that he thinks preoccupies most people in Canada. Through his propitiation of Ayyappaṇ, he asserts his identity as a selfless, simple *bhakta* whose only desire is to please his

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<sup>16</sup> According to the cyclical understanding of time posited by Brahmanical Hinduism (such ideas actually date back to the Vedic period), but well known throughout the subcontinent, the universe goes through four stages of time, or *yugas*. The first stage is a type of golden age, when the universe is steeped in virtue and prosperity, and when *dharma* prevails. During the next two stages, the state of the universe degenerates progressively. The *kali yuga* is the fourth and most degenerate stage, during which evil and suffering prevail.

<sup>17</sup> Aiyaṇār is a male hero-deity popular in villages of Tamil Nadu and parts of Sri Lanka. He is considered courageous and powerful, but potentially dangerous. He is often understood as a fierce protector of the village boundaries.

lord. As Kuganesan explains, “Some people ask [Ayyappan] for money, but we [my wife and I] do not ask for money; we do not need it. It is enough if we have a job and pray to god. We will survive with that ... I do not need money. As long as I have food and feel peace in my heart, I am well.” For Kuganesan, Ayyappan worship is a way to renounce the selfish indulgences he believes are characteristic of Canadian culture, and return to his Tamil heritage.

Despite his desire to remember his Tamil identity in certain ways, in other ways Kuganesan would rather forget. Culturally he remains Sri Lankan Tamil, but hopes to divorce himself from the political trauma coupled with this identity. Asked about the political situation in Sri Lanka, Kuganesan’s answers reveal little. Although his silence may have to do with the criminalization of all activities related to the LTTE here in Canada, they may have more to do with Kuganesan’s desire to forget the pain of the past. As he explains, “Everybody wants to forget it. I want to forget it too.” Although he emphasizes the importance of instilling Tamil cultural norms in his children by bringing them to the temple, watching Tamil movies, and telling them Tamil folk tales, in terms of politics, he asserts, “I do not tell them stories about Sri Lanka. They do not need to know about those things. It is not necessary for them. It is not a good idea to confuse them with those problems.” For Kuganesan, the worship of Ayyappan provides the opportunity to remain culturally Tamil without necessitating a tie to the politics of his nation of origin. Through his ritual practices he can preserve much of the tradition of his cultural identity, but at the same time embrace elements of the Canadian socio-cultural milieu.

Kuganesan also adopts less traditional masculine roles, which render him more Canadian and more “modern.” In his understandings of his ritual performances, he is the “modern Tamil man,” who is scientifically savvy and open-minded. Kuganesan’s understanding of *viratam* is

shaped by popular Western notions of health and fitness. He explains: “[During the *viratam*] we have to make our bodies suffer, [but] it is in fact not a bad thing to eat once a day and sleep on the floor. It is good for our health ... because if you eat many times a day, you will gain weight and get diseases such as [high] cholesterol. During the *viratam* we only eat vegetables and fruit and drink milk. It is good for the body.” Understanding the *viratam* in such “scientific” terms, Kuganesan’s ritual performance attests to his position as a “modern man.”

Kuganesan’s ideas about egalitarianism, which reflect a similar emphasis on modernity, are also linked to his worship of Ayyappaṇ. Asked about the unique features of Ayyappaṇ, he explains what he sees as the egalitarian ethos surrounding the cultus, which he compares to the ostensibly nondiscriminatory policies of a church in Montréal. Through his worship of Ayyappaṇ, Kuganesan aligns himself with what he sees as the comparatively egalitarian mindset of contemporary Canadian society. According to Kuganesan:

Ayyappaṇ sees everyone equally. Ayyappaṇ says that everyone is the same. Ayyappaṇ also sees Christians and Muslims on the same level. Some temples in India would not allow you [as a white apparently non-Hindu] to go in. Even Sonia Gandhi was not allowed in. Some of these temples are Tirupati in Andhra and the Minaṭci Temple in Madurai. They will not let you go inside there ... [but] everyone can go inside the church on Queen Mary [a street in Montréal]. The Ayyappaṇ temple is like that.

Kuganesan’s tendency to embrace egalitarianism through Ayyappaṇ worship is also revealed in his views on caste hierarchy. Like Thangavelu, he harbours disdain for Brahmins. Unlike Thangavelu, however, Kuganesan does not advocate usurping the roles of Brahmin ritual practitioners. Rather, Kuganesan’s critique of Brahmanical authority is rooted in his desire to progress past the restrictions of antiquity. He claims to avoid other temples because he does not like Brahmin priests who “are often seeking money only.” He also notes that he favours the Ayyappaṇ temple because the performance of *pūjā* is not reserved for Brahmins, as it is in more

traditional, more dogmatic temples. In his words, “There are no restrictions here ... We do not stick to the old rules of the past ... Here we can serve Ayyappan, but in other temples, they would not let us do so.”

While on the one hand Kuganesan questions Brahmanical authority on the grounds that it is old-fashioned and unnecessary, on the other hand he retains an ingrained sense of Brahmanical superiority. He even affirms his willingness to give up his proximity to the deity in order for the temple to be endowed with the purity of Brahmin ritual leadership. Couching his argument in terms of the affects of vegetarianism on the body, he explains:

We need a priest because they are fully pure. Even though the *gurucāmi* cooks vegetarian food on one side, he will still cook non-vegetarian food on the other side. But a Brahmin is not like that. He is always vegetarian. We have impurities in our bodies. Like for example, I eat meat twice a week and do not eat meat on the other days ... but the Brahmin never eats meat ... if a Brahmin priest comes to this temple, we cannot go close to the [image of] the deity. If the Brahmin does *kumbhābhiṣekam* (Skt. consecration ceremony) then we cannot touch the god.

Kuganesan’s discrepant understanding of caste is an apt metonym for his overall construction of his masculine identity. His experiences and explanations of his ritual propitiation of Ayyappan reveal the range of conflicting pressures informing his gendered identity. He is a modern Tamil-Canadian, and a traditional Tamil *bhakta*; he wants to forget the political past, and remember his culture; he asserts an ethos of egalitarianism and recognizes the ritual superiority of Brahmins. Kuganesan’s composite and contradictory masculine identity is expressed through his performance of *viratam*.

*Viratam*, however, can also free him from the pressures of the past and present. Like some of the *kāvaṭi* performers, Kuganesan experiences a type of numbness and freedom after the initial challenges of the *viratam*. Expressing his masculine identity through undertaking the fast,

he experiences catharsis. As he explains, during the *viratam*, Kuganesan focuses solely on the deity in order to liberate his mind from any upsetting thoughts. The rhythmic, continuous chanting of Ayyappaṇ's name helps him focus and establish a meditative sense of calm. This purgative process releases Kuganesan from the entangled pressures of his masculine identity, resulting in an overwhelming feeling of quiet and calm:

We constantly think about Ayyappaṇ so he eases everything out. It will be a little bit hard for the first few days, but it gets easier as the days go on ... We will feel very calm when we have the *mālai* on. Nothing else will come into one's mind ... When we put on the *mālai*, we won't think about anything and we will not have any problems. We just have to sit chanting Ayyappaṇ's name, again and again.

**c) Mithun:**

Mithun's experiences of Ayyappaṇ are vastly different from those of Thangavelu or Kuganesan for a number of reasons. As the temple's *pūcāri* he occupies the principal ritual position at the temple. Although in his absence the other *cāmis* have taken to conducting the *pūjā*, he almost always attends. He performs the *pūjā* with ecstatic volume and enthused movement, never failing to excite the crowd. When he finishes, he speaks briefly with the other *cāmis* in the kitchen, and then departs promptly.<sup>18</sup> Members of the community have great respect for him, and credit him with the accomplishments of the temple. According to a number of temple community members, who have recounted slightly different variations of what is becoming akin to a contemporary *talapūraṇam*, the temple used to be run by a man who brought the image from India. However, he proved incapable of operating the temple for a number of reasons. Some claim he was only after money, while others point to his deficient ritual

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<sup>18</sup> Departing before food is served, Mithun never eats with the other devotees. His refusal to eat with the others likens him to a Brahmin, as Brahmins do not traditionally eat with members of other *cāmis* for fear of ritual pollution. Though Mithun never claims his eating habits are related to boundaries of purity and pollution, it seems he constructs an image of ritual purity around himself by avoiding consuming food with others.

knowledge. Still others say that he consumed alcohol and ate meat, which greatly angered Ayyappan. Whatever version of the story one subscribes to, all agree that Mithun took over running the temple out of a deep sense of *bhakti*. He is, in his words, “crazy about Ayyappan.”

Unlike my other informants, Mithun was born and raised in Montréal, and is equally proficient in English and Tamil.<sup>19</sup> He is an eighteen-year-old student at Vanier College who hopes to study law at McGill University. In some ways, he sees himself as more Canadian than Tamil, although issues surrounding his identity are complex. He does not know exactly when his parents immigrated to Canada, although he believes that it must have been at least twenty years ago since they have owned a neighbourhood grocery store here for that long. He notes that his mother almost never talks about life in Sri Lanka, while his father reminisces occasionally. On the surface, Mithun does not lament cultural assimilation, a process he sees as inevitable. Asked how he stays connected to his culture, he explains: “Well, it’s a new century and people are forgetting. I find you talk more Tamil than me, you know. You could read Tamil, I can’t. A lot of people are losing their culture. A lot of my friends can’t read Tamil. They can’t even talk Tamil...” Although Mithun assured me that he supports the LTTE because they defend the Sri Lankan Tamil community, he does not keep abreast of the situation in Sri Lanka and faults his father for doing so:

No I don’t keep connected with the political situation there [in Sri Lanka]. I don’t read their news because I live here [in Canada]. I keep up to date more about what’s going on here. My dad ... looks at the news there, but not at the news here. I tell my dad, “you live here, why don’t you look at the news here?” But my dad says, “no I am still of the culture from down there.” ... White people will look at me and say, “oh, you’re Sri Lankan,” but I feel like I was born here so I’ll still look at stuff here.

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<sup>19</sup> All of my conversations with Mithun were in English.

While at first glance Mithun seems fully at ease with his identity as a young Tamil-Canadian man, he goes on to explain the various challenges of living as a “brown person” in Montréal. According to Mithun, racism and discrimination are ever-present. Tamils are not afforded the same opportunities or the same level of respect as “white people.” When asked to identify some distinctive features of Tamil culture, Mithun explained:

It's different for white people because our culture is different. Our colour is different ... I'm different in the colour of my skin ... We're different. It's different for white people because they're white. We have to go through a society of racists. It's a lot of stuff. We have to go through a lot to make it. When my dad came here, he was nothing. Like we were all nothing. Now we've grown up to be something ... We went through racism. So many people were like, “oh, what are these people doing here?”

According to Mithun, racism remains the biggest problem facing the Tamil community in Montréal. He points to the marginalization of the community and a distinct lack of respect that he experiences as a Sri Lankan Tamil-Canadian. He first recalls some of the general problems facing the Sri Lankan Tamil community and then narrates a personal anecdote that reveals the frustration and anger instilled by racism:

In Montréal, our biggest problem is that ... we're not first into our society [sic]. White people are better than us ... Even one guy, he studied engineering in Sri Lanka and he came here and now he's dishwashing ... Here, everything is harder because of our culture. We're not white ... When I talk they're like, “your English is different” ... One guy when I went to a club, He was like, “No Pakis aloud,” and I was like, “whoa what is this? First of all I'm not a Paki, I'm a Sri Lankan.” He just wanted to say none of our people are aloud. It was like horrible, you know. So we went back and trashed that place. Literally we did. We trashed the place down.

Even though in this story, Tamils band together to avenge discrimination, Mithun also believes that circumstantial discontent can turn “brown people” against each other. In terms of the education system, Mithun argues that “brown people” must work harder in order to prove themselves. Unfortunately, this sense of struggle, this need to surpass others can translate into

intra-communal violence. As Mithun explains, “Now, we’re getting more fierce ... In the Toronto area, there are gangs of brown guys ... The funny thing is white guys they don’t fight each other. Brown guys we fight each other ... Brown guys, like, we’ll fight our own people ... Brown people, they want to be better than other brown guys. They wanna think like, ‘I could beat him. That’s why.’”

Mithun believes that worshipping Ayyappan can help alleviate some of the problems he faces as a young Tamil man in Canada, and that it can also be helpful for Tamils as a community. Worshipping Ayyappan allows Mithun to build confidence, accrue respect, and assert his identity as a Tamil-Canadian. For Mithun, *viratam* is a foil to the racism and discrimination he faces, encouraging him and allowing him to face the world with increased confidence. Because performing the *viratam* is difficult, it endows Mithun with a sense of accomplishment; he feels he can face any challenges presented to him. He explains:

When you’re doing it, you feel like, “oh, I went through all that difficulty.” When you make it to the top, you feel so happy. I went through all this stuff, so why can’t I go through life? You feel like, I could do that too in life. Some people feel like, “oh I want to kill myself.” They have to go through work. Some kids don’t go study. If I could beat that, I could beat life. Life is nothing. I swear, when I went through that, I think life is nothing, you know. You feel like in your head, oh I could beat life. If you go through that thing, you feel like you could beat anything. You’re invincible.

For Mithun, the discouragement of discrimination is offset by the respect both performing the *viratam* and acting as the temple’s *pūcāri* provide him. While he may find himself disrespected in the wider milieu of Montréal society, his ritual performances at the temple make him revered within the Tamil community, and even gain him greater respect within his family. Although he is adamantly opposed to my use of the word “proud” to describe him or his family because of its implied egoism, he is extremely content with his role as the temple *pūcāri*:

Now I feel like people notice me more. It's true ... Before I was like people didn't notice me ... Tamil people. They know my dad, but not me. Now everyone notices me. I come here and do the *pūjā*. They give me more respect. I feel like, I feel like, I don't know how to say it, I feel better inside, you know. I feel like people depend on me. I should come everyday here. I feel like I'm important. Like it changed me a lot. You know before nobody cares if I don't come ... who cares? Now I feel like ... I should come. Right now I'm so tired, but my mom's like, "You have to come." Everybody calls me. I'm younger than all the people, but they respect me more ... My family respects me more when I take the *mālai*. More what I say goes in the house ... Before nobody cared about me and all that.

Part of the reason that Mithun has begun to gain respect in the community is the public's understanding of him as a genuine Ayyappan *bhakta*. His love for and devotion to Ayyappan confirm his identity as an upright Tamil man. Rather than a Vanier student who accepts the forces of cultural assimilation and does not know how to read Tamil, he comes to be seen, both by himself and by others, as an ideal Tamil man. Through ritual performance he constructs his identity as a traditional Tamil *bhakta*, and in doing so distances himself from actions and habits typical of non-Tamil men his age. As it does for Kuganesan, the performance of the *viratam* allows Mithun to emerge from Canadian cultural norms and to immerse himself in his Tamil identity, an immersion that has redemptive possibilities. As he explains, "Now ... I don't go clubbing, I don't party a lot like before." Mithun also asserts his authenticity as a *bhakta* through his willingness to contribute substantially to the temple operation. On several occasions I have witnessed him depositing impressive donations into the temple coffer. Like Ayyappan himself, who spent his life reviving the temple at Śabarimalai, Mithun wishes to put his religious duties above all others, including marriage. Mithun's view on marriage also reflects the renunciatory drive of the Nāyanārs. Hoping to illustrate the idea of *bhakti* to me, Mithun proclaims:

You don't believe me, I told my mom that even if I made forty-five million, I'd give it all to the temple. I just want it to grow. You feel better inside. I always tell my mom that it makes me so happy. I always tell my mom that when I grow up I'm gonna get a good job

like a business man and I'll make all this money for Ayappan. I always tell my mom, I'll never get married. My mom's always like, "Oh sure." But it's true; I'm crazy about Ayappan. It's the way I am ...

As he adopts the traditional role of the *bhakta*, Mithun becomes empowered through his connections to the Tamil community at large. He becomes immersed in a wide, male Tamil body (Osella and Osella 2003, 747). He identifies with Tamil men in Toronto as well as in South Asia, who undergo similar experiences in their ritual expressions of *bhakti*. The transnational sense of community Mithun establishes through the propitiation of Ayyappan also establishes a sense of camaraderie with Tamil men in the Montréal area, slackening the tensions between "brown people" he discusses above. Mithun claims that performing *viratam* fosters the development of friendships between him and the other participants. In his words, "It brings us closer. I never knew Thangavelu-*cāmi*. I never knew Mohan-*cāmi* ... Now we're like closer. We're like *cāmis*; we talk to each other ... Before I didn't even know them. We talk about Ayyappan a lot. We get more close [sic]." Since he began propitiating Ayyappan, Mithun spends more time with his Sri Lankan Tamil friends. He suggests that this is because they understand the restrictions he is under as an Ayyappan devotee. Ultimately, the worship of Ayyappan allows Mithun to reify his identity as a young Sri Lankan Tamil man.

In further explicating the process of the *viratam*, Mithun reveals experiences of emotional liberation that are similar to those described by Kuganesan. For Mithun, too, the performance of the *viratam* is a type of ritual death allowing him temporary reprieve from daily and perennial problems. Thinking about Ayyappan frees him from worry and anxiety. As he explains:

When I take the *mālai*, I'll be thinking of Ayyappan always. Nothing else goes through my head. Nothing else comes and nothing goes out, just Ayyappan only. I think of

Ayyappaṇ all the time when I put the *mālai*. You feel really happy when you put the *mālai*. You feel more calm and happy. You feel like calm. Even if you have a debt, you're like, "who cares?" You're so happy, you don't know. If you only take the *mālai*, you feel like that. You feel so happy. It's like you're in a different world.

Finally, while Mithun seems to gain a lot from both performing the *viratam* and acting as the temple's *pūcāri*, his hopes for the temple's future include passing his duties along to a Brahmin *arcakar*. Like Thangavelu and Kuganesan, his understanding of the caste hierarchy is dubious. On the one hand, he asserts that Ayyappaṇ devotees are blind to caste; on the other hand, he proclaims the elevated status of his own *cāti* and argues that the temple is in need of an *arcakar*. His composite view reflects his upbringing as a Sri Lankan Tamil-Canadian. He both condemns caste and subscribes to it. When I approached the question of his own *cāti*, Mithun responded, "We don't look at *cāti*, Ayyappaṇ [devotees] ... But ... some of us do. Like my *cāti* is good, you know. It's one thing I know; I know my *cāti* is good. We're like the top, but before us is Ayyar [Brahmin]." He went on to express a sense of disdain for Brahmins, many of whom he finds money-hungry; however, he hopes to hire a Brahmin for the temple in order to endow it with more legitimacy and to attract more devotees. Mithun claims:

Ayyappaṇ can be run without a priest, but the people, our society, won't take it ... Here in our society ... in Montréal ... we need a priest to run our temple. If not, people are not going to come. They're not going to care. They'll think, "we can come and do it too, anyone can do it." They feel like the priest can talk to the god with his *mantirams* and no one else can. They feel they [Brahmins] are ... cleaner in the heart. I feel like we [Vēḷāḷars] are ... cleaner in the heart, these days. Priests are more for the money. I personally feel that we don't need priests. If we get a priest, more people will come.

Mithun's resolution to hire a Brahmin priest will, I believe, adversely affect *cāmis* such as Thangavelu, Kuganesan, and even Mithun himself by distancing them from their beloved deity. Although they may still be able to assert their Tamil identities through the performance of *viratam*, the fact that Ayyappaṇ will be literally out of their hands will certainly detract from the

respect and self-confidence they accrue through their ritual practices. Their attempts to embody Ayyappaṇ on a tri-weekly basis will likely be relegated to the annual festival, and the authority of their knowledge will be usurped. While Mithun assures me that hiring a Brahmin will not isolate him from the deity because his father finances the temple, I suspect that the shift will relegate male Vēḷāḷar *bhakti* to the background, where it tends to be located in other temples in Montréal.

For now, however, the ritual culture of the Montreal Sri Aiyappaṇ Temple enables Vēḷāḷar men to construct masculine identities according to traditional and modern paradigms. While practitioners fashion themselves as “modern men” who have assimilated to life in Canada, their ritual performances also link them to more traditional masculine ideals, such as selfless devotion. Their performances both weave them into the roots of renunciatory Tamil masculinity, likening them to Ayyappaṇ himself, and establish new roots here in Montréal.

## Conclusion

Although *kāvaṭi* and *viratam* involve divergent physical components and occur in two different ritual contexts, they are both venues for the negotiation and expression of non-Brahmin Tamil masculinities in the diaspora. I have argued that issues of identity are at the core of these Tamil ritual productions. Performed almost exclusively by non-Brahmin men, *kāvaṭi* and *viratam* are attempts to reconstruct masculine identities which have been fragmented by marginalization in Sri Lanka and Canada, and by the dissonance between idealizations of “tradition” and “modernity.” Having experienced the turbulent trajectory of events in Sri Lanka, and migrated to Canada as refugees, Tamil men in Montréal are not bound together by a static, uncontested identity. Through ritual performances, however, they attempt to establish a sense of wholeness. They fashion themselves as traditional masculine figures in order to locate themselves on the stable ground of Tamil heritage. But they also envision *kāvaṭi* and *viratam* as testaments to their modernity. They often explain the practices through Western scientific epistemologies. In their attempts to reconcile vexed identities through ritual performance, men incorporate the nostalgia of the past and the potential of the future, ultimately, producing new Tamil masculinities.

This thesis is primarily an ethnographic work, supplemented by analyses of literary, cultural, and political history. I have employed a wide variety of resources, exploring a number of complex and intersecting issues which were brought to my attention by a total of thirteen male informants. In extensive conversations about Tamil culture, my informants pointed me to the particular historical moments that resonate most deeply for them. The organization of the thesis was roughly diachronic, largely in order to illuminate the way idealized constructions of

masculinity are rooted in real social histories that continue to reverberate in the memories and imaginations of Tamil men.

In Chapter One, I examined Tamil literary works from the ancient and medieval periods, and located the heroic male figures who many of my informants valorize. I analyzed warrior-heroes and kings in the Caṅkam anthologies in order to illuminate the reasons behind their idealization. Both courageous and indubitably selfless, they are lauded because they sacrifice themselves to protect and perpetuate the kingdom. While their brave acts of warfare are always carried out with the intent of helping others, they brim with the violence and potential danger of excessive virility. Similarly, in Tamil *bhakti* literature the Nāyaṇārs are selfless to the extent of self-mortification. The superfluity of their masculine power, however, is channeled into their love for Śiva and the Śaiva community. Whether it is the kingdom or the Śaiva community, ideal Tamil men in early literary works are courageous, selfless protectors.

Despite the predominance of images of muscular, protective masculinity in early literature, Sri Lankan Tamil men also relate to more modern conceptions of masculinity. The impact of the Śaiva reform movement in late colonial Jaffna led to the idealization of the “modern Tamil man,” who is defined more by his pen than by his sword. According to these understandings, the paradigmatic Tamil man is educated, Westernized, and duly “refined.” In closing Chapter One, I argued that from at least the nineteenth century, Tamil masculine identity has been complicated by the rhetoric of modernity.

Having established the multivalent and dissonant nature of Tamil masculinity in the late colonial period, I shifted the discussion to an investigation of Sri Lanka’s recent political history. In Chapter Two, I argued that the ethnic conflict fragments the identities of diasporic Sri Lankan

Tamil men in a number of ways. Exploring the political events from the closing decades of British rule in the mid-twentieth century to the mid-1980s, I highlighted the exclusion of Tamils from the nation. As Tamil men were denied political and cultural voices, and faced physical attacks carried out against their community, self-images of protective altruistic heroism, “refinement,” and modernity often came under significant pressure. At the same time, new, more militarized voices emerged from the Tamil nationalist movement. The LTTE deploys constructions of masculinity that simultaneously rest on the imagery of the “sacred” Tamil past, and propel the Eelam nation into the future. The leadership of the LTTE has drawn on the figures and lessons of Caṅkam and *bhakti* literature in order to incite Tamil men to sacrifice themselves on the battlefields of contemporary Sri Lanka. For men in the diaspora failures to answer such battle calls cause significant anxiety. Many fear that they are not “man enough” to fulfill their duties as Tamil men. Early literature, discourses of reform, and recent political events foment the fragmentation of Tamil male identity.

Through an in-depth analysis of personal narratives, and through my own observation of ritual, I analyzed the ways in which fragmentation is expressed through ritual performances. In Chapter Three, I argued that the physical and metaphysical elements of *kāvaṇi* allow men to incorporate (literally) what they believe to be traditional masculine ideals. Courageously undergoing self-mortification to protect their families, men posit themselves as warrior-heroes and fervent *bhaktas*. At the same time, many strive to integrate the tenets of modernity into their ritual performances. Chapter Four also addressed the expressions of masculinity embedded in ritual performance. In unpacking the statements’ of my informants, I argued that performances of *viratam* are understood as returns to primordial forms of Tamil masculinity which garner great

spiritual authority. On the other hand, *viratam* establishes new masculine identities for non-Brahmin Sri Lankan Tamil men. Performances of *viratam* are assertions of ritual power that draw their authority from renunciation, as non-Brahmin men usurp roles ordinarily reserved for *arcakars*. In a pilgrimage to the imagined past, *kāvaṭi* and *viratam* attempt to make the Tamil male body whole. Fragmented identity is not, however, solidly reconstructed in any permanent way. Votive rites fail to reintegrate or fully integrate individuals, who remain “compound[s] of disparate identities” (Nabokov 2000, 15).

Efforts to solidify identity also occur on the collective level. Performances of *kāvaṭi* and *viratam* are components of overarching endeavors to construct a familiar religious and cultural setting in the diasporic milieu. Ritual productions recreate Sri Lankan Tamil norms and social values in Canada, and speak particularly to conceptions of traditional Tamil masculinity. The large scale and spectacular nature of *kāvaṭi* and *viratam* – at the Montreal Murugan Temple’s annual festival and at the Montreal Sri Aiyappan Temple’s *viratam* celebrations – idealizes the men who perform them. This process of glorification creates a unified impression of archetypal Tamil masculinity. Moreover, as religious events are thought to recreate the “sacred heritage” of Tamil civilization, the men whose ritual productions are at the heart of the festivities are thought to embody authentic, unadulterated Tamil masculinity. Impressions of unity and stability, however, are just that. While some see trying votive rites as the apogee of Tamil masculinity, others argue that such practices diverge from the ancient values of Tamil culture. Within the community, there is no singular “Tamil masculinity.” Rather there are several conflicting, even competing, Tamil masculinities.

While performers of *kāvaṭi* and *viratam* cannot fully integrate themselves or their community into a seamless whole, their attempts to bridge the past and present do carry significant meaning at the individual level. Personal catharsis is enacted because Sri Lankan Tamil men in Canada translate their ruptured identities into performative narratives. In doing so, they cognitively and somatically incorporate masculine sensibilities, both old and new. Through pain-inflicting ritual performances, they articulate the ancient Tamil belief that in blood and death the sacred power that generates life becomes manifest. Like the spilled blood of Caṅkam-period warrior-heroes and the self-induced suffering of the Nāyanārs, the blood that drips from the hooks inserted during *kāvaṭi* and the hunger pains produced during rigorous fasting enrich the new Tamil-Canadian landscape. By reproducing Tamil values and socializing young members of the community, men's ritual performances create new life that is shaped by the old "order of things" [Figures 19 and 20]. At the same time, performances of *kāvaṭi* and *viratam* express masculine values that are specific to the contemporary Canadian context. Through their ritual practices, Sri Lankan Tamil men assert their upward social mobility. They affirm their status as modern non-Brahmin ritual practitioners whose authority is based solely on merit, rather than on inherited social privilege.

Through an analysis of masculinity, this thesis has aimed to provide a nuanced understanding of the political, social, and religious identities of Sri Lankan Tamils in Canada's "multi-cultural mosaic." While Canada has been considered a beacon of social egalitarianism since the promulgation of multiculturalism in the 1970s, the testimonies of my informants and recent political events in Québec point to the realities of continued exclusion. In February 2007, Québec Premier Jean Charest set the wheels in motion on the *Consultation Commission*

*on Accommodation Practices Related to Cultural Differences*. The commission set out to investigate the question of “reasonable accommodation” and, specifically, when it becomes unreasonable. The question is fundamentally a legal one, but the debate clearly extends throughout the Canadian social fabric: to what extent should a culture accommodate immigrant customs and religious practices? The furor caused by the commission and the controversy surrounding it suggests that Canada’s dream of multiculturalism is less harmonious than many believe.

For the Tamil community in Montréal, assimilation is a difficult demand, but one which they must come to grips with at every turn. Tamil men in particular face a crisis of identity; while their homeland in Sri Lanka is plagued by conflict and their cultural traditions are under perpetual threat, their social, economic, and cultural positions in Canada are anything but stable. When the community comes together to worship and to remember, these uncertainties and instabilities emerge in the form of ritual practices that attempt to salve the wounds of difference.

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**APPENDIX 1**  
**Ethical Approval Certificate, McGill University**



**Research Ethics Board Office**  
McGill University  
845 Sherbrooke Street West  
James Administration Bldg., rm 419  
Montreal, QC H3A 2T5

Tel: (514) 398-6831  
Fax: (514) 398-4644  
Ethics website: [www.mcgill.ca/researchoffice/compliance/human/](http://www.mcgill.ca/researchoffice/compliance/human/)

**Research Ethics Board I**  
**Certificate of Ethical Acceptability of Research Involving Humans**

**REB File #:** 115-1007

**Project Title:** Reconstructing Subjectivity through Ritual Recollection: Religious Ritual and Identity among Sri Lankan Tamils in Montreal

**Principal Investigator:** Victoria Gross

**Department:** Faculty of Religious Studies

**Status:** Master's student

**Supervisor:** Prof. Davesh Soneji

**Funding agency and title:** N/A

**Expedited Review** ☒

This project was reviewed on October 10, 2007 by

**Full Review** ☐

Elaine Weiner, Ph.D.  
Acting Chair, REB I

**Approval Period:** October 2, 2007 to October 11, 2008

This project was reviewed and approved in accordance with the requirements of the McGill University Policy on the Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Human Subjects and with the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct For Research Involving Humans

\*All research involving human subjects requires review on an annual basis. A Request for Renewal form should be submitted at least one month before the above expiry date.

\*If a project has been completed or terminated and ethics approval is no longer required, a Final Report form must be submitted.

\*Should any modification or other unanticipated development occur before the next required review, the REB must be informed and any modification can't be initiated until approval is received.

APPENDIX 2  
Images

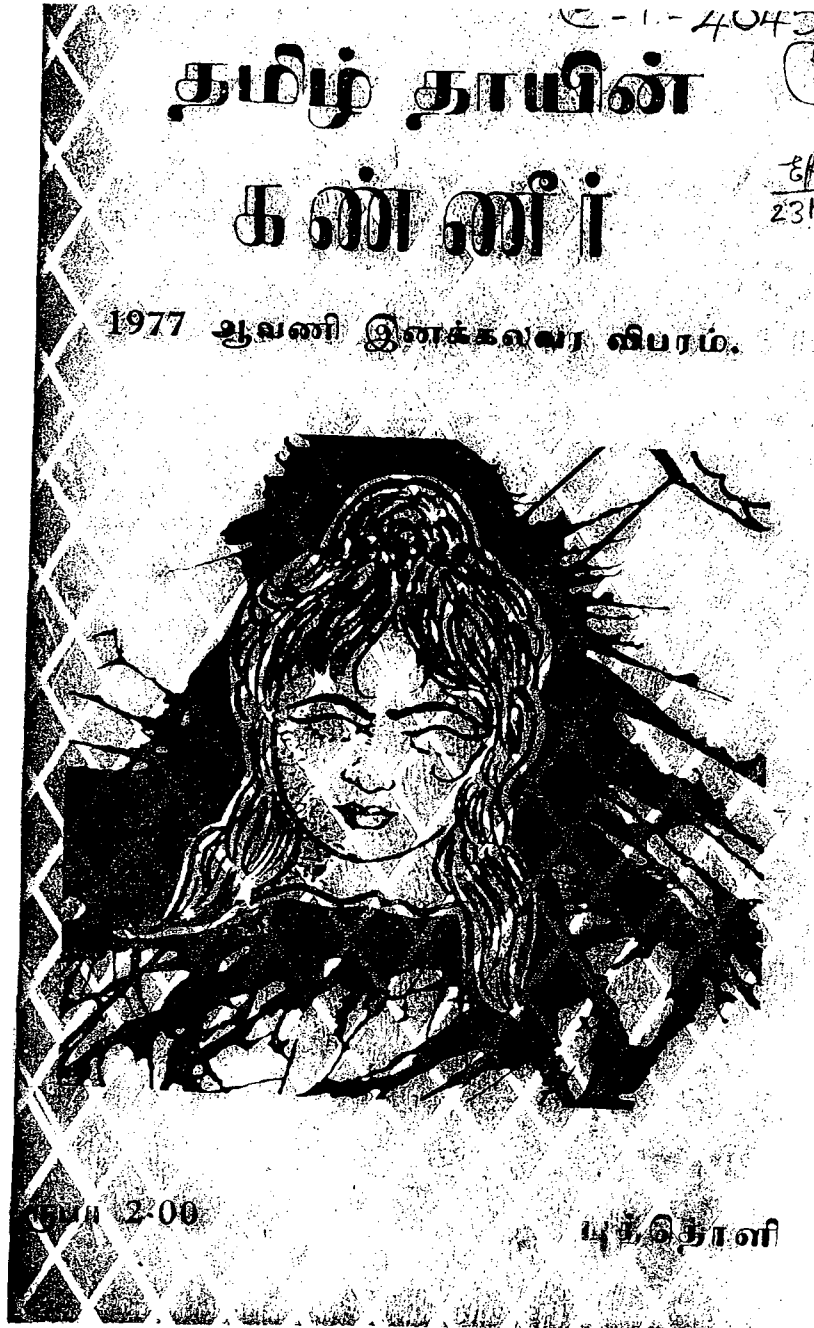
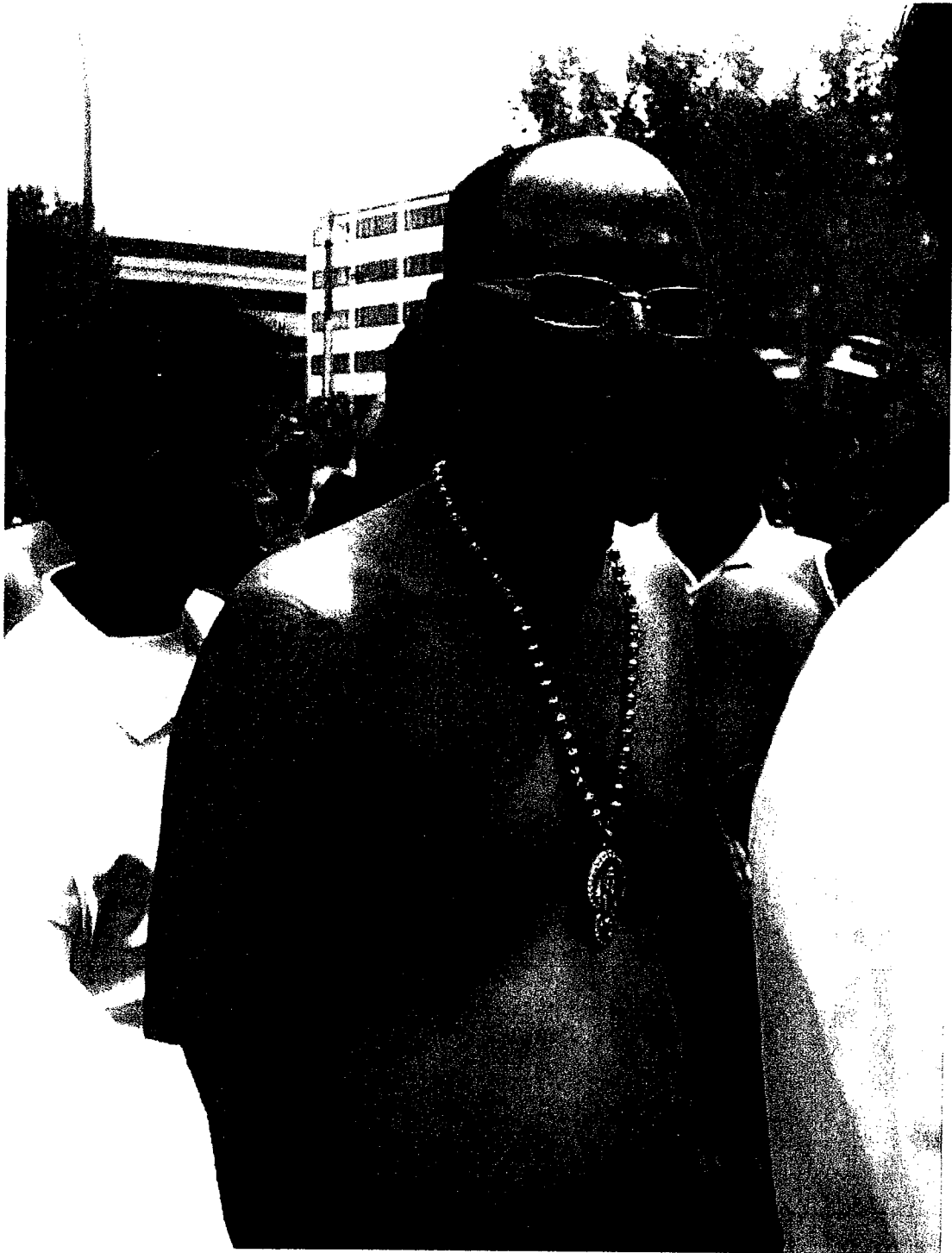


Figure 1

Illustration of *Tamiltāy* on cover of Puttoli's *Tamiltāyin Kaṇṇīr*  
("The Tears of *Tamiltāy*")



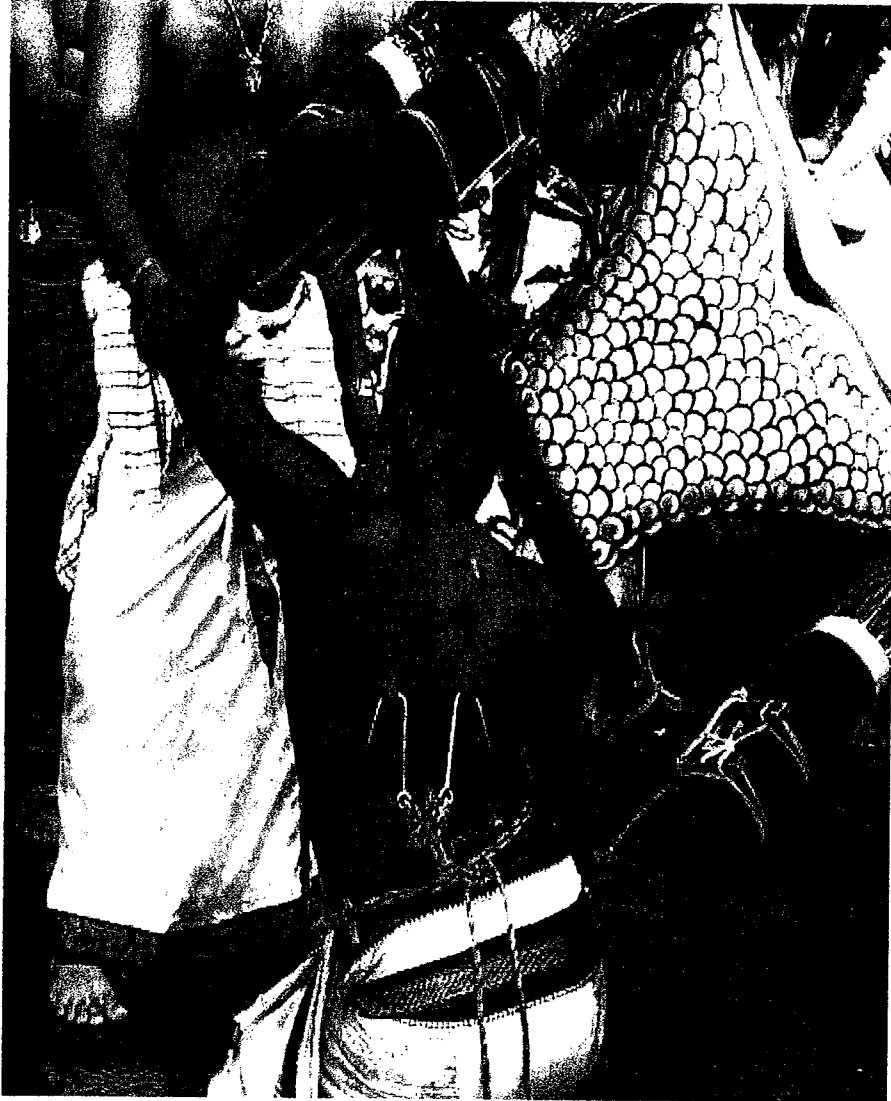
**Figure 2**

Man displays Tamil Tiger tattoo  
Montreal Durkai Amman Temple Festival, 17 June 2008  
(Photo by Author)



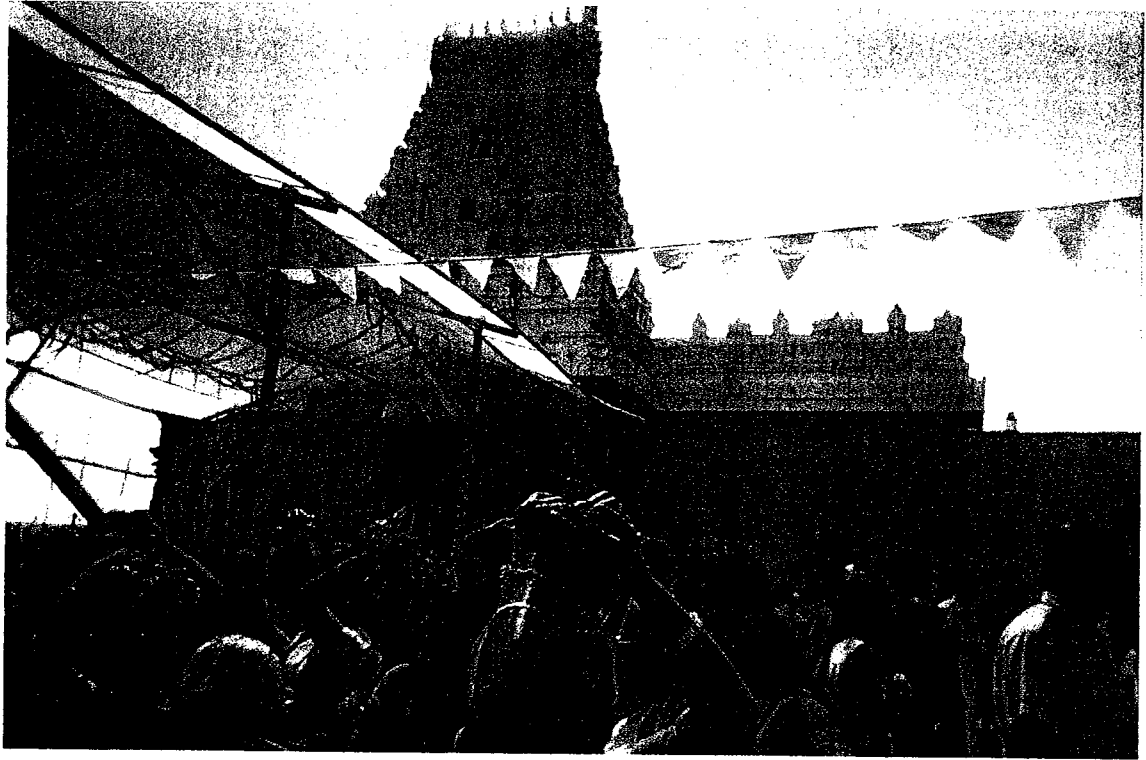
**Figure 3**

Men dance ecstatically as they perform *kāvati*  
Montreal Murugan Temple Festival, 16 August 2008  
(Photo by Author)



**Figure 4**

Hooks inserted during *kāvai*  
Montreal Durkai Amman Temple Festival, 17 June 2008  
(Photo by Author)



**Figure 5**  
Montreal Murugan Temple Festival, 16 August 2008  
Dollard des Ormeaux, Québec  
(Photo by Author)



**Figure 6**

Kannan (left) assists another man in the performance of *kāvai*  
Montreal Murugan Temple Festival, 16 August 2008  
(Photo by Author)

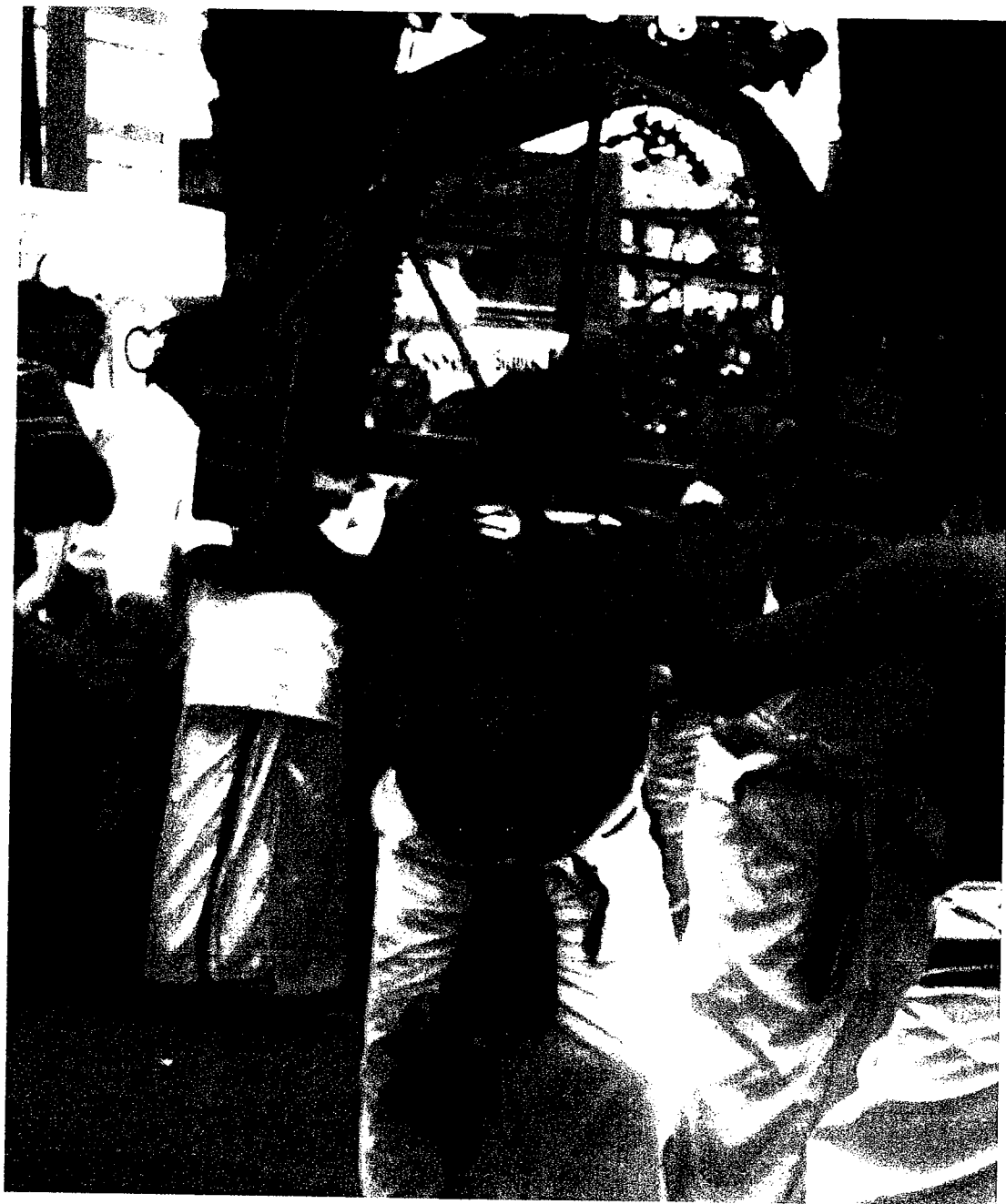


Figure 7

Mohan performs *kāvaṭi* (with additional facial piercing)  
Montreal Durkai Amman Temple Festival, 17 June 2008  
(Photo by Author)



**Figure 8**

Vinoth (right) assists another man in the performance of *kāvaṭi*  
Montreal Durkai Amman Temple Festival, 17 June 2008  
(Photo by Author)



**Figure 9**

Sutha (left) assists another man in the performance of *kāvai*  
Montreal Murugan Temple Festival, 16 August 2008  
(Photo by Author)



**Figure 10**

Two men perform *tākkukkāvaṭi* (hookswinging) with assistance  
Montreal Murugan Temple Festival, 16 August 2008  
(Photo by Author)



**Figure 11**

Man performs *tūkkukkāvaṭi* (hookswinging) with assistance  
Montreal Murugan Temple Festival, 16 August 2008  
(Photo by Author)



**Figure 12**

Rajkumar (right) performs *kāvati*  
Montreal Murugan Temple Festival, 16 August 2008  
(Photo by Author)



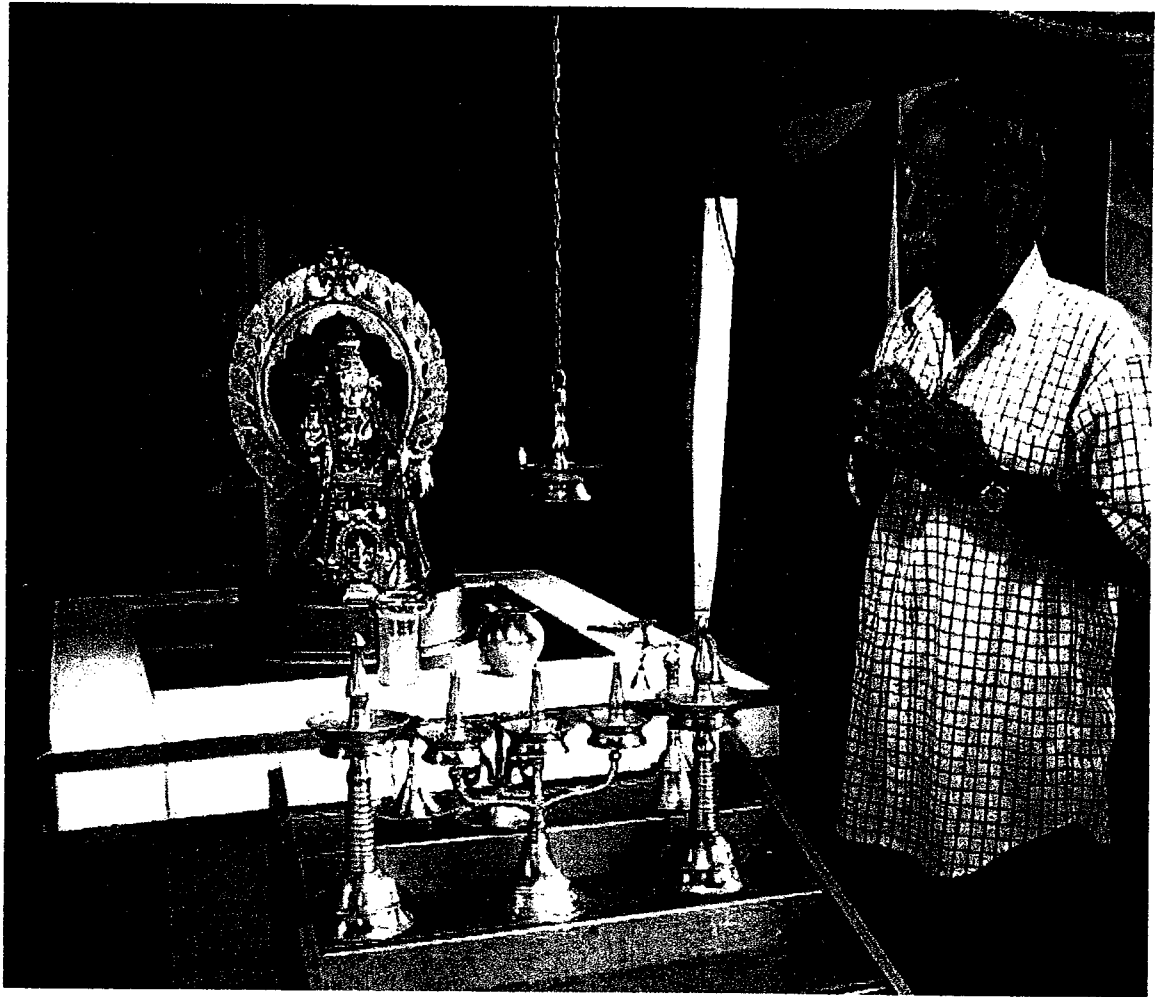
Figure 13

Lithograph of Ayyappan  
Montreal Sri Aiyappan Temple  
(Photo by Author)



**Figure 14**

Men propitiating the deity  
Montreal Sri Aiyappan Temple  
(Photo by Author)



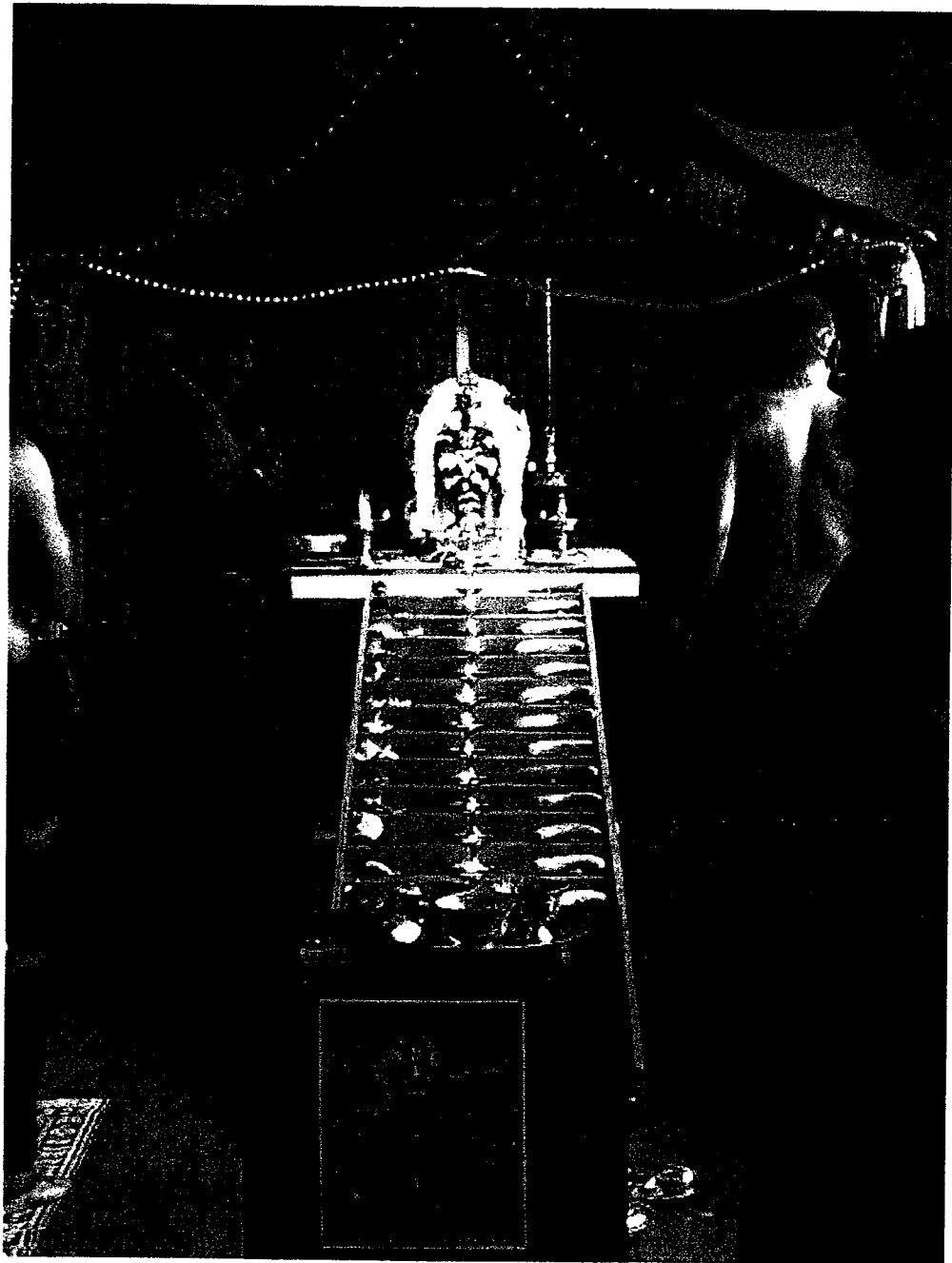
**Figure 15**

Thangavelu  
Montreal Sri Aiyappan Temple  
(Photo by Author)



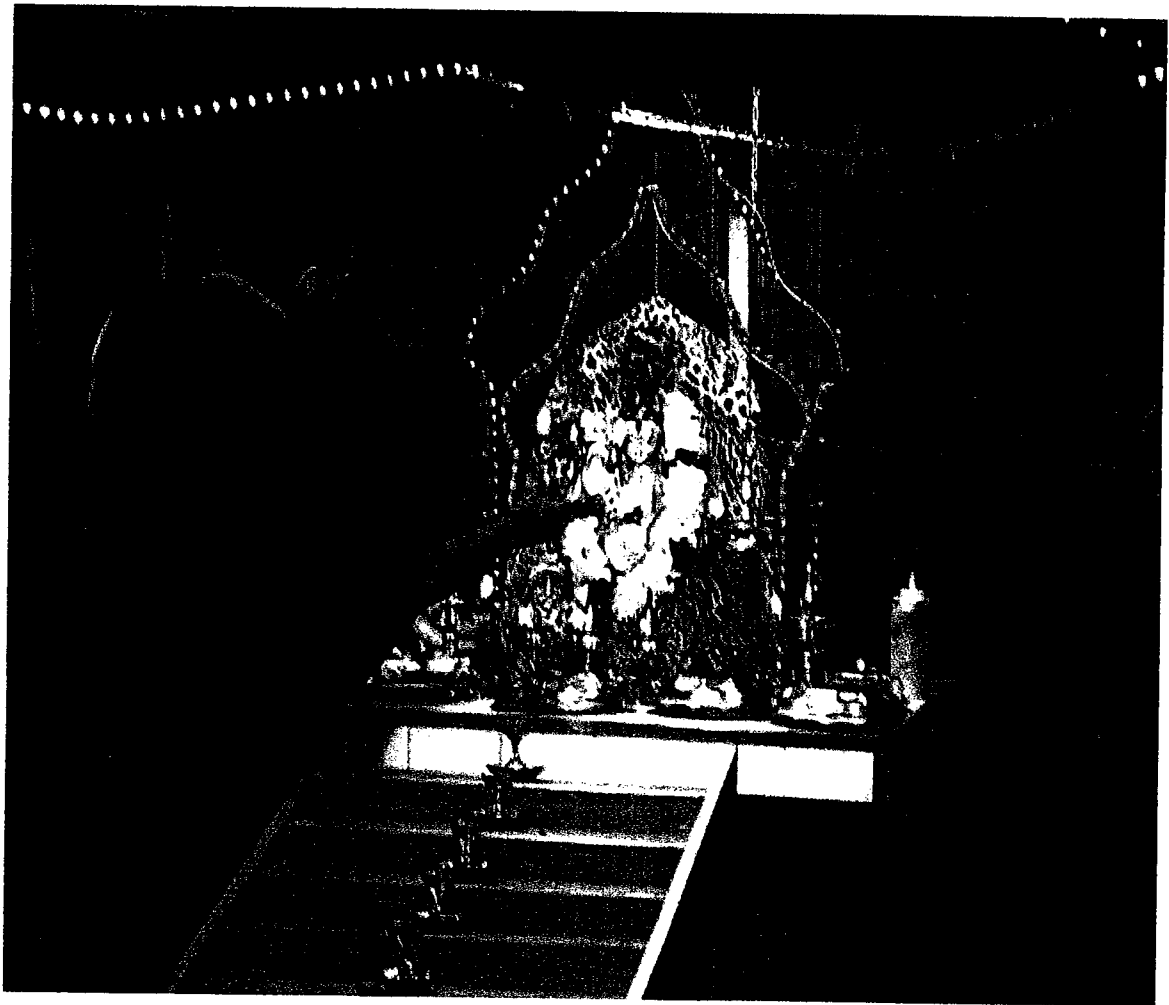
Figure 16

Kuganesan lights a votive candle for Ayyappan  
Montreal Sri Aiyappan Temple  
(Photo by Author)



**Figure 17**

Mithun performs *pūjā*  
Montreal Sri Aiyappan Temple  
(Photo by Author)



**Figure 18**

Mithun propitiates the deity  
Montreal Sri Aiyappan Temple  
(Photo by Author)



Figure 19

Mohan's second son performs *kāvai* (without piercing)  
Montreal Murugan Temple Festival, 16 August 2008  
(Photo by Author)



Figure 20

Mohan's third son performs *kāvai* (without piercing)  
Montreal Murugan Temple Festival, 16 August 2008  
(Photo by Author)