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# The goddess of the tea estates: Hindu traditions and community boundaries in the up-country of Sri Lanka

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Annual festivals to the Hindu goddess Mariyamman are the largest events that Up-country Tamils organise for themselves, and they invest tremendous amounts of time, effort, money and meaning into these celebrations. Up-country Tamils are descendants of South Indian migrants, who came between the 1870s and 1930s to work on tea plantations in the island's central highlands, or up-country. In this article, I focus on how the various rituals, ceremonies and processions that take place during tea plantation festivals mark external and internal community boundaries. Through the performance of these rituals, Up-country Tamils make meaningful sacred places for themselves in the diaspora out of Sri Lankan spaces. In doing so, Up-country Tamil communities not only differentiate themselves from neighbouring communities of fellow Up-country Tamils, but also from their elders' and ancestors' communities, through the transformation of Hindu traditions. By looking at the planning and execution of such ritual activities, including when things did not happen as planned, I show how Up-country Tamils understand internal differences, especially along caste lines, and construct their cultural heritage, while presenting a common front to outsiders, whether Sinhalese or Jaffna Tamils. Though outwardly religious, these festivals have become embedded expressions of ethnic identification in the up-country. Some of the ritual practices of these festivals, such as hook-swinging, are rarely practiced in India today, yet have become central to the performance of Up-country Tamil ethnic identification and cultural heritage in the diaspora.

## Introduction

Every year, during February and March, residents of nearly every tea plantation in the up-

country of Sri Lanka hold a festival for Mariyamman, the Tamil Hindu goddess of smallpox and other infectious diseases. Tamil Hindu festivals, such as this, seek to turn away the anger of Mariyamman's malevolent side and attract her beneficence in the form of the protection and health of the community. Tamils conduct Hindu festivals for similar reasons throughout South India, and so does the Tamil diaspora, but, in the up-country of Sri Lanka, these festivals have taken on new meanings in relation to other ethnic and religious communities. Annual Mariyamman festivals are the largest events that Up-country Tamils organise for themselves, and they invest tremendous amounts of time, effort, money and meaning into these celebrations.

Up-country Tamils are descendants of South Indian migrants who came to Sri Lanka between the 1870s and 1930s to work on tea estates, as plantations are called in Sri Lankan English, in the island's central highlands, or up-country (Bass 2012). Though officially labelled 'Indian Tamils' since the 1910s, they have recently developed their own identity as 'Up-country Tamils.' In contrast to their official name, which links them to their country of ancestral origin, their self-identification connects this ethnic community to the places where they have lived and worked for generations.

Although slavery was abolished throughout the British Empire in 1834, slave-like working conditions in colonial capitalist enterprises did not disappear for the millions of Indians who migrated to work on plantations from the 1830s to the 1930s. Sugar was the major plantation crop in Fiji, Mauritius, Trinidad and Guyana, while rubber dominated in Malaysia and tea was the primary crop in Sri Lanka. Unlike the individual migration of indentured servants to sugar plantations in Fiji, Mauritius, Trinidad and Guyana, migration to Sri Lanka was coordinated by *kankanis*, from the Tamil for supervisor. *Kankanis* were sub-contractors who managed all aspects of labour recruitment, migration and management on the plantation. The use of contract labour encouraged family migration, as did the designation of certain tasks on the estates, such as plucking tea, as women's work.

Up-country Tamils have made a name for themselves on an island beset by decades of ethnic conflict, just as they have made a place for themselves within Sri Lanka's extremely contested spaces. Up-country Tamils have faced discrimination since their arrival on the island and lost an official sense of belonging soon after Sri Lanka's independence in 1948. Parliament's passage of a series of laws in 1948 and 1949, known collectively as the Citizenship Acts, effectively denied citizenship to Up-country Tamils, who then represented most of all Tamils on the island. After several agreements between the Sri Lankan and Indian governments, approximately 40% of Up-country Tamils 'repatriated' to India between 1967 and 1983, though they were 'returning' to a country they never knew. Those that remained in Sri Lanka gradually lost contact with their relatives who repatriated, just as those who went to India, especially the younger generation, gradually came to assimilate into mainstream Tamil society, despite many major early obstacles (Bass 2012: 164-185).

Ever since the Up-country Tamils' migration to Sri Lanka generations ago, their fellow islanders have frequently seen them as insufficiently Sri Lankan and have denied them the most basic of rights and services. 'It is thus remarkable,' Stanley Tambiah (1986: 66) wrote, 'that an island that has experienced waves of South Indian migrants through the centuries, and in time incorporated them into the local Sinhalese framework or into the indigenous Tamil fold, should have so decisively branded its most recent immigrants as foreign.'

In this article, I focus on how the various rituals, ceremonies and processions that take place during tea estate festivals express and reinforce community identities and boundaries, both social and physical. Through the performance of Hindu rituals, Up-country Tamils make meaningful diasporic sacred places out of Sri Lankan spaces. In doing so, Up-country Tamil communities not only differentiate themselves from neighbouring communities of fellow Up-country Tamils, but also from their elders' and ancestors' communities, through the transformation of Hindu traditions. By looking at the planning and execution of such ritual activities, including when things did not happen as planned, I show how Up-country Tamils understand internal differences, based on caste, class, region and religion, and construct their cultural heritage, while presenting a common front to outsiders, whether Sinhalese or Jaffna Tamils, as Up-country Tamils refer to those officially designated as 'Sri Lankan Tamils'.

Religious change over generations in the diaspora is not necessarily a shift from an inherited, cultural baseline or a modernisation of tradition, but, rather, variations within a universe of discourses and practices in which new religious forms make sense to participants (Kelly 1988: 41). I therefore analyse the 'metamorphosis' of such diasporic developments, rather than articulating the extent of cultural retention and change (Jayaram 2011: 8). Notions of tradition try to freeze a part of the past in the present, implicitly valuing certain cultural expressions over others. The labelling of something as "traditional" imbues it 'with positive and edifying value and cultural authenticity, regardless of the actual history, vintage, or derivation of the thing or concept in question' (Robertson 1991: 38). Ironically, this branding as tradition often causes major changes to 'traditional' cultural practices, as is the case with Up-country Tamils in Sri Lanka.

Each tea estate, and often each division of an estate, in the up-country has its own Mariyamman temple, just as neighbouring villages in Tamil Nadu each have their own temple with their own Mariyamman to protect them. While some South Indian villages have several Mariyamman temples, one for each main caste and one for the whole village, estate temples in Sri Lanka tend not to be divided by caste. About three-fourths of Up-country Tamils are *Paraiyans*, *Cakkliyans*, *Pallans* or other lower *Dalit* castes. While some castes may be dominant numerically, and therefore politically, on certain estates, they tend not to have greater economic power, as is often the case in Tamil villages. Up-country Tamils who live in towns near the estates, such as Hatton or Talawakelle, tend to be upper caste, and they attend their own Hindu temples in town. In this way, caste

and class divisions map onto differences between urban and estate-dwelling Up-country Tamils.

The majority of Up-country Tamils are Hindus, though approximately 10% are Christian, mostly Catholic, who participate in Mariyamman festivals as well. By enacting Hindu rituals, embodying the goddess and leading festival processions, Up-country Tamils claim spaces in Sri Lanka as places that belong to them and to their divine protector, Mariyamman. Over time, these annual communal activities, while explicitly Hindu, have facilitated the development of a distinct place-based ethnic identification with the up-country, superseding religious or caste identities.

Tea estates in the up-country of Sri Lanka are usually large sprawling properties covering up to 1,000 hectares, with a resident population of several thousand people. About two-thirds of estate residents live in 'line rooms,' which are sets of four to twelve one-story homes with shared walls, like row houses, often with another set of line rooms sharing the rear walls. The size and condition of line rooms vary, but they can be as small as seventeen square metres, and most are at least several decades old and suffering from significant official neglect. Another third of estate residents live in newly built detached housing, which has been a priority of Up-country Tamil political parties in recent years. Estate workers receive the housing as a condition of employment. While Up-country Tamils increasingly try to find better-paying, higher-status work off the estates, often one member of the family continues to work on the estate, to retain this benefit.

Estate management was nearly entirely British in the colonial era, while Tamil *kankanis* took care of most of the day-to-day supervision of tea estate workers. In the 1970s, the Sri Lankan government nationalised estates, and estate management positions soon came to be dominated by Sinhalas, who often received these postings due to political patronage, rather than professional qualifications. In 1993, estates were privatised, and while the new plantation companies initially invested in the estates, which had faced major problems under government ownership, these investments were not sufficient. Today, most of the tea in Sri Lanka is grown in Sinhala-owned smallholdings in the low and mid-country, reflecting the neglect of up-country estates and the government's greater investment in smallholdings.

Estate workers have been unionised since the 1940s, but as Up-country Tamils started to regain their citizenship after the 1970s and 1980s, estate trade unions have come to relate to Up-country Tamils more as political parties than as unions (Bass 2012: 96-119). Estate unions still regularly negotiate with management over wages, which was raised to 730 rupees daily (about US\$5 at the time) in October 2016, but that remains a low daily wage in the face of an increasingly depreciating rupee and persistent inflation. Estate workers often become union members as a form of insurance, to guarantee assistance should any problems arise at home or at work.

While Up-country Tamils are the majority community in the up-country, Sinhalas retain economic and political power, although this has gradually been changing in the twenty-first century. Most Up-country Tamils speak some Sinhala, to communicate with estate management, government officials and shopkeepers. However, most Sinhalas in the up-country do not speak Tamil, except for some estate managers who have learnt some to 'talk tea' with their workers. During the civil war, Up-country Tamils often compared themselves favourably to Jaffna Tamils, stating that, unlike Tamils in the North and East, they got along well with Sinhalas. However, Up-country Tamils are cognisant that they remain second-class citizens, and this structural inequality has only increased since the end of the war in 2009, with increasing development in Colombo, but little economic investment in the up-country.

### The Localisation of Tradition

Annual goddess festivals are venues for asserting and redefining relations of inclusion and exclusion, indicating who belongs and who does not to a community (Mines 2005). While these identifications are tied to larger identities of caste, religion and ethnicity, they are primarily local events. Though Up-country Tamil festivals are often advertised with flyers and posters throughout the up-country, the majority of participants and audience are local estate residents served by the temple. While each estate festival marks a local community, physically through the various processions and socially through festival honours, Up-country Tamils frequently compare the size, length and entertainment value of the festivals at neighbouring estates.

Every Mariyamman temple celebrates festivals differently, though a common set of symbols and practices underlies the festival proceedings. Up-country Tamil Mariyamman festivals typically last three days, though a few last up to a week, depending on the estate's size and relative wealth. Paul Younger (2010: 70) describes a Mariyamman festival in Guyana that is almost identical in its ritual order and meaning to those that I observed in Sri Lanka. This resemblance not only reveals the deep roots of these Tamil Hindu symbols, but also how decades of practice within plantation systems have similarly shaped them. While the basic structure of Up-country Tamil Mariyamman festivals has much in common with other annual temple Tamil Hindu festivals, whether in Tamil Nadu, Jaffna or Malaysia, I focus on how Up-country Tamils interpret these festivals as expressions of their identification as a Sri Lankan community in contrast with others on the island.

The main feature at the start of estate Mariyamman festivals is the construction of one or more *karakams* (decorated ritual pots), and the selection of men to act as their carriers, all of which embody the goddess for the duration of the festival. The *karakam* building ceremony takes place in the middle of the night, near a water source, and signifies the ritual start of the festival. The other major parts of the festival are the celebratory processions on the final day. Leading the first procession are the *karakam*



carriers, followed by people doing various forms of devotional acts, including dancing with a *kavati* (a decorated arch carried on the shoulders), dancing in *cannatam* (entranced frenzy), sometimes after ritually piercing their cheeks, and *tukkam* (hook-swinging). This procession ends with a ceremony of *timiti* (fire-walking), wherein numerous residents traverse a bed of hot embers. The second procession brings the image of the goddess from the temple to all the homes in the division. At each house, residents perform a brief *puja* to the goddess and she gives her blessings to the household. This allows estate residents direct communication and interaction with the goddess. These processions are part of larger processes of making estates into Up-country Tamil places, imbued with the practice of Hindu rituals and protected by the goddess.

Changes in Up-country Tamil Hindu festivals and in the discourses of heritage, tradition and identity that surround them have not resulted from outside pressure to conform to hegemonic practices but arose as new meanings became attached to cultural practices through their performance in new places. In contrast, government authorities have regulated Tamil Hindu festival processions in Singapore so that the chariot processions are motorised, no music is played, and no stops are made en route (Sinha 2008: 162). Traditions are not 'lost' due to acculturation or commoditisation in the diaspora but are transformed when performed under new social conditions (Small 1997: 36). Up-country Tamils' symbolic and emotional attachments to certain cultural traditions as critical to their ethnic identification are neither a natural nor inevitable connection. Like Tamils' devotion to their language, these sentiments are 'produced under specific historical conditions, and as such (are) subject to negotiation and change' (Ramaswamy 1997: 246).

Transformations in Hindu festival processions are more than just 'detours, deviations and delays from a normative processional route' but reflect that 'the communities that typically lead ceremonial walks are changing as well and that the dramas (be they social or religious) enacted at processions are likewise evolving' (Clark-Decès 2008: 17). Up-country Tamil NGOs have facilitated many of the transformations through which Up-country Tamils have self-consciously developed a distinct cultural identity, which I discuss elsewhere (Bass 2012: 142-163). However, many changes in Hindu festivals result not from intentional political positioning in contrast to and in conversation with other ethnic groups on the island, but because of numerous small decisions resulting from the diasporic condition itself.

For example, on Sri Lankan tea estates, almost all the annual festivals dedicated to Mariyamman occur on weekends. Rather than celebrating Hindu rituals on the 'traditional' auspicious dates according to the Hindu lunar calendar, the festivals conform to the five-day workweek. Since estate management would not allow a missed day of work or a major shift in the work schedule, Up-country Tamils have moved their festival celebrations to the weekends, allowing estate workers to participate on their days off. The 'sacred' time orientation of Hindu temples is therefore made to coincide with the

‘secular’ calendar of the land where they are located (Narayanan 1992: 159). Additionally, the rescheduling allows people who have migrated to Colombo and elsewhere in the island to return home for the festival. These calendrical changes have a practical basis since estate workers do not have the power to alter the plantation work calendar, but also show how decades of practice on the tea plantations of Sri Lanka and the priorities of estate management has altered Up-country Tamil Hinduism.

Many Up-country Tamils, and most other Sri Lankans, perceive Hinduism as the most ‘Indian’ aspect of Up-country Tamil culture, a common view in the Indian diaspora (Mearns 1995: 246). However, Hindu religious practices are just as Sri Lankan as any other part of their culture since they developed over generations on Sri Lankan terms and in Sri Lankan spaces. Up-country Tamils adapted and performed Hindu rituals in contrast to and in dialogue with dominant Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, further linking ethnic and religious identifications for Up-country Tamil Hindus. In diasporic communities, religion is often one of the most conservative forces, but, like all other aspects of culture, it also changes with time and place. Despite this, Hinduism often depends on ideologies that tend to deny change and history (van der Veer and Vertovec 1991: 153). Hindu ritual in the diaspora therefore ‘re-presents one’s image of India even as it acts out the reciprocities and social landscape of one’s new home’ (Clothey 1992: 129).

Mariyamman festivals have become a hallmark of Up-country Tamil cultural heritage and identity, harking back to an Indian past while being performed in a Sri Lankan present. ‘In the diaspora, some aspects of processions become more important, and the associated rituals acquire new functions,’ Jacobsen (2008: 9) concludes, and these festivals ‘also gain features typical of a multicultural festival, an event which celebrates and exhibits identity.’ In this way, Up-country Tamil religious discourses and practices become part of the struggle for the recognition and affirmation of identification as Up-country Tamil. I therefore concentrate less on the explicitly religious content of Hindu rituals and festivals and more on how the performance and discussion of these traditions plays a role in the construction, negotiation and maintenance of Up-country Tamil communities and places.

Up-country Tamils define themselves, ethnically, culturally and religiously, against a variety of Others, both on and off the island. These efforts arose in the latter half of the twentieth century, after decades of bearing identities determined by colonial and post-colonial power structures (Bass 2012: 48-71). First, Up-country Tamils assert their identification as Tamil Hindus in contrast to Sinhala Buddhist estate officials, politicians and townspeople. By expressing their distinct culture, Up-country Tamils publicly proclaim their belonging on the island. In contrast to the Up-country Tamil Hindu rituals in the heavily Buddhicised space of *Sri Pada*, analysed by Premakumara De Silva elsewhere in this journal issue, Mariyamman festivals do not accommodate hegemonic Buddhist narratives and practices, but are solely Up-country Tamil cultural expressions. For example, in their performance of Mariyamman festivals, discussed in detail in the



latter half of this article, Up-country Tamils not only mark spaces as the dominion of the goddess, but also as ethnically Up-country Tamil places. Up-country Tamils view the expression of their Indian cultural and religious heritage in Sri Lanka as a way of asserting themselves as a valued community on the island, even while many outsiders view any links outside the island as undermining one's status in Sri Lanka.

Second, Up-country Tamils contrast themselves with Jaffna Tamils, whom the government labels as 'Sri Lanka' Tamils, as opposed to 'Indian' Tamils, which is what Up-country Tamils are still officially called, as in the decennial census. Up-country Tamils strongly desire to demonstrate to others that they are a Sri Lankan community, despite their ancestors' relatively recent migration from India. This was a particularly potent political claim during the long-running civil war and in the immediate post-war era (Bass 2016). Lastly, Up-country Tamils claim both connections to their Indian ancestors, and distinction from Tamils currently resident in India. Up-country Tamils share an Indian past with their Tamil cousins in India, but generations of existence in the diaspora have severely limited contemporary links, so that the only significant connections that most Up-country Tamils have with Tamil Nadu is through cinema, music, television and other forms of Indian popular culture.

### **The Construction of an Estate Festival**

One weekend in March 2000, Delbourn tea estate's Lower division held its annual Mariyamman festival (see Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> Delbourn borders the town of Hatton, where I was based during my fieldwork, though the main residential area is about a kilometre from the edge of town. The celebrations that weekend included several seemingly 'secular' events, most notably a children's talent show on Saturday night, which I discuss in detail elsewhere (Bass 2012: 142-163).

The processions that ended the festival on Sunday afternoon were the most important religious event of the year for Delbourn residents, while the talent show was the highlight of the social calendar. The inclusion of ostensibly non-religious activities allowed for greater participation of Up-country Tamil Christians, who make up about 12% of the estate's population. Although this festival was seemingly about Hindu religious identity, Christian Up-country Tamils actively participated and even helped organise the proceedings, as I discuss later in the article.<sup>2</sup> The festival was thus an ethnic festival, celebrating Up-country Tamil identity, even as certain parts were expressly concerned with identification as Hindu.

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<sup>1</sup> All names of individuals and estates in this article are pseudonyms. The research is based on interviews, participant-observation, surveys and other ethnographic methods employed on numerous research trips to the up-country between 1999 and 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Among Up-country Tamils, as with Tamils in India (Arun 2007: 84; Kent 2004: 18), Christianity 'stands for and is associated with identity as a low-caste Paraiyan,'; this group often convert to Christianity since it provides a path for upward mobility (Hollup 1994: 242).



**Figure 1: Delbourn Estate**

The flyer for the festival was posted throughout the estate and Hatton, and also functioned as a programme (See Figure 2). The format for the flyer, with the deities to be propitiated pictured above a great amount of text, was standard for Tamil Hindu events, in Sri Lanka and in India. The goddess Mariyamman is at the top centre, flanked by Vinayakar and Murukan, just as she is in the Delbourn temple's main shrine. After an announcement of the festival with location and date are four-line *tutis* (invocations) to each of the deities. A formal invitation to attend the festival follows, with a schedule of events and participants. Below that, the organisers credit those responsible for providing the sound and lights, bedecking of the deities' images, and paint for the Mariyamman temple.





**Figure 2: Delbourn Mariyamman Festival Flyer**

At the very bottom of the flyer is a brief promotion for the festival in Sinhala, to potentially invite any Sinhalas from Hatton, few of whom would be able to read any Tamil. While most flyers for Up-country Tamil Hindu festivals included a summary in Sinhala, no poster for a Sinhala Buddhist festival in the up-country contained any Tamil whatsoever. This clearly reflects the power imbalance among ethnic groups in contemporary Sri Lanka. Up-country Tamils generally desire recognition from Sinhalas, who, as the dominant community, tend not to feel any need to include minority Hindu Tamils. This lopsided tension underlies many interactions between Up-country Tamils and Sinhalas, a result of the severe social, economic and political inequality that persists in Sri Lanka today.

Sundarajan, one of the *talaivars* (local union leaders) on Delbourn Lower division took an active role in organising the Mariyamman festival. Sundarajan was thirty-two years old when I first met him and worked as a watchman at the superintendent's bungalow. Although he is Catholic, Sundarajan told me that he helped out because no one else has the contacts or skills to do so. He is a member of this community after all, he added, and nobody else had come forward to do the work, so he continued to do it. However, he decided that year was going to be his last year organising the Mariyamman festival, since he felt others needed to step up and take charge. As Sundarajan told me, 'Being a talaivar is not easy work.' Sundarajan's being Catholic did not appear to have any significant factor in his attaining a position of power on the estate, which was more due to his personal power of persuasion and charisma. Up-country Tamil Hindus tend not to view Catholics as Others, or vice versa, since they all participate in the same festivals. The main religious Others are Buddhists and Muslims. The latter, being another minority community, are also seen as political rivals.

Several members of Sundarajan's family explained to me that, since they are living amongst Hindus, they felt that they should participate in the festival to maintain a sense of unity and community. This went beyond surface participation for keeping up appearances, such as putting up decorations, preparing festival meals, and giving gifts to neighbours, to include partaking in the religious celebrations and performing pujas to the goddess. Almost all residents of Delbourn estate participated in the festival, no matter their religion, allowing them to enjoy some entertainment, company and activity on a chilly winter's evening. In this way, these rituals serve to emplace Up-country Tamils in Sri Lanka, marking the estates as their home, and display a shared identification as Up-country Tamil in contrast to Sinhala Buddhists in nearby towns.

Establishing Hindu temples on tea estates helped legitimate the presence of Up-country Tamils in Sri Lanka by giving it divine sanction (Clothey 2006: 22), at least in their own eyes. Officiates at estate temples tend to be non-Brahmin priests called *pantarams*. Most of these estate temples are simple structures, usually with an enclosed area for the idols and a covered, open space for larger ceremonies and assemblies. In many cases, *kankanis* were responsible for building these temples, since they were the

wealthiest and highest status Tamils on estates before the reform of the *kankani* system in the 1960s. Small shrines to various Hindu deities are also scattered around the estates, particularly near the dispensary and the factory, providing opportunities for daily worship and requests for divine protection. These temples and shrines tended to be founded for such direct, practical purposes, and do not feature stories of miraculous appearances of deities or other foundational myths, as is often the case in Tamil Nadu.

The active involvement of non-Hindus in ostensibly Hindu festivals illustrates the difficulty in drawing sharp distinctions between Hindu religious events and Up-country Tamil ethnic celebrations. To a certain degree, many Up-country Tamils, especially Christians, see these festivals as cultural events more than religious ones, but these divisions are not always sharply drawn amid the poverty and marginalisation of the estates. While a blurring of the sacred with the seemingly profane is a common feature in many Hindu contexts, I contend that Up-country Tamils' continued economic and political marginalisation, in which their diasporic condition has been used as a critique of their belonging in Sri Lanka, has facilitated the ethnicisation of religious activities. In modern Sri Lanka, ethnic identifications are the primary criteria of otherness, and while, to a certain degree, Sinhalas have increasingly associated being Sinhala with being Buddhist, and vice versa, neither Hindu nor Tamil identities on the island have taken on such equation (Bass 2012: 46-47). Regardless of whether Up-country Tamils are Hindu or Christian, Sinhalas, Muslims and Jaffna Tamils tend to view them as Tamils first, and religious identifications are secondary.

### **The Goddess Comes to the Up-country**

The Delbourn Mariyamman festival began in earnest on Friday night with the ritual assembly of the *karakams*, decorated ritual pots which represent the goddess, and the selection of men to act as their carriers. The Delbourn *karakam* ceremony took place near a small stream in a valley clearing amongst the tea fields of the estate, a fifteen-minute walk from the Mariyamman temple at the estate's centre. The rest of the festival took place in the heart of Delbourn estate, but it started at its margins. Over the course of the festival, Hindu rituals moved from the outside in, indicating the spatial scope of Mariyamman's territory, as well as the focal point of her power, residing in her temple. Not only did Friday night's opening ritual take place at the margins of the estate, but the next day's parade also began on the estate's edge and moved to its centre, where events continued on the Saturday. However, at the festival's end, Mariyamman left her temple and paraded around the estate's line rooms, marking Up-country Tamils' residences as her protected dominion. This movement of festival rituals collectively serves to proclaim the estate residents' collective identification as Up-country Tamils.

When the ritual began around 10:00 p.m. Friday night, about ninety people were present, with a relatively balanced mix of men and women, though a significant number of children, mostly boys, were also in attendance. In a space about two metres by four



metres on the edge of the clearing, a dozen men, including the Mariyamman temple *pujari*, assembled the *karakams*. They made two *karakams* in metal pots and one *kumpam* (clay pot), though for the sake of simplicity, I refer to them as the *karakams*, since they all served almost identical ritual functions. To construct a *karakam*, some estate elders filled a brass pot with water from the nearby stream and placed a coconut on top of it. Next, nine mango leaves were cut and placed in the pot, tied with rope to keep them in place and covered with flowers and margosa leaves. The *pujari* then drew a rudimentary face on the *karakam* pot and placed a big blob of turmeric on it as well. The turmeric and margosa, as well as the water that bystanders sprinkled, acted as cooling agents, preventing the inherent heat of the goddess from overwhelming the carriers of the *karakams* (McGilvray 1998: 61).

While the *karakams* were being constructed, the other Up-country Tamils had little to contribute to this ritual and passed the time socialising in single-sex groups. A large number of women sat around the ritual's edges, almost like two sides of a square, chatting with friends and neighbours, while a small group of women danced in a circle. Further back, around a bonfire, groups of men were laughing, singing and dancing to three *tappu* drummers. Many of them were drinking, and their behaviour became increasingly loud and lewd. Around 12:30 a.m., as the *karakams* were completed, the audience shifted their focus to the ritual. The men in the back quieted down and let the bonfire die out. The *pujari* blessed the *karakams*, signifying that they were no longer just decorated pots but were now sacred vessels for the goddess. The next step was for Mariyamman herself to select the *karakam* carriers, who embody the goddess for the duration of the festival (See Figure 3).

Mariyamman reveals whom she will honour as *karakam* carriers by 'coming to' a person and stating her choices. Up-country Tamils usually phrase this action as *camivarutu*, literally the 'coming of the god/goddess' to a person. 'We believe god has come inside him,' an Up-country Tamil English teacher at an estate school told me, and 'when he talks, we believe god is talking to us.' This process is usually translated into English as 'possession' (Hollup 1994: 289; Nabokov 2000: 19; Smith 2006). However, I prefer not to call this phenomenon 'possession,' since it does not adequately describe either the relationship between Hindu gods and the people to whom they come or how Tamils understand human and divine agency. Although I remain sceptical of the presence of the goddess that night, I do not try to explain away or question the authenticity of her appearance. Instead, I present the local point-of-view, referring to the coming of the goddess, thus taking her arrival and presence as an 'ontological reality' (Smith 2006: 66). How she came is not of concern to me, but rather, how Up-country Tamils acted in her presence and employed her name for personal ends.



Figure 3: Delbourn Karakam Carriers

After the *pujari* completed the *karakams* at Delbourn, he had an assistant hide a small object, for the goddess to identify. The *pujari* then asked questions about the location and identification of the hidden object as a way of confirming and legitimising the goddess's presence. Tamil Hindus are aware that inherently fallible men mediate the goddess's presence in this world, and they will question and criticise what they see enacted in her name (Nabokov 2000: 41).

At this point in the ritual, events became very confusing, and it was not just because it was approaching 2:00 a.m., though the late hour certainly exacerbated tensions. The goddess appeared to come to one man, and the music stopped so that the *pujari* and other leaders of the ceremony could question him. However, since he was a *pujari*, though not the *pujari* conducting the ritual, they declared that he could not be the one to select the *karakam* carriers. He then proclaimed that he would protect the people, presumably as the goddess, and slapped the ground loudly. He was then calmed down and fell out of his trance, after which the music started again.

The ceremony turned even more chaotic a few minutes later when two men became simultaneously entranced. At the time, I was not able to follow everything that was happening, though I was able to fill in some details in subsequent interviews. A disagreement arose over who should be the one to take the symbol of the goddess, the set of eyes that are placed on the outside of the *karakam*, confirming her presence. During

the debate, someone pushed Saktivel, one of the two entranced men, which could have broken his trance. Immediately, a huge fight erupted, with all the men pushing, shoving, yelling or trying to stop others from doing so. A relative of Saktivel was yelling loudly and whipping his scarf around, slapping several people in the face. He was angry that his kinsman did not receive the honour of participating in the festival as a representative of the goddess, which would have enhanced the status of his entire family.

Despite this disturbance, which was pushed to the ritual's periphery, the leaders of the ritual recognised Mariyamman's presence in the other entranced man and she chose three men as the *karakam* carriers. The leaders of the ritual proceeded with the ritual consecration of the *karakam* carriers, who went down to stream to bathe, and change into white *vestis* (dhotis). The *karakams* were placed upon their heads, and they prepared to lead the procession back to the Delbourn Mariyamman temple. However, the argument resurfaced, when another relative of Saktivel started yelling and screaming. People drowned him out by loudly praising the goddess with shouts of '*haro hara*,' a common Tamil Hindu chant praising a deity.

Despite these efforts, a third man became entranced, besides Saktivel and the chosen *karakam* carrier. In a frenzy, this newly entranced man grabbed the goddess's whip, a symbol of her power that had remained untouched throughout the ceremony, and cracked it on his body, hitting a few bystanders in the process. Eventually, several men were able to restrain him. The final part of the evening that did not go according to plan occurred soon thereafter. Saktivel, the main antagonist from the earlier argument, became entranced again and stated that the goddess sent a challenge that had not yet been met. However, most people in attendance did not accept the claim that Mariyamman had come to him. Instead, the crowd gathered their belongings and walked back home, with the *karakam* carriers, now embodying the goddess Mariyamman, in the lead, putting an end to the ritual and any remaining arguments from Saktivel and his supporters.

The festival's first night ended in confusion. I was never able to fully sort out what occurred, nor determine the names of all participants. I interviewed several people on Delbourn estate during and after the festival, and everyone was reluctant to talk about what went wrong that evening. Sundarajan blamed the fight on drunkenness, but that only tells part of the story. Fights during festival ceremonies often arise from disagreements over the meaning of rituals and associated feelings of respect, honour and prestige (Hanchett 1982: 229-230). A series of personal rivalries came to the surface in the middle of the night when tensions were high, sleep levels were low, alcohol was plentiful, and the stakes were formidable. Some of these conflicts were likely based on caste and class, though participants were uncomfortable talking to me about such issues. Public honours, such as bearing the *karakams*, carry considerable symbolic weight for Up-country Tamils because they provide one of the few outlets to distinguish oneself in the regulated plantation environment.



The next day, during a discussion about what happened at Delbourn with Up-country Tamil friends at the Centre, the Hatton-based NGO to which I was affiliated, they joked that no Up-country Tamil wedding, festival, or even NGO meeting is complete without a fight. Fights show the intensity of people's feelings about an event and of their relationships with each other, such as the fight over the *karakam* when the main antagonist stood up for his relative. These 'social dramas' (Turner 1974: 33) provide an opportunity to disperse potentially dangerous emotions in a circumscribed setting that is guaranteed to contain and redirect this energy.

Through these festivals, Up-country Tamils not only establish what it means to be a resident of a particular estate but also where they stand within these communities. The selection of certain people to be *karakam* carriers, as well as to take on other roles at the festival, are markers of status, which will last a year, until the next Mariyamman festival. It is not simply individual Up-country Tamils jockeying for position, but families and caste groups. As with much of my research in the up-country, interviewees were reluctant to name castes, but would indirectly talk about one caste group or another as being ascendant in the community. Union politics on the estates often operate in a similar way, with parties and unions battling each other for members and votes, while also favouring certain castes over others.

These internal struggles over status and power occur 'behind the scenes,' and are not explicitly performed during the more public segments of the festival, although they are clearly on display implicitly. While these contests among Up-country Tamils do not directly involve other communities, whether Sinhalas in neighbouring towns or Tamils on neighbouring estates, they help establish who are the local leaders and representatives, who will be doing the work of defining the community in relation to these others. After these internal boundaries and status markers were set through the *karakam* construction, the final step was their display in Sunday's procession through the estate.

### **A Procession of Tradition**

This afternoon procession simultaneously expressed modernity and tradition among Up-country Tamils. The festival was firmly rooted in the twenty-first century due to the presence of a video crew, but also strongly connected to the past by featuring 'traditional' rituals, especially hook-swinging, that have practically disappeared from the Hindu ritual repertoire in Tamil Nadu. These ritual practices also serve to differentiate Up-country Tamils from other communities on the island, both Jaffna Tamils, who do not regularly engage in them, as well as Sinhalas, some of whom have incorporated variations of these rituals into their own religious practice, as I discuss later.

Unlike the *karakam* assembly that started off the festival, the processions marking the end of the festival happened in the residential areas of the estate itself. The afternoon procession began at a small shrine near Delbourn's edge and slowly progressed to the

Mariyamman temple at the estate's centre, while the evening procession started at this temple and went out to the estate's line rooms near the temple. Festival organisers told me that they expected up to a thousand people to show up for Sunday's final events, though the peak festival crowd actually numbered about seven hundred.

Five musicians and the *karakam* bearer led the afternoon procession of around 250 people. A group of about a dozen entranced dancers, ranging in age from twelve to seventy-five, was next in the procession. Most had a brass *vel* (Murukan's spear) held in their mouths and a few had pierced their cheeks with one. Next, five men were dancing with *kavati*. Some were more entranced than others, displaying more frantic movements and posing more difficulty to those leading them along the road. These men restrained entranced people who fainted or were moving too rapidly and splashed water on others to break their trances.

Following behind the entranced dancers were about two hundred people walking, with a tractor and trailer bringing up the rear. Two large poles, about eight metres long and a half-metre in diameter, were propped up in the back of the trailer, leaning over the tractor in front. An entranced man was suspended from each of the two poles by ropes attached to six to ten metal hooks in his back. Both men were shirtless, so the hooks were clearly visible, and their white *vestis* signified their sacred status. The hooks did not bear the entire weight of the men, though. Their feet were also tied and suspended from the poles and a white cloth was hung at the end of the pole for them to hold onto as a safety plumb line.

One of the dozen men standing in the trailer bed had a long pole with a hook on the end which he used to move power lines and streamers out of the way so that the poles with the hook-swingers would not hit them. Another six men were sitting on the tractor, including Sundarajan, who invited me up to join him after he saw me standing on the side of the road taking notes and photographs. Since Sundarajan had generously granted me several interviews during the busy festival season, I felt obligated to join him. Once on the tractor, I was initially not sure how to react when I realised that the men swinging on hooks were only a metre and a half above me, but I then got out my camera and took some pictures, which provided a sense of distance between us.<sup>3</sup>

Up-country Tamils usually perform rituals of penance and self-sacrifice, like hook-swinging, as a vow, in return for or in anticipation of the goddess's assistance (See Figure 4). Both of the hook-swinging men's names were listed in the festival flyer, as *paravai kavati*, which literally translates as 'winged/feathered pole (that carries burdens).' Since *kavati* also refers to Murukan's ceremonial arch that devotees carry, another, more appropriate, translation of *paravai kavati* is 'winged devotion.' While the English term stresses the means of suspension and the passive role of the participant, the Tamil term

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<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, the pictures did not come out well, since the bright tropical sun made the men overly backlit.



refers to the extraordinary movement and attitude of the participant. In other words, what to an English-speaking viewer is the violent swinging of a passive victim, to a Tamil is the devotional flying of a dedicated supplicant to the divine.



Figure 4: *Paravai Kavati*

The last part of the festival procession that Sunday afternoon was *timiti* (fire-walking), which Up-country Tamils also undertake due to a vow to the goddess. The fire-walking pit, located in a clearing near the roadside around a bend from the temple, was full of glowing embers. The fire, which was about six metres long and two metres wide, had been lit that morning in a ritual that started off the day's festivities. The flyer/programme for the festival listed nine people as *tikkulippu atiyarkal* (devotees who will walk the fire pit), but many more joined them. About thirty people, including most of the procession's entranced dancers ran across the fire pit in a steady stream during the first two minutes of the ritual. A few walked very slowly and deliberately, while most ran frantically. Some even had babies in their arms, because of a vow taken on behalf of the child in face of illness (Babb 1974: 35). However, based on their behaviour during and after the ritual, several men were walking the fire both as a masculine display of their own toughness and as an act of devotion.

Near the end of the fire-pit were two holes in the ground filled with water, where people could dip their feet after the fire-walking. About three metres from the fire-pit was

a shrine to the Mariyamman, so that the fire-walkers were having *darshan* of the goddess the whole time that they traversed the coals. The entire fire-walking ceremony ended in less than five minutes. No clear signal was given for either its beginning or end. Many people, myself included, had been up the street near the temple watching the hook-swingers being let down from their poles, when we realised that the fire-walking had begun.

Up-country Tamils regularly practice rituals of penance and self-sacrifice to Mariyamman and other Hindu deities, such as fire-walking, pilgrimage and hook-swinging, in return for past actions or in hope of future intervention. As part of a vow, fire-walking is a test of a Tamil's devotion and resolve, since not getting burnt is a sign of one's purity of body and mind, as well as personal discipline and devotion (Babb 1974: 36). Tamil Hindus often practice hook-swinging on behalf of larger groups, such as a family, village, estate or caste-group, for their collective well-being; the person undergoing the ritual gains social status for participating in a sacred ritual, as was the case with the *karakam* carriers, by individually acting on behalf of a larger social unit (Jacobsen 2008: 4; Oddie 1995: 32, 40; Younger 2002: 99). Undertaking such a vow strengthens individual and collective identities as well as Tamils' relationships with a particular goddess and her locale (Lawrence 1997: 223). By performing these rituals, Mariyamman is linked to her worshippers' homes in the up-country, and this place is linked with those Up-country Tamils who live there, in contrast to other spaces belonging to other communities.

Up-country Tamils in Sri Lanka and other diasporic groups often maintain cultural practices that have almost totally died out in the homeland, as is the case with hook-swinging in India. The colonial Indian government started to restrict hook-swinging in the 1850s, though it was already in decline. In Sri Lanka, the practice continued unabated, since colonial-era tea estate management did not generally interfere with workers' religious practices, as long as ritual celebrations did not adversely affect production on the plantations. Hook-swinging is now a common display of devotion at Up-country Tamil Hindu, and sometimes Sinhala Buddhist, festivals in Sri Lanka, but never at Jaffna Tamil rituals. Sinhala Buddhists have adopted, and occasionally co-opted, Tamil Hindu religious practices, as has been well documented at Kataragama (Obeyesekere 1977; 1978; 1981) and at *Sri Pada*, as Premakumara de Silva shows elsewhere in this journal issue, but caste and class differences minimise religious sharing between Up-country Tamils and Jaffna Tamils. Mariyamman worship, and the devotional rituals enacted and embodied as vows to her, remains a predominantly lower caste practice, anathema to Jaffna Tamil *Vellala* elites.

These internal differences are not unique to Tamils in Sri Lanka, since caste and class are pervasive social markers in both India and its diasporas. However, the regional differences between Jaffna Tamils and Up-country Tamils (and not to mention East Coast Tamils) are much stronger in Sri Lanka. While Up-country Tamils identified with Jaffna

Tamil demands for greater Tamil rights and autonomy during the civil war, decades of social and political exclusion dating back to the colonial era have limited pan-Tamil solidarity on the island. Although the end of the war could have theoretically fostered Tamil unity across regional and ethnic differences, institutions and attitudes developed during the conflict have not been easy to overcome since the war's end (Amarasingam and Bass 2016). The multiplicity of Tamil identifications in Sri Lanka highlight the distinctive, diasporic struggles that Up-country Tamils face, but also point to the problems that Jaffna Tamils have faced in their diaspora as well.

## Conclusion

Up-country Tamils often claim that Hindu rituals are the most strongly 'Indian,' and therefore traditional, aspects of Up-country Tamil culture. However, these examples highlight how labelling something as traditional and Indian has more to do with Up-country Tamils' emplacement in Sri Lanka than with continued, concrete connections with India. In the up-country, Hindu festivals are not signs of present connections with an Indian homeland, but are links to a remembered India that Up-country Tamils have passed down over the course of generations.

Though outwardly religious, these festivals have become embedded expressions of ethnic identification in the up-country. Annual Up-country Tamil processions not only mark estates as the domain of Mariyamman but have also become sites for the enactment of Up-country Tamil identity and culture. This conflation of religious and ethnic identifications in the up-country has developed over generations of ethnic discrimination and disenfranchisement and decades of violent ethnic conflict. Assertions of cultural tradition have been crucial to the formation and solidification of a distinct Up-country Tamil ethnicity in contemporary Sri Lanka. After all, what distinguishes one ethnic group from another is the expression of culture. By performing rituals to Mariyamman, Up-country Tamils highlight their distinct identification with the island and their cultural differences with numerous Others, especially Sinhala and Jaffna Tamils, who have often actively denied their claims of a distinct ethnic identification belonging in Sri Lanka.

Mariyamman festivals on up-country tea estates assert Up-country Tamils' identification with the places where they have lived and worked for generations. At the same time, these Hindu rituals invoke cultural traditions inherited from India, which Up-country Tamils and others see as their unique heritage. In these expressions of a distinct culture and identity, Up-country Tamils root themselves in Sri Lankan spaces. After decades in which others, whether colonial officials or postcolonial politicians, Sinhala Buddhists or Jaffna Tamils, estate management or urban elites, have ascribed a status as outsiders onto Up-country Tamils, the transformation of these Hindu rituals into ethnic festivals repositions Up-country Tamils in relation to others on the island, affirming that they are equally at home in Sri Lanka, despite persistent social, economic and political inequalities. 🍵



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