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Religious dynamics of Sri Lankan Hindu Tamils in Paris: constructions of the self and the other

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Since the 1980s, refugees from Sri Lanka have been living in France and make up the largest Hindu group. In recent years, this migration, and more generally the South Asian migration, has radically transformed the French social landscape leading to questions about how Hinduism and Hindus define 'Others' and interact with them, and what these exchanges reveal about Sri Lankan Hinduism. In a context of dramatic growth in religious diversity, Hinduism represents not only a minority religious tradition but also a challenge to French *laïcité*. A new visibility/invisibility dialectical relation has also become a major issue. Although the presence of the religion may be discreet and hidden, religious processions make a powerful impression, such as Ganesh Chaturthi organised by Sri Manicka Vinayakar Alayam every year in the streets of Paris. Moreover, such transformations born from the increased visibility of Sri Lankans are often perceived by other Tamils who settled earlier in France (from Pondicherry, from the Caribbean and from Indian ocean islands) as an intrusion of 'newcomers', threatening their identity and integration process in French society. I will discuss the changing dimension of religious questions in an urban environment by exploring immigration, religion and space. Between the local (the street, the 'quartier') and the global (transnational migration nexus), I will analyse space as a medium of social connections which sheds new light on the reconfiguration of religion. Through the study of the internal multiplicity of Tamil immigration and of the localisation of places of worship, I explore the development of Sri Lankan Hinduism in Paris and its metropolitan region. I will also show how Hindus negotiate their status and sometimes transform their practices to be accepted by the host state.

Introduction

Indian migration to France is diverse but Tamils represent the most numerous ethnic group. Tamil is also the foremost South Asian spoken language in France. Like in Montreal (see Bradley in this special issue), the Tamil speaking people of France do not form one homogeneous community. The French Tamil community includes not only Tamils from Sri Lanka, but also from India, Mauritius, Reunion Island, Madagascar and from the French West Indies. No accurate numbers are available (official figures for the number of Tamils in France do not exist), but it is estimated at a total of 150,000–200,000 people (Goreau-Ponceaud 2008; Moliner 2009). Language is not the only difference between the various Tamil communities in France. Religion is another element of distinction. The largest group of Hindus in France is constituted by the Tamil Hindus from Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan Tamils in France are mostly Hindu (more than 80%) and Catholic¹ (between 10 to 20%). Most of them are Roman Catholics but some of them are Protestants². The Sri Lankan Tamils seem to constitute a distinct ethnic diaspora, but they also belong to two different religions. The Indian Tamils and specifically the Pondicherrians are mostly Roman Catholics. The Pondicherrians represent a special case. Thanks to their French nationality, they arrived much earlier, in the 1950s, after Pondicherry became part of newly independent India. Amongst those migrants who arrived from South Asia, they constitute the only group that has a colonial connection with France (Goreau-Ponceaud, 2011). Since the French people have no colonial representation or categorisation of South Asians – apart from Pondicherrians – South Asians in France have been subjected to lower levels of racism and discrimination compared to North Africans (Moliner 2009).

As such, the Tamil diaspora³ in France is not a monolithic unit. First, it is divided by

¹ Christianity came to Sri Lanka under the Portuguese, the earliest colonial power in Sri Lanka, and they were Roman Catholic. While many Sri Lankans converted to Catholicism under the Portuguese, few converted to the Protestant churches under the Dutch and the British who succeeded the Portuguese as colonial rulers of Sri Lanka.

² A very small percentage of Tamil Christians are Protestants and Pentecostals. While Tamil-speaking communities are welcomed into local Pentecostal churches (Apostolic Church, Church of God, Assemblies of God), others establish independent assemblies. If most of these Churches are relatively recent in appearance, the oldest assembly was founded in France during the 1950s by a Sri Lankan missionary. This is the primitive Pentecostal Church, located today at *La Courneuve* which was created by Pastor Benjamin Selvaratnam (1913-2004). Indeed, it was in November 1952 that the latter arrived in France to set up a missionary work for the Ceylon Pentecostal Mission (CPM), one of the main Pentecostal denominations of Sri Lanka (this is probably one of the oldest examples of "mission in return", from South to North, as far as the Pentecostal field on French soil is concerned).

³ In this paper the term diaspora is used as an analytical category to describe the migration processes and transnational connections of the approximately one million Sri Lankan Tamils displaced all over the world. The usage of the term diaspora implies that Tamil migrants refer back to a 'homeland'. Diasporas are not static entities but heterogeneous and dynamic formations. As Brubaker writes: "In sum, rather than speak of 'a diaspora' or 'the diaspora' as an entity, a bounded group, an ethnodemographic or ethnocultural fact, it may be more fruitful, and certainly more precise, to speak of diasporic stances, projects, claims, idioms, practices, and so on" (Brubaker 2005: 13).

pre-migration diversity related to caste, social-class, religion, gender, village and the area of origin. Distinctions linked to the individuals' various migration processes should also be taken into account, since they have broad implications in the determinations of the Tamils in France, in accordance with their status as illegal or legal migrants, political refugees or French citizens. This migration, which is mostly concentrated in Paris and its metropolitan area – Île-de-France⁴ –, is characterised by its internal diversity which increases even more with the influence of religious groups, as a consecutive effect of the transplantation from the Indian world to the host-land of some religious traditions, Saivism⁵, and of the emergence of new religious expressions in the diaspora. We should notice that migration and the interactions it brings about tend to amplify the confusion surrounding religious referents and identity-related referents. As mentioned by Claveyrolas and Trouillet in their presentation of the "*Hindus and Others in South Asia and Overseas*" research project, "far from being contrary to Hinduism, contact, in other places, with the Other has made a huge contribution to the renewal, the 'restauration', the modernisation, the changes of this religion". Indeed, the variations in ritual performances seen in contemporary diasporic communities may be taken as a clue to the symbolic structure in general: a relatively stable repertoire that leaves room for minor explorations, adaptations, shortcuts, or contemporary additions. Diasporas are shaped by the ways transnational cultural flows are fostered in order to overcome the sense of the spatio-temporal disjuncture that is at the core of the diasporic experience.

Demographic and symbolic issues of this diversity are significant for the evolution of socio-religious landscape in Île-de-France. In recent years, this migration, and more generally the South Asian migration⁶, has radically transformed the French social landscape, leading to an experienced 'excess of alterity' (Grillo 2010) for the host society. Grillo uses this expression in the way to describe our period which seems characterised by a European-wide moral panic about 'difference', apparent in populist movements which make rejection of difference a central plank in their policies, but also in wider public debates about the rights and wrongs of different ways of living and the governance of diversity. In that way, Grillo examines how the concepts of integration, multiculturalism, diversity, difference – have been deployed in debates specifically within the UK. In France, such a debate exists and animates the discourse of the different political parties. Nevertheless, because of its special status in the French orientalist imagination, Hinduism, perceived and represented as an exotic expression, does not

⁴ Île-de-France is one of the 13 administrative regions of France, composed mostly of the Paris metropolitan area. Paris and Île-de-France region is a magnet for immigrants, hosting one of the largest concentrations of immigrants in Europe.

⁵ Saivism or Saivite worship connotes the worship of the deity Siva or members of Siva's 'family'.

⁶ South Asian migrants settled in France came more recently and in much smaller numbers: they came mostly in the late 1970s.

seem to pose as many problems as Islam⁷. In that way, the host society played an important role in identity labelling. And, in the absence of any valid category (*Sud-Asiatique* or South Asian is not used in France, and *Asiatique* or Asian, refers to Chinese and formerly Indochinese people), South Asians tend to be lumped together as Indians or Hindu without constituting a common identity.

Within the South Asian community, there is a change in how members relate to one another, in their criteria for the acceptance of the Other in their newfound groups, and in this way in their definition of community boundaries. Nevertheless, in contemporary politics of recognition we see that there is reference to faith alongside other aspects of identity. The Hindu community in France is regarded as internally strong, self-contained and economically successful, as well as considered reticent in voicing its interests and pressing its claims. This model minority contributes to the development of France's multicultural landscape (for more details see Moliner, 2009). In national arenas, religious identities have become increasingly significant partly because of policy shifts from multiculturalism towards community cohesion, and partly because of projections of religious militancy as an excessive, subversive presence in contemporary politics and culture.

One of the most significant consequences of new immigration flows has been a dramatic growth in religious diversity, which has been seen as a challenge to French secularism or *laïcité*. It may be interpreted that Hinduism does not just represent a minority religious tradition but a challenge to French *laïcité*. *Laïcité* is more than the statement of principle articulated in the second article of the French constitution, sustained by the first article of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man* and the inspiration for the December 9, 1905, law. *Laïcité* is the ultimate expression of the enlightened utopian humanism that defines the French citizen and, as such, is constitutive of "Frenchness" (Bowen 2008). In order to be sustained, *laïcité* needs the French citizen to be willing to keep their universal humanity separate and independent from her individual particularity. That is, *laïcité* requires willingness on the part of all French citizens to transcend individual religious background, gender, and race in the public arena. This separation between the universal and the particular, the citizen and the individual, the public and the private, the cultural and the religious, however, leads toward a paradox

⁷ The ways in which cultural, ethnic and religious difference is constructed and represented in contemporary Europe has certainly deep roots in colonial politics of communalism and in orientalist construction of cultural difference. Yet alarmist and essentialised representations of immigrants also draws considerably from the intertwining effects of post-9/11 anti-Muslim sentiments, the rise of radical right parties in Europe and the ongoing economic crisis. Islam and Muslims migrants have increasingly been identified not only as the quintessential antithesis of European identity, but also as a major obstacle in the integration of migrants into the hosting society (Modood 2006): as such, religious visibility in Europe, the persistent development of transnational migrant networks and migrants' attachment to what is understood as an undifferentiated notion of 'Muslim countries' is unwelcomingly received by many states as the proof of an alien presence within the continent (Goreau-Ponceaud and Gallo, 2015: 54).

filled with tension. Since it is widely accepted that religion will not disappear with the advance of modernity (Casanova 1994), the question that remains is how the public sphere manages religious traditions' refusal to accept the private place assigned to them by secularist theories. In Paris, a new self-confidence that reveals specific Tamil identity is articulated and performed in these embodied customs (the significance of this external public gaze when Hindu temple processions and ritual practices are taken out and performed in the local streets around the temples as happens in the centre of Paris needs to be questioned). Does this then become a contested space? Do some of the embodied practices such as trance dancing sit uneasily in these urban neighbourhoods, causing disturbance to the onlookers' gaze?

Since the eighties, the creation of Tamil sacred space has been an important way to ritualize Tamil life and to establish Tamil religious traditions in France both among the Tamil Hindus and the Tamil Catholics. The Hindus have ritualised space by establishing temples in several cities, and, in the Tamil Hindu temple in Paris, by establishing circumambulation rituals around the temple. As pointed by Sebastia (2008) and Goreau-Ponceaud (2008), the Tamil Roman Catholics, the Pondicherrians, on their part and in reaction to this "religious vitality", have created sacred Tamil space within the existing Catholic Church by organizing weekly Tamil masses, and by the celebration of Our Lady of Velankanni⁸. In a way, by allowing the Pondicherrians to use their mother tongue within the Catholic realm and by insisting on the importance of maintaining original cultures, the policy of the church contrasts with the ideology of the French Republic. In fact, except for monthly Tamil masses, all the celebrations are punctuated with *inculturation*⁹ features, that is to say, with cultural gestures and attitudes selected for their relevance to Indian culture and are implicitly in the Hindu tradition. These emerging elements of 'display' and competition within diasporic communities may well provide interesting questions for this special issue focus on Hindus and their relations to the various Others they encounter. If diaspora Hinduism is to be studied as a "place" of

⁸ Velankanni is a pilgrim center located in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu which is very famous for its Virgin, named Arokkiya Mata ("Our Lady of Good Health") or Velankanni Mata. Her worship, initiated by the Portuguese at the beginning of the seventeenth century, was developed over the centuries, and enjoys increasing success today, as may be measured by the hundreds of thousands of pilgrims of all castes and creeds, and from every state in India, who attend her ten-day festival from 29 August to 8 September. In her ethnographic study of Catholicism in Velankanni Brigitte Sebastia show, on the one hand, the strong influence of Hinduism on the worship of the Virgin and the shrine, and, on the other hand, the federative scope of the shrine and of the Virgin, the extent of which is unique in India (Sebastia, 2002). She also noted that Catholicism in Velankanni presents itself in two radically opposed aspects: 1/ an orthodox aspect within the church symbolized by a liturgy identical to that celebrated in the West, and 2/ a heterodox aspect outside the church ensuing of a subtle blend of ritual or devotional forms derived from Catholicism and Hinduism.

⁹ According to Clementin-Ojha (1993), with this term, the Church understands the promotion of work on the adjustments to be made in the Catholicism implanted in the countries dominated by a different religion so as to favour the integration of the Catholic communities in their own culture and to interest non-Catholics in the Christian message. This new disposition engaged with the second Vatican Council and signalled a change in the perception of Other.

double contact: first between Hindus, the host society and the other religions of this other territory, then between Indian Hinduism and diaspora Hinduism, one important issue of this contribution is how Hindu temples and their priests have to respond to the multidirectional shifts both inside their own communities and in the surrounding society. This contribution will also highlight in particular the role of Otherness in fashioning identity. The representations and relationships generated by these multiple faces of otherness are highly unstable, as they depend on complex interactions between the global context, the regional (relations between South Asian states for instance), the national (the French public policies towards ethnic minorities) and even local ones. In this process of the redefinition of diasporic identities, religion tends to become a major component of ethnic identity. This is due to the disruptive nature of migration that propels some migrants to turn to what they perceive as unchanging values and traditions of their past.

Hindus today are recreating their Hindu-ness in various ways. One of the visible manifestations of this ongoing process outside India is the formation of local or regional temple communities, and related activities to reconstruct a familiar religious-cultural setting in diasporic contexts. Another manifestation of their presence in the religious landscape of their new countries is found in ritual dynamics. Especially the ritual domain can be studied as a key to processes of re-inventing religious identity in a pluralistic socio-cultural setting. The question is how such ideals of ritual tend to attract “neo-Hindus”¹⁰ with a yogic lifestyle, but at the same time could present too high/too low an ideal for other Hindus. Furthermore, diaspora often brings together people of various regional and sectarian backgrounds who would never have had to cooperate in the separate communities in the country of origin. In forming a diasporic temple community people often have to negotiate a wider sense of collectivity, regarding the architectural style, the central deity, as well as the self-presentation politics to the host country.

Conversely, the pressure of wealthy sponsors may force the priest to upgrade and enhance the ritual practices of the temple, often to the point of an implicit or even explicit ‘Agamisation.’ Such upgrading would lend the temple greater status and ritual authenticity by linking it with what is perceived as India’s classic tradition. This delicate question of the negotiation of social relations between Hindus and non-Hindus, between diasporic Hinduism and Indian Hinduism, between host society and immigrants, is reinforced by a new visibility/invisibility dialectical in the urban space. If the presence of religion may be discreet and hidden, religious processions make a powerful comeback, such as Ganesh Chaturthi organized by Sri Manicka Vinayakar Alayam every year in the streets of Paris. Moreover, such transformations born from the increased visibility of Sri Lankans are often perceived by other Tamils who had settled earlier in France (from Pondicherry, from the West Indies and from Indian ocean islands) as an intrusion by

¹⁰ Since the 1960s, Hindu spirituality, centred on the figure and on the message of the guru, has been spreading in French society.

'newcomers' threatening their identity and integration process in the French society. In that way Hinduism represents not only a minority religious tradition but also a challenge for the others which also puts in tension the actors already anchored in the city and newly arrived migrant populations. I will explore these relevant issues in an urban environment through the articulation between immigration, religion and space. Between the local (the street, the "quartier") and the global (transnational migration nexus), I will analyse space as a medium of social connections which sheds new light on the reconfiguration of religion in terms of cohabitation. Through the study of the internal multiplicity of Tamil immigration and of the localisation of places of worship, this paper will explore the development of Sri Lankan Hinduism in Paris and its metropolitan region. I will also show how Hindus have to negotiate their status and sometimes transform their practices to be accepted by the host state, regarding French *laïcité*. Amongst these transformation processes regarding Hinduism as a contact point between different traditions, groups and territories, I will focus particularly on, on the one hand, the process called 'temple-isation' (a term created by Vasudha Narayanan referring to the situation of Hindu immigrants from India in the USA) and, on the other hand, the transgression of boundaries between Hindu and Catholic Tamils.

Research settings and methods

This contribution is based on fieldwork conducted in the Île-de-France and in India over five years (from 2004 to 2009), and combined participant observation with interviews. Access to Sri Lankan Tamil community¹¹ in Île-de-France was gained through pre-existing relations established in India with several community *gate-keepers*, which resulted in a "snowballing" method. Some of them were Pondicherrians while others were Tamils from Sri Lanka. Most of the interviews in Paris were conducted in the area of La Chapelle which extends across the tenth and the eighteenth *arrondissements*. Traditionally a working-class area, these *arrondissements* have recently developed into a multicultural environment dominated by North Africans and sub-Saharan Africans. La Chapelle manifests its increasing diversity through the colour, race, and language of its migrant population, which currently comprises large numbers of illegal entrants making a living out of doing odd jobs. Since the 1980s, La Chapelle has gradually become the heart of a vast network of a community 'solidarity' that aims to fulfil the economic, cultural and political demands of the Tamil community (both Indian and Sri Lankan). More generally

¹¹ Despite the problematic and contested nature of 'community', I am using it to indicate the symbolic construct, created by the perception of boundaries by the members of a group, in this case, Tamils originating from Sri Lanka. The actual notion of community often sustains a fluid and pragmatic meaning to individuals, revealing it to be a multi-layered, multi-valent notion that does not signify adherence or membership to one, closely defined group. Each person may be a member of various, loosely-defined and changing communities. Recent scholarship has insisted that collective identities, far from being immutable, are constructed, multiple and flexible. The extent to which Tamil migrants of diverse state origins can be considered part of a 'Tamil diaspora' or 'community' is complex and contested.

it is through its commercial role in relation to the immigrant community of Paris that La Chapelle has achieved its current reputation for the host society (La Chapelle area is regarded as an Indian neighbourhood); a process that in turn contributes to the definition of a “super-diversity” (Vertovec, 2010). This fieldwork was complemented by another study conducted within the framework of the COMET¹² research project focusing on the analysis of different foodscapes linked to the emergence of minority commercial centrality in Paris.

This phenomenon reveals changes not just in the host environs but also in the internal structure within these migrant communities. Within the community, there is a change in how members relate to one another, in their criteria for the acceptance of the Other in their new-found groups, and in this way in their definition of community boundaries.

From the war in Sri Lanka to the emergence of Tamil diaspora

The reason for the emergence of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora and Tamil Hindu migration to France was in the first place the civil war (officially from 1983 until 2009). One of the most significant consequences of Sri Lanka’s civil conflict has been the displacement of its Tamil population both internally and internationally¹³, leading to the formation of a *refugee diaspora* (Van Hear 2014). Formed by several waves of migration since the independence in 1948, in 2010 the Tamil diaspora was estimated to reach around one million people forming a powerful transnational diaspora. Within Europe, Germany, Switzerland and France are the major destinations.

Building Tamilness

The Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora is partly a product of the policies of the Sinhala Buddhist nationalists that first came to power in Sri Lanka after the parliamentary election in 1956. It is in the context of growing political conflict that the making of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora should be seen. In the decades after independence, rivalry between the island’s

¹² The research project “*Commerce alimentaire ‘ethnique’ entre pratiques communautaires et vivre ensembl : une comparaison de quartiers parisiens*” (Ethnic food trade : between ethnic practices and living together: a comparison between Parisian neighborhoods) was coordinated by Hadrien Dubucs (ENeC, Paris IV Sorbonne) and Lucine Endelstein (LISST, CNRS) and funded by the city of Paris (2012-2015).

¹³ There are two distinct groups of Tamils in Sri Lanka: the Sri Lankan Tamils and the “Up-Country Tamils” (see Daniel in this special issue) who are the descendants of bonded labourers brought from southern India in the nineteenth century by the British colonial authorities to work on plantations. The two groups have generally seen themselves as separate communities. Furthermore, traditionally, the Tamils tended to move from place to place for upward mobility, education or for social advancement. For example, as early as in the 1920s and 1930s, one can find the Jaffna Tamils as postmen and station masters in Malaysia and Singapore. Also, the first phase of migration of professionals and students to England was seen around and after independence in 1948 (Goreau-Ponceaud 2014). They hail from the upper classes and upper castes in Sri Lanka, who sought university or professional studies. In addition, the migration was because of the Tamils’ search for prospects for economic prosperity.

Sri Lankan Tamil and Sinhalese populations became the source of increasingly violent confrontation (Spencer 1990). The Sinhalese population perceived the Tamils to be a privileged minority, while Tamils felt discriminated in a Sinhalese-dominated state. More precisely, the conflict in Sri Lanka is neither a simple ethnic contest nor a mere two-sided affair. Studies from the fields of political economy, geography, anthropology, and sociology emphasise that the titanic military struggle between the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was the product of a continuing series of alienating and isolating moves by GoSL and escalating responses from the LTTE. Experiences of discrimination, persecution and violence came to a head in a pogrom in 1983 in the capital Colombo and resulted in an open conflict that produced a large transnational Tamil diaspora¹⁴. What began as a conflict between the Sinhala and the Tamil communities gradually grew into a demand for the creation of separate homeland for the Tamils. The origins of the civil war have their roots in the colonial era of the multi-ethnic state (Spencer, 1990). The country has a long history of communal politics operating along ethnic divides, resulting in several rounds of ethnic violence since 1915¹⁵. The processes of transformation after independence initiated by the British Commonwealth cultivated the tendency toward ethnic polarisation between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority in the east and northern parts of the former Ceylon.

Most members of this diaspora have migrated since the mid-1980s, primarily as a direct or indirect result of the ongoing civil war in Sri Lanka¹⁶. Members of the diaspora in France can thus be differentiated according to when they migrated, to the means by which they gained residence, and to how successfully they have integrated into French society. Sri Lankan Tamils started to settle in France between the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, when it became difficult to go to England after the tightening of the British immigration laws in 1983 (*British Nationality Act* of 1981). Furthermore, the nature of migration, whether it is individual or chain migration, is an important factor in the extent of interactions with the Other. Indeed, chain migration tends to limit the need and the opportunities to interact outside self-sufficient community networks. In France, Tamil migration is composite: while the majority of migrants arrive as part of a chain migration process, a significant proportion do so on an individual basis; for example, the Indian Tamils or the pioneers from Sri Lanka, who were mainly *Vellala* landowners from

¹⁴ The 1983 pogrom (or Black July Pogrom) – generally taken to mark the beginning of the war in the country – was a major turning point in the conflict and it is considered by the Tamil diaspora as the beginning of the war and the beginning of the life in exile.

¹⁵ While the ethnic divide traces back to the presence of two separate Sinhalese and Tamil kingdoms at the time of colonisation, the first grievances emerged with British policies favoring Tamils in colonial schools and civil service jobs.

¹⁶ There are three different categories of Tamils who migrated after 1983: First, students and professionals who could migrate using their education, knowledge and skills; second, refugees seeking political asylum and third, those Tamils, sponsored by the Tamil expatriates, already established in those countries. They are mainly siblings and parents of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora.

the urban areas of the Jaffna Peninsula. Despite their high-caste status, they belonged to middle-class strata of the Jaffna Tamil society and lacked any previous familiarity with French society and language, and experienced many problems in terms of housing, employment and legal recognition.

The historical phases of migration constitute an important variable. These early migrants tended to have more interactions across ethno-religious boundaries for instance. Following the violent events in Colombo (1983-1987), the influx of Tamils in France increased. However, from the early 1990s,¹⁷ the recognition of a refugee status for Tamils has become almost systematic. Early flows of Tamil asylum seekers created clusters of recent arrivals, as in La Chapelle, that initially lacked transnational connectivity. Conversely, throughout the 1990s, the Tamil asylum seekers were urban *Karaiyar* (mainly Catholics) and lower-caste Tamils from rural areas, who had previous experiences of migration to India, Europe or Canada. This second cohort of Tamil refugees was thus integrated into wider migration networks when compared with the first cohort. Since the early 1990s, this partly contributed to the development of transnational kinship networks connecting Tamils residing in France with the Tamil diaspora. That is why from the 1990s onwards, the hosting context has changed with the progressive constitution of a community: the Sri Lankan Tamils turned to their countrymen/ethnic fellows rather than to French assistance agencies. As the number of asylum seekers swelled the size of the diaspora, there was soon a pressure for the establishment of dedicated social and economic services and of various diaspora associations in La Chapelle. And by the mid-1990s, the constitution of a well-organised migration network led to an upheaval in the residential trajectories: families headed to the suburbs as the number of female migrants and family regrouping increased, since it was easier to find cheaper housing and bigger apartments there.

Today, La Chapelle houses only a small percentage of Tamil residents but still remains a primary place for newcomers. However, this area of Paris is regarded as an “Indian neighbourhood” by the French society. What is the reality behind this image? This reality has less to do with residents’ backgrounds than with the commercial uses of the area, which put this district at the heart of large-scale mobilities. For example, the large number of specialist shops create an “Indian centrality” at the metropolitan level: the specificity of the products sold polarises the consumption practices of people of Tamil or South Asian origin, the vast majority of whom do not live here but give the area its image. In La Chapelle, South Asians interact with other South Asian groups, with different ethnic minorities and with the majority population, who all potentially represent powerful figures of Otherness. As a result of the migration process, many of these immigrants

¹⁷ While India provided a safe haven for refugees in the aftermath of the events of 1983, by the early 1990s, with the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, the situation had changed. India was no longer as welcoming to asylum seekers, thus increasing the importance of the growing Tamil diaspora in Europe.

experience a redefinition of their identities. Migration tends to reinforce antagonist perceptions of ‘us and them’, and to strengthen national/ethnic/religious identifications.

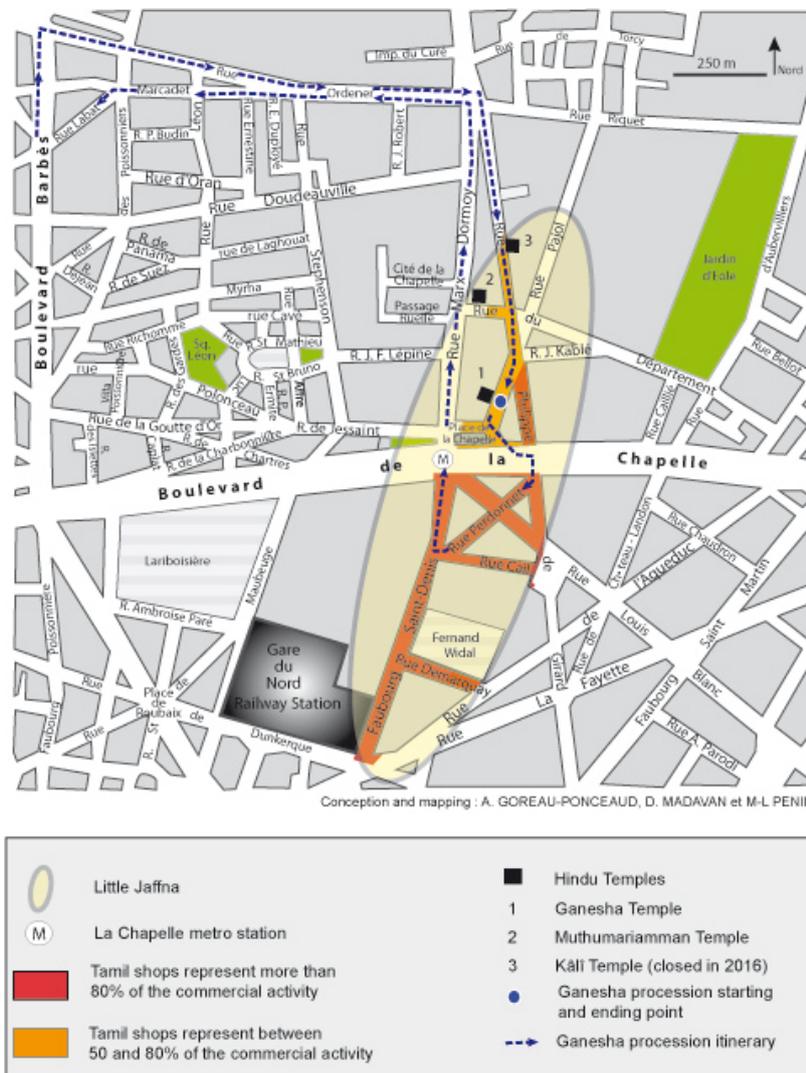


Figure 1: La Chapelle area: the heart of an intense economic activity

But such a process is depending on the model of integration prevalent in France. La Chapelle retains its image as an “Indian” district, despite a growing disconnect between rapid gentrification of housing stock on the one hand and the continuity of these business activities, whose polarising effect extends well beyond the local neighbourhood, on the other.

Religion has a cumulative effect within this process of polarisation. In this way, La Chapelle is a place of cultural memory. Jan Assmann (2006) and Danièle Hervieu-Léger (2000) emphasise that memory has a cultural basis or is culturally transmitted and cannot only be found within the individual – in the body or in the neural basis of consciousness, as a hardcore cognitivist would stress. From this point of view, which this article subscribes to, Sri Lankan Tamils use cultural memory as one central axis around which

they build their identity in a new setting and under new circumstances. The cultural memory, which is more extensive than the memory of any particular group incorporates – and constantly reactivates and reconstructs – the currents of thought which have outlasted past experiences, and which are newly actualised in the present. In the interpretation given by Halbwachs, this “inseparable creative and normative dynamic function of collective memory is engendered by society itself” (Hervieu-Léger, 2000:124-125). It means that the collective memory of the Tamil Hindus in France gets its own local expression. In other words, the convergence of identity occurs through places.

This point is very important because until recently, in scholarly studies on Hindu diaspora, localisation was a neglected process, probably because globalisation presents an omnipresent veneer that we can easily refer to, whereas local answers to specific conditions easily appear as particularism. But as pointed by Joanne Punzo Waghorne, “the process of re-invoking, and in some cases reinventing, local identities has begun.” (2004: 173). In fact, global Hinduism is confronted with the challenge to express itself as a faith community in the face of transnational affiliations, universal religions, and secular values. This need to articulate its basic principles and to give a universal account of itself has often led to a re-definition of Hinduism conversant with the dominant Western concepts of religion. Diasporas have thus created religious identities which claim global recognition and legitimacy, but such versions of Hinduism rarely include the specifically local and diversified.

This local expression is made possible by proximity, not in the sole sense of “being next to”, but also of “being connected to”. One can connect to any place through various means of communication as well as through social relations. The existence of Tamil diaspora supposes places of anchoring that are essential to the existences of the community in France. These places are made visible by the presence of concrete objects that are ratified individually and/or collectively. Thus, the disparity or disjunction between ‘over there’ and ‘elsewhere’ is compensated for by the establishment in France, of places and spaces which refers to recognisable principles. Such spatial landmarks and places of memory maintain the bond with ‘over there’. Another important contribution by Hervieu-Léger is her distinction between cultural and religious memory. This is especially important when it comes to the Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus, who in their self-understanding differentiate between the two categories. Most often they firstly denote themselves as Tamils (the cultural memory they share with the Tamil Christians in France), and secondly, they identify themselves as Hindu (religious memory that they share exclusively with the Indian Tamil Hindus). As a comparison it is interesting to note that most of the young Indian Hindus in France understand themselves firstly as Hindus and secondly as Indian¹⁸. In that regard the Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus differ from the Indian Hindus, which does have significance in terms of their negotiation strategies and

¹⁸ That is also an observation made by Raj (2000) in England among young Indian Hindus there.

relationship to shared cultural memory that is connected to a particular locality and to the context of migration: Sri Lanka, which they share with the Sri Lankan Tamil Catholic in Île-de-France. From that perspective, cultural memory can be illustrated as a Russian doll consisting of shared culture, language, religion, history, locality and so forth. As also pointed by Bradley in this special issue, it is obvious that in most of these perspectives, for the time being, Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus have more in common with Sri Lankan Tamil Catholics than with the Indian Hindus in Île-de-France. It is also a fact that young Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus intermingle with Sri Lankan Tamil Catholic Christians in France, but not with Indian Hindus (in terms of marriage and ethnic business). As pointed by Laurent Gayer, it seems:

constructions of the 'other', in diasporic environments, have two major attributes: their multiplicity and their volatility. Like every other social group, diasporas also ground their identities in constructions of otherness, both internal (fixing the boundary between 'proper' and 'incorrect' behaviours inside the community) and external (fixing the boundaries between the community and its social partners) (Gayer 2007).

However, one important difference between Tamil Catholicism and Tamil Hinduism in France is Hindu inclusiveness and Catholic exclusiveness (that is also an observation made by Jacobsen (2009) in Norway. Hindus do visit the Catholic churches. This was especially the case before the foundation of the Tamil Hindu temples. A few Hindus do participate in the festival of Our Lady of Velankanni.

Gradually, during the 2000s, the strengthening of the migratory network gave way to a residential dilution of Tamils in the northern and eastern peripheries of Paris. This change in residential trajectories is perceptible through the geography of Hindu temples in Île-de-France. Around 100 000 Sri Lankan Tamils are living in France, 90% of them in Paris and in its suburbs, mostly in deprived neighbourhoods such as La Courneuve, a city located in the north-eastern periphery of Paris. As well as in the cities of Strasbourg and Lyon, the Tamil diaspora is highly concentrated in Paris and in its Northern and Eastern suburbs (the greater Paris area). At the same time, the religious sphere produces continuity among discontinuous transnational spaces, and Sri Lankan migrants are often a vector of this continuity. If religion plays a critical role in identity construction, meaning making and value formation; religion is also physically or symbolically constitutive of migratory paths themselves.

Temple building, building public presence: construction of the self and the others

Jacobsen (2009: 183) writes: "the misfortune of the Tamils in the modern nation state of Sri Lanka is an important context for understanding the religious rituals in the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora". We can also add the population concentration which allows the

development of an ethno-religious infrastructure of Tamil-oriented temples which incorporate many of the regionalised specificities (amongst Hindu migrants in France: Tamilness is as important as Hinduness and Tamil Hindu traditions are mostly seen as part of Tamil culture). This population concentration gives the opportunity for Paris to become the home to a growing number of public Tamil Hindu ritual events, such as chariot processions in which the deity is removed from her/his home within the temple and paraded through the streets. In other places, like in Bordeaux or in Strasbourg where the population is less there is a kind of de-ethnicised faith-based identification due to the confrontation to the other Hindus. Tamils have to worshipped in spaces orientated towards other ethno-linguistic Hindu communities in their local area. In that case the Sri Lankan Tamils have to negotiate the absence of a specifically Tamil mode of Hinduness by worshipping within an unfamiliar (from the aesthetics and ritual) temple. There is a kind of centre and periphery model. It is at the periphery that innovations in terms of the process of re-negotiations of the boundaries intervene because contacts with other Hindus are more intense. In areas where populations are less numerous or concentrated 'Hindu immigrants...have had to negotiate a wider sense of "we"' (Eck 2000: 224) by finding means of transcending ethnic and sectarian difference. In Paris, there are enough immigrants to form temples that virtually replicate what they have known back home.

For Sri Lankan Tamils in Paris, religion is a significant factor not only in maintaining ties with the homeland but also in orienting their lives in diaspora. Religion has often an important function in the establishment of communities in the new place. Religion and Hinduism in particular, have a strong locative dimension. As pointed by Sophie Bava and Stefania Capone (2010), religion is not only a burden or a resource (material and spiritual) or a value in which migrants in exile can take refuge. It actually generates specific trajectories, new protagonist figures, and renewed religious experiences, and it opens the way for unprecedented religious constructs in new spaces (reterritorialisations) or in religious spaces revived by the arrival of migrants. If religion plays a critical role in identity construction, meaning making and value formation; religion is also physically or symbolically constitutive of migratory paths themselves. Then we must study the influence of migrations on religious practices in Île-de-France. Starting with the delocalisation and relocalisation of worship, its revitalisation, the organisation of particular religious events, and the meaning of certain religious events and practices, we may analyse the connections between religious practices and local society. This may also allow us to understand how a transnational religious space is renegotiated and produces translocality. Observing how spaces are transformed by migrants' religious practices informs us about territories of the religious sphere, the strategic dynamics underpinning their extension and transnationalisation, and the logic of migration that revitalises some of them. These new religious places or topographies set up by or for the creation of new reference points for migrants also modify urban space and the way people relate to others

and to host society. Hindu communities in every country — and even every particular locality—appear to search their own specific balance between the various factors determining their migration history, their transplanted tradition, and the interaction with their country of residence.

Temple building

Until recently, only a relatively small percentage of the French population knew where and how Sri Lankan Hindus practiced their faith because Hindu public religious institutions were virtually non-existent when the first immigrants arrived. At the end of the 1970s and in the early 1980s rooms were hired for the communal celebration of certain festivals. Such places of worship were by necessity only temporary. While early immigrants had no public religious institutions, over time the Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus have created possibilities for practicing their faith outside their homes.

We should also be precise in that the new settlers, or the first generation, had to learn the language, and their education from India or Sri Lanka was often not accepted, which meant they had to go through the educational system once again but on French terms. When it came to religion, they had to get used to the view that religion is primarily a private matter and not much seen in the public sphere. That meant that the Hindu tradition in many ways became privatised and institutionalised. The second generation of Indian and Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus, who were either born in France or came to France as small children, do not face the same problems as their parents. They are brought up in a French setting and are used to dealing with French society at large and to being a religious minority. Instead, they struggle with issues of identity, generation gap, being recognised as French citizens with Tamil roots, and being Hindu but under different terms. They, as well as their parents, are all Hindus in their self-understanding. But what they put into this category differs. For example, the arrival of large numbers of Sri Lankans has involved an increase in the visibility of Pondicherrians who must undergo criticisms from Sri Lankans for their corrupt way of speaking Tamil, their lack of economic dynamism, and their lack of interest in the Tamil culture and language and their inability to transmit it to their children. It is true that nowadays bilingualism, for instance, is more accepted by school teachers, while just a few decades ago it was considered as an obstacle to learning French. This ignorance of the language is considered as a handicap to maintaining bonds with the family and the country. It is interesting to note an overall generational pattern when it comes to the relationship to the Hindu tradition. While the first generation in many ways tries to keep up tradition as they knew it in India or Sri Lanka, the second generation does not. They reinterpret or take out elements from tradition or the collective memory, which both helps them engage in French society and bonds them to the tradition they share with their parents. In other words, among the second generation of Tamil Hindus in France, tradition is negotiated between the society they are part of and the identity of being a Hindu. I also should add that in France no

pan-Hindu organisation or meeting place exists. There are few points of contact between Tamil Hindus and Hindus from North India. They speak different languages, they follow different ritual traditions, they have different iconographic traditions, and they belong to different diasporas.

In order to illustrate my purpose, I will utilise a figure of Frédéric Dejean and Heidi Hoerning (2010) which illustrates the different stages in the structuring of the community: each stage corresponds to a type of place, demonstrating that the history of every religious community is accompanied by a specific geography (Figure 2) and a specific negotiation of otherness. Ritualisation is not possible without localisation or “re-spatialisation”. In that way we could also evoke the four stages identified by Peach and Gale (2003) in the establishment of public places of worship in England which hold some relevance for the case discussed here. The first is the private transformation of houses into prayer rooms (this is the case for the *Sri Manicka Vinayakar Alayam kovil*), which is often accomplished without awareness of planning regulations. The second stage is the occupation of warehouses at a greater distance from where the faith communities live. The third and the fourth stages, include “the arrival of domes, minarets and Hindu towers” (Peach and Gale 2003: 482)¹⁹.

The first permanent places of worship appeared in 1985. From the 1990s, in several towns of Île-de-France, Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus established religious organisations. They elected temple committees and collected money, so they could rent or even buy places on a permanent basis. The granting of permission for the use of the places for public worship was a troubled process (Goreau-Ponceaud 2014).

Not only are devotional worship and attendance at Hindu temples growing in France as the Tamil community develops and expands in Paris, but new temples are being established in old properties and further ones are being constructed. Importantly, *kovils* do not only reflect how Hindus perceive themselves in the new context, but they also actively become sites where the outsiders’ perception of Hinduism is forged. For Tamils, the *kovil* is a sacred space and its creation requires a high degree of ritualisation. However, for many French people living in la Chapelle area, a *kovil* appears somewhat differently, as the exotic or funny location of an alien but not threatening ‘religion’.

Kovils, for the Sri Lankans are symbolic places that act as rhetorical constructions designed to designate by connotation the territory and the social community that erects them (Trouillet 2012; Goreau-Ponceaud, 2008). Nevertheless, religious places also encounter ‘the normalising language’ of local and national authorities that may see them as ‘antithetical rather than complementary to the existing landscape’ (Peach & Gale 2003:486).

¹⁹ These third and fourth stages are not completed in France.

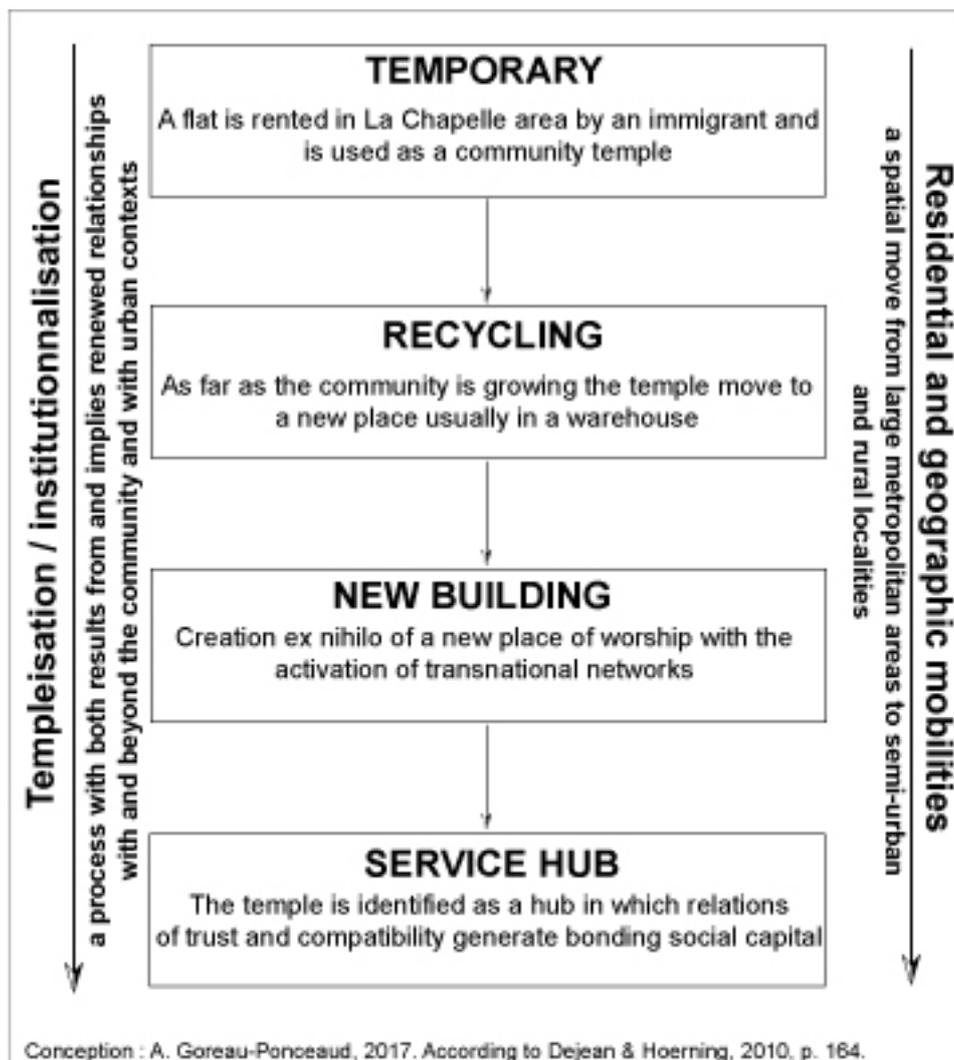


Figure 2: Ritualisation and localisation: the templeisation process

As Baumann (2009: 161) has remarked “the reconstruction of the histories of temple institutionalisation [in France] should not undermine the fact that Hindu religiousness and ritual are practiced at home as well” (*puja, nitya-karma*). The house remains significant in migrants’ religious life, but the temple has become of crucial importance in the transmission of the tradition from one generation to the next. Moreover, the second and third-generation Sri Lankan Tamil adolescents in Paris have their own strategies of belonging, not only by disentangling universals from the local customs of their parents and grandparents, but also by making new alliances, with both local and global “flavours”. Various factors oscillating between idealised rationality and emphasis on personal devotion maintain a creative tension and an ongoing differentiation between ‘ethnic’ and ‘universal’ traditions.

Alongside the everyday practice of home-based worship, *puja* areas are the focal point of ceremony within the home. The *puja* area is not the sole site of fetishised objects

within the home. In the traditional Tamil worldview, the household is vulnerable to the malevolent influence of *pēy* and *tirusti* (the evil eye) (Daniel 1987: 127-8), and guarded through a number of encircling, boundary-marking rituals to ‘separate off and expel unwanted substances from protected interiors’ (Mines 2005: 37-9)²⁰. Protective fetishes could be also found in several of the shops that I visited in La Chapelle area. Objects such as guardian deity images protected the home or the shops from malevolent forces, and the home *puja* area was the container for a range of emotionally, and spiritually significant objects. Within family settings, women, it seemed, were largely responsible for the maintenance and care of *puja* areas and the instruction of children in home *puja* rituals, echoing Wilkinson’s observation that “Hindu women are unmistakably the sustaining and dynamic force behind the perpetuation and transmission of traditional religious practices in the home” (1994: 63; see also McLoughlin 2010: 574-5; Vertovec 2000: 94-5; Sinha 2011: 102). As noted by Baumann (2009), in very broad terms, and emphasising spatial categories, the vast complex of Hindu ritual can be characterised as domestic rituals (the *grihya* rites), and solemn public rituals (*shruta* rites). These *shruta* rites take place at various sites: inside and outside the *kovil* (*puja*, *abhisheka*, *prasada*). However, according to my fieldwork, the role given to the *kovil* by Tamils is increasingly important, even if these objects (home *puja* room), function as the focal point for routine practices of home-based worship considered crucial to household welfare and the reproduction of cultural and spiritual values understood as central to Tamilness. According to my observations, the *kovil* increasingly becomes the main site for biographical rituals (*samskaras*), for being introduced to Hindu tradition, for celebrating festivals, and generally for learning to be a Hindu. As shown by Baumann, “a decisive shift takes place from the home to the temple, accompanied by a shift in authority away from women and mothers to men and priests” (2009: 154). Baumann calls this process templeisation.

The construction and institutionalisation of religious places is often supported by the activation of transnational networks through which funding, technical skills, architectural advice or ritual knowledge is transferred from one place to another (Krause 2008; Gallo 2012; Trouillet 2012). Gradually *kovils* become what David Ley (2008) calls a ‘service hub’, in which relations of trust and compatibility generate bonding social capital; from this base, a wide range of personal and social services is provided, significantly aiding co-ethnic members to adapt to their new conditions. Indeed, the *kovils* in Paris offers courses in academic support, literacy and dance. This process of templeisation is reinforced by nationalist associations. The placement of LTTE leaders

²⁰ Intricate patterns are drawn daily on the earth before entranceways which invite auspiciousness and keep inauspiciousness at bay, and mark a moral boundary between interior and exterior worlds; a practice replicated throughout the South Asian subcontinent, but known in Tamil regions as *kolams* (Dohmen 2004; Hancock 1999; Nagarajan 2007). In all the houses I have visited, except for Pongal, there is no *kolam*, but taking off the shoes before entering the house or apartment participates in this symbolic marking.

among different communities in Europe allowed Tamils to develop transnational networks across different states. Within their Tamil nationalist worldview, Tamil identity is constructed on real or imagined “ancient Tamil culture”, which is believed to have existed before the Sinhalese colonisation (Schalk, 1997: 37). Such an emphasis and discourse on “Tamil identity” is strong among the political active parents. The “ingredients” in this identity, the ancient Tamil culture, is what is seen and frequently referred to as “Tamil language”, “Tamil dance”, “Tamil music” and “Tamil song”, respectively, *bharathanatyam*²¹, *veenai*, *miruthangam* and *sangeetham* – the same practices the children learn at the Tamil school (*Tamil cholai*). Young girls performing the classical dance form of Bharatanatyam at classes in, or affiliated with, Paris temples are not just learning footwork, facial expressions and elaborate hand gestures, they are studying and performing the very embodiment of a cultural tradition and gaining a kinesthetic understanding of the great mythological stories of the deities of the Hindu pantheon. This dance form, often danced to Tamil texts, becomes a perfect carrier of tradition in this way.

Making sacred place

Among the 11 *kovils* owned by Sri Lankan Tamils in the Paris region, the association of *Sri Manicka Vinayakar Alayam* or *Ganesha/Vinayagar* temple enjoys the greatest popularity.

Name of the temples	Places	Divinity
<i>Adhiparasakthi Kovil</i>	Aubervilliers	(Mâry)Ammâ
<i>Sri Ayyapan Kovil</i>	La Plaine Saint-Denis	Ayyapa
<i>Muthumari Amman Temple</i>	Paris	(Mâry)Ammâ
<i>Sabariyassam Manchamatha temple</i>	La Courneuve	Ayyapa
<i>Sathya Naarayana Padhuka Temple</i>	Ivry/Seine	Shiva
<i>Sivan Parvathi Association</i>	La Courneuve	Shiva
<i>Sri Ash Tala Lakshmi Derasthanam</i>	Choisy-Le-Roi	Vishnu and Krishna
<i>Sri Manicka Vinayakar Alayam</i>	Paris	Ganesha
<i>Sri Muthukumaraswamy Alayam</i>	Paris	Muruga(n)
<i>Sri Shity Vinayagar Temple</i>	La Courneuve	Ganesha
<i>Sundara Vinayagar</i>	Garges-lès-Gonesse	Ganesha

Figure 3: Hindu Temples in Île-de-France

This major Sri Lankan Hindu temple in France was officially opened in the heart of La Chapelle district in 1985. The establishment of this Hindu temple, with its extensive ritual calendar, was a significant step in the ritualisation of Hindu space in Paris. The

²¹ Bharatanatyam, originally known as *sadir* or *dasi-attam* is an Indian classical dance style from southern India which developed in the Hindu temples.

temple functions as a weekly meeting place for the Tamils most closely associated with the temple, and at the times of the most important festivals it has this function for a large part of the Tamil Hindu community.

The owner of this temple, Sandera Sekaram, was a Vellalar from Jaffna who arrived in France in 1975 at the age of thirty (he died in April 2013). Sandera enjoys good connections with the diaspora and he is a crucial actor in either building bridges or widening gaps between sub-groups in the larger South Asian communities in Paris. As such Sandera Sekaram is an ethnic entrepreneur. The French host society tends to transform the resources of migrants: some identities are devaluated and relegated to the private sphere, new economic opportunities appear, and communities regroup along ethnic or religious lines to conform to the expectations of the French State. As a result, potential entrepreneurs – as Sandera for instance – are offered a new set of resources that vary from one country of migration to the other. And identity becomes one of the resources that can be mobilised by Sandera.

The opening of this temple is linked to specific activities that his family undertook in the diaspora. Ganesh is a god who is the subject of special devotion from Sandera Sekaram's family. In fact, his father founded three temples dedicated to Ganesh in northern Sri Lanka, his brother one in Highgate in England and his niece one in Melbourne, Australia. Sandera Sekaram took inspiration from these previous experiences of temple building from his father in Sri Lanka. Thanks to him he could quickly bring the *murtis* from Sri Lanka. In 1983, the mayor of Paris gave him the authorisation to open his temple, yet this was not easy. According to Sandera, some Tamils may conceive religious activities in public places to be safer because they are more institutionalised, (ideally) attracting less criticism because they have official approval. This new temple is a few yards from the original site. All works were planned by a temple architect (*stapathi*) from Chennai. The building is immediately adjacent to a residential block. On the whole, the temple is well situated to serve as a place of public access for Hindus in Paris. As a result, places which formerly tended to remain hidden and inconspicuous, with barely any indication of the people who used them, have become increasingly visible. The Hindu Tamil minority has begun to make clear that they want to present their religious orientations and practices to the outside world, particularly during the *Ganesh Chaturthi*. This festival lasts for twelve days but the high points in terms of ritual importance and the number of people attending is the chariot procession or *rathayatra*. The procession ritual was organised for the first time in 1996, just one year after the 'miracle of the milk'.²² This procession has changed over the years. As in Norway, "the

²² Sandera told me that it was also to celebrate this miracle that he wanted to organise the procession. On 21 September 1995 in India, the gods openly appeared and drank the milk which had been offered to them in oblation. This 'milk miracle' has attracted worldwide publicity. It could be found wherever there were statues of Ganesh and deities associated with the god Shiva, whether in temples or in private homes and both in India and worldwide, in fact in all the countries where the Indians reside. These miracles, which

number of elements included, and the quality have increased. Each year new elements have been added” (Jacobsen, 2008: 197). While initially there was only one chariot, a second one was quickly added and brought from Sri Lanka in the form of a richly decorated resin elephant. The number of participants grew steadily: in 1996 it was estimated between 1,000 and 2,500. According to the temple and the *Prefecture* of Paris, in 2004-2008 the Ganesha festival drew between 10,000 and 15,000 visitors and the number given for 2010 and 2011 was 30,000.²³ The fact that this particular Hindu chariot festival is increasing in size every year indicates a more overt and a more confident display of Hindu religious belief to the outside world. This large processional activity is clearly designed to affirm a sense of belonging and identity through expressions of solidarity and group cohesion for insiders, whilst at the same time, creating recognition and visibility for outsiders or other onlookers. In other *kovil* such as the Shiva temple, processions take place inside the temple and have a much more inward focus. The Shiva Temple reproduces a specifically South Indian version of Hinduism and simultaneously transgresses difference through its incorporation of Vaishnavite and Saivite priests and deities. Ethno-linguistic boundaries are also straddled through the inclusion of multiple South Indian languages and ritual traditions.

Predictably, this procession is not an exact replica of those taking place in Sri Lanka. For example, its date in the diaspora does not follow the traditional ritual calendar based on the planetary movements but complies with the official regulations of the French authorities which allow this procession on Sundays only, when traffic is lighter. On *rathayatra* or *ter utsava*, the *murtis* of the two most important gods of the *kovil*, Ganesh and Murugan, are transported on two festival chariots on the streets. These chariots are hand-pulled through the streets in a circle around the *kovil* by barefooted devotees dressed in traditional costumes, the first exclusively by men and the second by women, thus blocking traffic in cooperation with local police.

Before the procession, the streets are washed with rose water and saffron by two water trucks from the municipality to purify the path of Lord Ganesha (this “Parisian otherness” makes the necessity of purification imperative), and men carry heavy

exist in Sri Lanka or in India, are, in the diaspora, a very important proof that the gods followed the emigrants outside South Asia, which is no longer the exclusive territory of Hinduism. This is the result or the symptom of the Hinduisation process of the host land. Furthermore, ritual actions which no longer correspond to the actual life-world of the participants who are distanced from the source both in time and place may be abandoned as ‘mere ritual.’ At the same time such ‘old-world’ practices may be consciously deployed as highly prestigious status-enhancers and become re-introduced overseas. Innovations, made necessary by the new minority situation, may ease transmission to a new locality; yet such changes are also part of global processes of religious homogenisation and universalisation. As such, transplanted from an older ‘nursery’ of habitual ritual practice in the country of origin to a new time and place, those practices are considered highly effective in ‘Hinduising,’ ritualising, sacralising, and purifying the new space. They are increasing the religious status of the Hindu group overseas.

²³ While the visitors are mainly South Asian people from France a lot of South Asian people are also coming from Germany and UK to see this event.

wooden *kavati*. This practice is becoming increasingly popular. The *kavati* are held on the shoulders of the carriers who dance to the beat and tune of drums and flutes. These dancers, barefoot, clad in *vēstis* (sarongs), are followed by women carrying on their heads camphor offerings, which are set on fire. Piles of coconuts are placed along the way in order to be broken as the chariots pass them. Numerous devotees of the Lord accompany his idol, dancing and singing *bhajans* (songs worshipping divine beings). For the performance discussed above, Sri Lankan temple musicians played the *tavil* – a loud, double-headed drum, the *nagasvaram* – a piercing reed instrument similar to a clarinet and the small cymbals, the *tala*. Together these instruments are named the *periyar melam* and are considered an essential element of temple rituals and festivals in South India (as they have been for several hundred years). They are now beginning to be seen more frequently in British Saivite temples. Yoshitaka Terada explains how ‘*Periyar melam* music is often believed to be the sonic manifestation of the deity and it makes the deity’s presence immediate and real to worshippers’ (2008: 109), hence its significance at such occasions. It was obvious at such an occasion that worshippers, dancers and musicians were all performing their faith, in a sense performing the divine, and the spectators²⁴ are as much engaged in the religious occasion as the performers. The dance is thus perceived through a gaze that is both religious and engaged. In such a context, tradition and modernity, continuity and change, local and global appear to sit side by side, seemingly unchallenged and untroubled.

Construction of the self and the other

This procession is a movement from one place to another that is symbolically and ceremonially resonant. This event consists of distinctive elements (costumes, music, chariot, and so on) that distinguish it from the everyday urban routine but are presented in ways comprehensible to Hindu and non-Hindu spectators alike. For Sandera Sekaram, this procession is held not only for the benefit of the Sri Lankan devotees of the deity concerned but also for the wider public.

The Sri Lankan Tamils living in France are committed to the writing of brochures about their religion so as to make Hinduism understandable by French and non-Hindus in general. More specifically, members of the temple of Ganesha have created a website.²⁵ They also sell videos of previous processions and every year much energy is invested in trying to get journalists to cover the event.²⁶ So even if this event is firstly organised by and for the Sri Lankan Tamils, according to Sandera Sekaram, “by bringing

²⁴ Gradually, the profile of these spectators became more diverse, opening up to French society but also to the members of the diaspora, reinforcing what Clifford called the “lateral axes of the diaspora” (1997: 269), the ways in which diasporic identities are produced through creolisation and hybridisation, through both conflictive and collaborative coexistence and intermixture with other cultures.

²⁵ <http://www.templeganesha.fr/>

²⁶ Even if the journalists do not understand the meaning of the event, it gains much media attention with an exotic bias.

more than 20, 000 people each year this festival is a way of reuniting the whole South Asian population beyond religious splits". With this temple Sandera strives towards the creation of a uniform identity that is "Tamil Hindu" and which downplays differences of geographic origin, caste and localised ritual practice. Because it was the first temple established in the core of the "little South Asian" of Paris, this *kovil* is not a specifically Sri Lankan Tamil-orientated Hindu temple and welcomes people who originated from Mauritius, French West Indies, Reunion Island and from India. But according to Sandera, "even if there are Muslims and Christians who come to see the festival, this event is important for us because it allows us to show ourselves to others".

Thus, this procession brings South Asians together beyond religious difference in order to put religion and religious identity on display. In such a situation, the boundaries between public and private are being negotiated in various ways, significantly raising questions of how much visibility a group may wish to achieve. And, by using their bodies and a number of objects, the Sri Lankan Tamils openly demonstrate their demographic importance in the streets. In doing this they lay a claim to public space: they temporarily occupy it and they fill it with their bodies, voices and instruments. The music marks and promotes the vent of the festival and specifically frames what is about to occur. In fact, the music of the *periya melam* evokes intense religious devotion. This event is also an occasion to bring the deity out of his normal abode, the sacred interior of the temple, into the profane everyday world. And by combining procession (movement) and station (the significant stopping in front of the most influential merchants in the community, those who finance, which is where the coconuts are broken), this event has "a performative character" (Slyomovics, 1995: 159). Moreover, the route of the procession always describes a circle or a square through the neighbouring area back to the temple. Moving in a clockwise direction, they perform what is known in Hindu traditions as *parikrama* or circumambulation²⁷. It underlines how, during the festival process, the streets surrounding the temple are sacralised by this movement itself, in addition to the presence of the deity in its wooden chariot being transported through the spaces. In this sense, the *Ganesha Chaturthi* is a public ritual which refers to the idea of a sanctifying delimitation of space and time. The procession defines above all the territory-jurisdiction (*kshetra*) of the divinity of the temple and induces by extension a local and symbolic territorial appropriation by the processional group.

There is a close but complex relationship between religion and ethnicity which plays out, too, in sites of migrant settlement. For the last five years, the importation of Tamil-Dravidian ethnicity has been particularly visible in Paris. This distancing of Tamils from other Hindus is expressed by the appearance of Murugan in the procession. *Saivism* in Tamil regions is marked by a strong devotion to Murugan, whose worship pre-dates

²⁷ This outside activity echoes the circumambulation that is essential inside the temple, where devotees move only in a clockwise direction around the shrines (Trouillet, 2012).

Aryan influence (Clothey 1978: 23-34), but who, through a process of ‘Sanskritisation’ whereby ‘indigenous Tamil deities became identified with Aryan, Vedic deities’, entered the orthodox pantheon as one and the same as Skanda, the warrior son of Siva and Parvati (Trouillet, 2010). Murugan is considered the patron deity of the Tamil lands, people and language, with emphasis on his pre-Sanskritic pedigree contributing to Tamil nationalist (or Dravidianist) discourse during India’s freedom struggle and on into the post-colonial era (Clothey 1978: 2).

In that way, the internal and external boundaries of the South Asian ethnic groups are constantly questioned and challenged, often in opposite directions (South Asian diasporas have a tendency to break up into multiple sub-diasporas when there are sufficient numbers to support fragmentation). At the same time, Sandera Sekaram tries to bridge the gaps with other Hindu communities, identifying internal cleavages that may lead to division.

But what is significant about public religious life for a Tamil Hindu? Unlike the French Tamils, particularly the first-generation settlers have remained mostly publicity-shy, yet proud of their hard working and mainly successful status in French society (particularly for the Indian Tamils). Perhaps this has to do with distancing themselves from more recent arrivals from Sri Lanka, many of whom registered as refugees or asylum seekers and who have struggled to establish themselves (Goreau-Ponceaud, 2008). Perhaps too, it is related to the Tamil gang warfare during the early millennium years and the links of some young men with the LTTE.²⁸ Because of the combined fact of this visibility and their phenotypical proximity, Pondicherrians see themselves assimilated with the Sri Lankan Tamils. Indeed, Tony Dreyfus²⁹ explained in 2000 in the daily newspaper *Le Monde* (12/09/2000) that:

This predominantly Ceylonese community is very friendly, helping, harmless, but little by little they buy away every flat and shop. The local population can’t take it anymore, especially the elderly. And they seem to have taken the Ganesha pageant as a provocation. I do not want the local residents to get at each other’s throats.

In this respect, the public display of religion is understood as part of the process that estranges a neighbourhood from their “original/traditional inhabitants”. This ritual process of ambulation around the temple assumes renewed meanings among Tamils in Paris, in so far as it also delimits a political space of identification between the city and the Tamil community. The main function of this procession in a diasporic context is to “doing as” in the homeland, to bringing Hindu people together and to exhibit one’s own

²⁸ Since the end of the 1990s, the ‘native French’ attributed to Sri Lankans, because they have been more active and visible in the public sphere, all kind of evils: for instance, they are supposed to organise drug trafficking in La Chapelle, to finance terrorism and criminal associations, and to collect money through different gangs.

²⁹ He was the mayor of the 10th District until 2008. He belongs to the Left.

religious culture. The latter becomes a marker of cultural uniqueness. This procession can also become the means to form ethnic communities and identities in the immigrant context, especially as the route of the procession has never been changed. The procession-ritualised time enables the community to emerge from discretion and be visible in full view of everyone, which makes it a means of drawing public attention. While the Ganesha festival is organised with the aim of allowing the Tamil population to achieve a certain degree of legitimacy within the French public sphere and society, the process is far from going unquestioned by the French polity. In fact, the French public have reacted in different ways, sometimes with complaints, and the procession was banned by Tony Dreyfus twice – in 1999 and in 2000. This is because for some inhabitants of La Chapelle, the procession exacerbates communalism, seen as the closing in of ethnically defined communities on themselves³⁰. This claim refers to the postulate of French political philosophy that citizens must all subscribe to same values in the public sphere. In France, due to *laïcité*, when private religious groups that are not recognised by the state seek to act publicly, they incur suspicion. The contemporary rendition of the concept of *laïcité* is regarded as the prime instrument of republican integration: religion is to be confined to the private sphere and public expressions of faith are considered to be a threat to the entire republican framework. They compete with the state for the loyalty of their members, and thus promote communalism. Thus, many French people who live in La Chapelle think that communalism leads to terrorism. And, as a response to this procession, Pondicherrians have created a separate Indian Tamil space in Catholic churches in different cities of Île-de-France and institutionalised the first large Indian Tamil Catholic procession in 1999. Many parallel developments can be identified between the Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus and the Pondicherrian Christians, such as the level of ritualisation, the institutionalisation of gatherings in temples and churches, processions, the organisation of Tamil church and temple committees, the bringing in of Tamil priests from abroad, the use of the Tamil language, the incorporation of Tamil food in the rituals, and so on³¹. As pointed out by Bruland (2013), there are shared material culture and sensorial practices across the religious division of Hinduism and Catholicism among Sri Lankan Tamils residing in Paris; such as the clockwise movement of incense (which is strikingly similar to the Hindu ritual of *arati*), the use of flower garlands, and the worship of Mother Mary, which are as much part of Tamil Catholic prayers as

³⁰ If the event appears ordinary, the motivations and desires of the participants are by the same token obscure to the observer (who belongs to the host society) ... the continuity of the event over time, the degree of organisation and work it demands each year, and the numbers of people mobilised as marchers or spectators are all indicators of an extraordinary social energy at work. This combination of obviousness and opacity points then to a problem of perception... It is a form of social life which is constructed in part in order to reveal itself and, at the same time, to conceal itself; it creates interplay of display and secrecy.

³¹ Anthropologists and historians of religion have described Hindu elements appearing in Catholic practice and vice versa among Sri Lankan and South Indian Tamils in their home countries and in diaspora (Luchesi 2008; Sebastia 2008).

Tamil Hindu prayers. The establishment of Hindu temples and Tamil Catholic rituals ritualise a Tamil sacred space in France that strengthens Tamil identity and mobilises the diasporic project. The Tamil Hindu *rathayatra* processions and the Catholic procession of the statue of Our Lady of Velankanni are perhaps the most successful events for the institutionalisation of Tamil Hindu and Catholic space and time in France. These processions affirm Tamil identity, and function as strategies to negotiate identity and to secure the generational transference of traditions.

Conclusion

A religion that has migrated, which has become delocalised and jeopardised, over time develops into a re-localised and re-built religion. This possible reconstruction by the activation of transnational flows taking shape and place in a diasporic oecumene has been manifested in the case of Tamil Hinduism by a process of templeisation bringing in its wake many transformations. An increased visibility of Hinduism (more precisely the arrival of a new religious landscape), an imbalance between domestic and public rites, an upheaval in the role of women and mothers in the transmission of Hinduism, and above all a blurring of secular / sacred, private / public borders. This visibility causes reactions from other South Asian minorities, especially among Pondicherrians. Step by step religion has become a considerable operator of space. Through this case study I wanted to show that religious identities can be surprisingly malleable and generate the emergence of multiple, complex others. As pointed out by Robert Putnam and David E. Campbell, religion not only fosters 'bonding' ties to coreligionists but also 'bridging' ties to practitioners of other faiths (2010). Religious boundaries display signs of malleability. Hindus still incorporate ritual elements and divine beings from the religious traditions of the Others and exercise a wide personal choice in terms of spiritual activities, thus enabling spiritual paths that cross in and out of Hinduism. In a Hindu context, rituals do not necessarily have an insulating effect; they may also provide points of intersection that open up toward the Other, thus fostering familiarity and recognition. Everyday religion is still replete with 'divine intersections' that constitute a subtle, under-theorised counterforce against religious and political discourses of purity.

Analysing the growing number of Tamil Hindu processions held in London, David points to the public performance of these 'embodied customs', as evidence of increased confidence and assurance in articulating 'specific Tamil identity' in the migration setting (2009b: 218), while Luchesi describes the increased conspicuousness of Tamil Hindus' ritual practices in urban Germany as a process of 'leaving invisibility' and 'claiming their own place in German religious plurality' (2008: 180). For my part, I adhere to this hypothesis for a demand of recognition. The politics of recognition are stimulating: one seeks to understand the relationship with the 'other', while also to interrogating the diversity. 🙏 |

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