

*High Spirits and Heteroglossia:  
Forest Festivals of the Nilgiri  
Irulas*



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I declare that the work in this thesis has been composed by myself and that the work involved in its preparation is entirely my own.

(Neil Thin)

## **Abstract**

Irula people of the Nilgiri Mountains in southern India live in partial seclusion in the forest, and have been classified as *adivasis* or 'Scheduled Tribals.' Though they are often described as hunter-gatherers, for at least the last hundred years their modes of livelihood have predominantly been subsistence horticulture, plantation labour, and marketing of garden and forest products. One-day village-based festivals are among their most significant cultural activities, involving collective excursions into the forest to worship deities and ancestors. The dialectical interplay between scripted ritualism and *ad hoc* improvisation in these festivals gives rise to numerous contradictions in meaning, making them highly entertaining events. Analysis therefore emphasises the playful nature of Hindu festivity, and reference is made to comparable practices of Hindus on the plains.

Within the Irula festival, there is invariably a lengthy séance at which participants communicate with deities, ancestors, and a variety of spirits, through entranced human mediums. Transcribed recordings of these séance-dramas are discussed, with detailed analysis of authorship, visible and invisible participants, content, and style. The language of the séance, like the encompassing festival, oscillates between predictable, scripted ritualism and unpredictable improvisation; this ethnography therefore challenges assumptions about ritual entelechy, since Irula rites are celebrations of both order and chaos. This feature echoes the combination, in Irula society, of formal, role-centred hierocracy and informal, person-centred adhococracy. A variety of interpretations of the social role of heteroglossia are offered.

The metaphorical construction and social uses of divinity are dominating concerns throughout. The analytical importance of non-belief is emphasised, and this is linked to the role of scepticism, whereby counter-rational faith is subverted within religious behaviour by irony and parody. The concept of metaphoric *resonance* is offered as an aid to the analysis of ritual, enabling us to recognise the mobility and elusiveness of ritual metaphor. Four 'levels' at which ritual metaphors have meaning are distinguished: *instrumental*, *expressive*, *aesthetic*, and *metacommunicative*.

*Dedicated to the memory of Janet 'Toot' Thin, my paternal aunt, who inspired me with stories of India and played an important part in helping me understand what it is to be different.*

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## Prologue

Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,  
Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend  
More than cool reason ever comprehends.  
The lunatic, the lover, and the poet  
Are of imagination all compact.  
One sees more devils than vast hell can hold;  
That is, the madman. The lover, all as frantic,  
Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt.  
The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,  
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;  
And as imagination bodies forth  
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen  
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing  
A local habitation and a name.

Shakespeare, *Midsummer Night's Dream* (Theseus)

This thesis is mainly about a community known as *ērLa*<sup>1</sup> (henceforth anglicised as Irulas<sup>2</sup>) of the Nilgiri Mountains in Tamil Nadu, southern India. It is based on two field trips, the first from August to December 1986 and the second from January to October 1988. During the first period of fieldwork I visited Irula villages daily, but

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<sup>1</sup>Throughout the thesis, the transliteration of the Irula language will be as follows:

- The five rounded vowels will be shown with umlauts - *ä, ë, ï, ö, ü*; all modified vowels will be followed by a colon when lengthened; lengthened unmodified vowels will be written as double vowels - *uur*.
- Nasalised vowels occur at the ends of words, and will be indicated with diacritics - *avã*
- Retroflex consonants will be shown in capital letters (my equivalent of the dots under letters in the transliteration of Tamil), and since unlike Tamil the Irula language uses these retroflexes - D, T, L, and N - in word initial position, I will avoid capitals at the start of words unless these are retroflexes.
- Alveolar d's and t's will be underlined - *ndu* and *tt*

<sup>2</sup>Indianist ethnographers pluralise the names of 'tribals' with slightly less consistency than the almost uniform pluralisation of caste names. Worldwide, it is standard ethnographic practice to employ the formula *pluralised:non-pluralised::civilised:uncivilised*, when deciding whether or not to pluralise the names of ethnic groups. No-one calls 'the Nuer' 'the Nuers' or 'the Boers' 'the Boer.' The unmodified plural of tribal names is not unconnected, I suspect, with the unmodified plural of the names of animals, implying perhaps a surreptitious wildlife metaphor. The unmodified plural is a half-way house towards the total singularisation of peoples, which indicates a desire to express predictability and generalisability, and is usually derogatory - 'Jerry takes a bit of beating' - or patronising - 'The Santal has great belief in the supernatural' (Mahapatra 1986: 39). Another point of ethnographic semantics is that preceding the name of an ethnic category with 'the' has the effect of objectifying them, introducing a note of generalised otherness.



did not stay permanently in an Irula village. During the second period, I lived in the Irula village of Biliyuur<sup>1</sup> and visited many other villages.

My primary aim will be to present an ethnography of Irula village-based festivals, of which I attended fourteen<sup>2</sup>. I will be especially concerned with the manipulation of symbols<sup>3</sup> in the festival as a whole, and with linguistic aspects of the séances which always occur during the festivals. Phrased more simply, the twin activities which this thesis concerns itself with are *playing with symbols* and *playing with words* - these being particular forms of the general process of *playing with metaphor* - understanding things in terms of others - which is how all human cognition proceeds.

Since these festivals seem to be the most significant activities which Irula villagers participate in collectively, I will try to establish what it is that these dramatic performances achieve for the individual participants and for the collectivity. These performances (verbal and visual) are controlled and engaged in predominantly by men, and the overwhelming majority of interpretations of these events came to me from men rather than women; this is regrettable, since women undoubtedly play a variety of less overt roles whose subtlety I am unable to convey here. All ethnography to some extent privileges foreground rather than background cultural space; the best we can do is to ensure that our ethnographies are not entirely composed for us by the loudest, most immediately persuasive actors

The festivals are recognisably 'Hindu,' and any analysis of them would be futile if no attempt were made to set them in a wider Hindu context - that of Hindu scriptural and oral traditions, the Hinduism of the great temples, village Hinduism, and Hinduism as practised in the Nilgiris and nearby areas. It should be understood, then, that although what I will have to say about Irula festivals will apply specifically to one ethnic group, it will also shed light on and reflect patterns of behaviour found among other castes throughout India.

As well as discussing the activities and performances of festivals, it will be necessary to discuss the abstract notions and invisible beings involved in the performances - deities, ancestors, spirits - and, insofar as they prove to be meaningful frames of analysis, the sacred, the forest, and the supernatural. Central

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<sup>1</sup>This is a pseudonym.

<sup>2</sup>See Appendix 1

<sup>3</sup>See section 2.2 for a discussion of my uses of the terms 'metaphor' and 'symbol.'

to this is of course the character of divinity,<sup>1</sup> and I hope that, first by discussing the visible manipulation of symbols in the festival as a whole, then by analysing the verbal representation of divinity in the séances, I will convey a meaningful impression of the identity or identities of divinity in general. Irulas use several words for divinity or deities, the most common of which are *toga* for reference and *saami* for address; the two main questions I hope to answer with respect to divinity concern the *identity* of divinity - 'who or what is the deity?' - and the *performance* of divinity - 'what does the deity "do" as performed by human actors?'

The following assumptions about the notion of divinity, which I take to be universally valid, form the basis of my analysis:

1. *'Divinity' refers to the peculiarly creative uses of metaphor, whereby empirical data serve not merely to alter our understanding of other data, but actually to bring those data into existence. Created by the human imagination, these metaphors constitute human identities and legitimations of human activities. It is in this sense, and only in this sense, that we can speak of divinity as 'creative.'*
2. *The imaginary powers which constitute divinity are of two broad kinds - those used to construct individual identity and to legitimate individual activities, and those used to construct group identity and legitimate group activities. Divinity is thus the definitive 'other' by means of which individuals and groups conduct metacommunication about themselves.*
3. *The processes of identity construction involving the idea of a deity are characterised by two kinds of orientation - an **associational** orientation whereby people rally under a deity, and a **contrapuntal** orientation whereby people pit themselves against a deity.<sup>2</sup>*

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1 Throughout this text I will use the term 'divinity' to refer to the idea of the divine in its various abstractions; when I refer to a personification or reification of divinity, I will refer to a 'deity.' I prefer both of these terms to 'God,' which is both too general and too Christianised for our purposes here, and to 'god' which would, to many readers, belittle the deity by implicit comparison with 'God.' Where a deity is predominantly characterised as 'female' (it will become apparent that she is never unambiguously female), I will refer to the 'goddess.'

<sup>2</sup>In Leach's phrase, 'p is what not-p is not' (1969: 9); the simple point is that, though opposed to one another for some purposes, the categories human and divine (like particular humans and particular deities) unite in opposition to others - e.g. animals, the forces of unpredictability - for other purposes.

4. *The associational and contrapuntal orientations can each be usefully subdivided: associational orientations can be **homophilic** (attributing desired human characteristics to the deity) or **heterophilic** (attributing to the deity desired characteristics which humans lack); contrapuntal orientations subdivide into **homophobic**<sup>1</sup> (attributing undesirable human characteristics to the deity) and **heterophobic** (attributing to the deity undesirable characteristics of non-humans).*

My first point of theological theory is, I am afraid, bound to alienate many of those readers (including, perhaps, Irulas themselves) who believe in a creative actor-deity. We would all, I presume, agree that it is the potter, and not the pot, who is responsible for the shape of the pot. But those who see deities as potters and people as pots will not find that they have many grounds for agreement with me. I share MacIntyre's view that 'sometimes to understand a concept involves not sharing it' (1970 [1964]: 69). It is tempting to call this approach 'methodological atheism' (Larner 1984: 111), but the term 'atheist' is robbed of its meaning if we accept that to acknowledge the metaphorical nature of divinity is quite a different thing to denying the existence of divinity. We need no further guidance here than W.I.Thomas's straightforward dictum that if people believe a thing to be real, then it becomes an 'efficient cause' which has real consequences for them (1958 [1927]: ch.1). In other words, to acknowledge that religious worship involves shadow-boxing is not to deny that the shadows are real or that this activity improves people's ability to box with more substantial opponents.

It will be noted that I describe my theorizing as 'theological,' rather than side-stepping the issue by calling it 'anthropological' or 'sociological' (which of course it is too, but I prefer to be specific). I am not one of those who, like Evans-Pritchard (1956: 322) or Larner (1984: 106) prefer to leave theologising to those who call themselves theologians (conversely, I would not expect theologians to leave anthropologising to anthropologists). Bearing in mind the above proviso about the meaning of 'atheism,' I will go along with Larner when she says that 'I see methodological atheism as a necessary starting point for any sociological exploration of the concept of God' (Larner 1984: 111), but not when she claims that 'the question of whether or not this social product [God] relates to a supernatural reality is outside the brief of the sociologist' (1984: 106-7). If such

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<sup>1</sup> I hope that my right to coin this useful term hasn't been pre-empted by the currently fashionable abuse of the term by those who use it to mean 'dislike of homosexuals.'

subjects *are* outside our brief, then we have no business discussing 'God' at all. If Leach is justified in claiming that 'it is nonsensical to discuss the actions or qualities of supernatural beings except in terms of human action' (1954: 172) - and it is worth pointing out that theists proceed no differently when their theistic projections are discussed in anthropomorphic metaphors - then it makes no sense to leave unchallenged the hypothesis that supernatural beings are anything other than human creations.

Yet even Leach manages to shrug off analytical responsibility for challenging the anti-empirical nature of some religious claims when he says that 'a myth is *true* for those who believe in it; whether it is also true in a matter-of-fact, empirical, sense is irrelevant and would, in any case, usually be very difficult to demonstrate' (1983: 8). On the contrary, although the empirical validity of some myths may be irrelevant to our analysis, the myth of divine agency *must* be challenged if our own analysis is to be legitimate<sup>1</sup>. Similarly, most anthropologists would not be prepared, as Needham is (1979: 27-28), to discuss the social aspects of rain-making rites and absolve ourselves of the responsibility of acknowledging that they don't affect the weather. Nor would there be any point in discussing the social background to the authoring of religious texts if we accepted uncritically the believers' claims that they were authored by a divine agent.

The deity-stone is the central object of worship in Irula festivals, just as it quite literally is the central object of worship in Hindu shrines. Throughout the year it sits unattended, opaque, lifeless and, I have little doubt, unthought-of. At festival time, a trail to the deity-stone is re-blazed: it is weeded, and often literally made visible and reachable through the year's overgrowth. It is then anointed with, among other substances, oil and water - a process which gives it the appearance of being, like the glowing embers which are offered, on the threshold between opacity and translucence; often it is personified by being decorated with a pair of tinsel eyes and perhaps a piece of coloured cloth.

It often struck me while observing these events that the twin processes of fieldwork and of writing ethnography follow remarkably similar cosmological movements to

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<sup>1</sup>In some of the best discussions of metaphor in everyday life, there tends to be an astonishing failure to identify divine metaphors; thus in Lakoff and Johnson's excellent discussion of a variety of 'life-is-a-journey' metaphors, the metaphor of 'God-is-our-guide' is conspicuously absent (1980 *passim*); and Lakoff and Turner's (1989) discussion of the metaphors by which we personalise events completely omits the 'God-is-a-person' metaphor.

those made by Irulas at their festivals. Ethnographers head off into the wild<sup>1</sup> expecting to find something worth disentangling (and if we are honest we will concede that much of what we are going to disentangle may well have been disentangled many times before); we try to render opaque practices translucent (but again, honest ethnographies recognise that full transparency is never achieved, and that translucency may be an illusion); and people we study give us new insights into our own lives - like the wetted deity-stones, they provide distorted reflections at the same time as appearing to return our gaze. They are both the objects and the subjects of our studies.

Once recognised, the connections between my *fieldwork* and their *forest-play* proliferated endlessly. The reader may be assured that I have no intention of promulgating an orgy of reflexive navel-gazing; still, I find it impossible to avoid drawing analogies between the ritual endeavours and entertainments of the Irulas and our own anthropological rite of passage, pilgrimage, or whatever we may choose to call our fieldwork. To increase our understanding of the twin aspects of ritual - *cognitive* and *ludic* - is to increase our understanding of these same two aspects of the anthropological endeavour. It may also be necessary to insist from the start that my emphasis on the ludic aspects of both Irula ritual and the anthropological endeavours of fieldwork, writing, and reading, is not in any way meant to suggest that these are frivolous or unimportant activities. Play is usually defined negatively by reference to everyday behaviour:

play is not 'ordinary' or 'real' life. It is rather a stepping out of 'real' life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own. (Huizinga 1949 [1938]: 8)

But this is not necessarily to deprecate play as an activity. As Huizinga puts it, 'play ...is not foolish. It lies outside the antithesis of wisdom and folly' (*ibid*: 6). Both these quotations are indicative of the tendency in most discussions of play in the broad sense - including religious belief, ritual, myth, metaphor, music, 'other-worldly' renunciation - to interpret these activities as *evasions* of reality. Defined as side-stepping or escapism, all these activities are inevitably inferior, in some sense, to serious work:

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<sup>1</sup>For predominantly urban-based anthropologists, 'the field' is perhaps as wild as 'the forest' is to Irulas and other rural people. Were Irulas to become anthropologists, they would doubtless carry out 'forestwork' in preference to our tame-sounding term 'fieldwork'.

This 'only pretending' quality of play betrays a consciousness of the inferiority of play compared with 'seriousness,' a feeling that seems to be something as primary as play itself. (*ibid*: 8)

My contention will be that these activities don't just dodge reality, they *confront* it, undermine it, poke fun at it, even make it seem illusory. I share Schechner's view that

So-called 'serious' work in humans is treated playfully; and so-called play can become very serious. ...Huizinga was wrong when he decried the 'deterioration' of play because serious issues get involved in it. Serious issues are always involved in play; just as, in humans, play is inextricably involved in all 'serious' work. When through industrial or other means the play elements are taken out of work, work becomes drudgery and less efficient, not more; and when the seriousness is taken away from play, then playing grows sloppy and dull, not fun. (1988 [1977]: 101)

This brings us to the question of the relationship between scepticism and fantasy. All too often the battle-lines are drawn between social analysis and the practices of make-believe; the assumption is that the former stands for open-minded sceptical enquiry and demystification, in antagonism to the closed minds and mystification of the make-believers. I will try to show that the artificiality of these battle-lines will be exposed once we recognise the scepticism and irony in play, and, conversely, the elements of fantasy that social analysis indulges in. We should, for example, be constantly aware that when we use 'everyday life' (variously referred to as 'normality,' 'reality,' and so on) as a baseline against which to judge play, we are fantasising: there is, in reality, no such baseline, since there are play-elements in the most serious of activities, just as there are metaphors in the 'hardest' of scientific language. Though we must agree with Bateson (1972 [1955]: 188) that play is 'framed,' we should also be aware that play-events may occur at any moment, last only a moment, and be framed by a nod, a wink, an unusual word, or a barely perceptible alteration in voice-tone. Play, then, is endemic in serious business, and this thesis is aimed at increasing our understanding of different sorts of play. Ritual may be regarded as a special variant of play, distinguishable by its degree of prescriptive fixity and by its compulsory rather than optional nature. It may be described as a prescriptive and compulsory form of metacommunication; and since social scientists are specialists *par excellence* in metacommunication, it is hardly surprising that there are many qualities shared by the endeavours of social science and of ritual.

## **1. Setting**

### **1.1. Nilgiri area**

Hockings reports that there have been over 3,000 books and articles on the Nilgiris, which makes this 'perhaps the most intensively studied part of rural Asia east of the Holy Land' (1989: vi). The Nilgiris stand out not only topographically, but also historically, as an area relatively cut off from the rest of India until the British established hill stations there in the early nineteenth century. It is also ethnically and linguistically distinct, with its various ethnic minorities having their own languages. As a result, it has received more than its fair share of attention from Western explorers, and more recently anthropologists and linguists - notably Rivers (1906), Mandelbaum (1955), Emeneau (1964 [1958], 1971, 1974), Zvelebil (1973, 1982, 1988), Hockings (1980 etc.) and Kapp (1978 etc.).

Little is known about the history of the Nilgiris before 1819, when John Sullivan became the first foreign settler there. The British soon established a sanatorium and encouraged traders to hold a weekly market at Ootacamund, now generally known as Ooty. Before this there had been no market on the plateau itself, nor did Badagas use coinage among themselves. Coffee was introduced to the Nilgiris in 1838, and tea in the 1860s. Between the 1860s and the 1880s a number of measures introduced by the British radically affected the landholding and livelihoods of the mountain people. The cultivation of new lands to which tillers had no title was banned. In 1863, swidden agriculture, an important supplement to village horticulture throughout the Nilgiris, was banned. And in 1882 the Madras Forest Act prohibited the cutting of timber in the Nilgiri forest. At this time tea was being rapidly developed by the British, and many indigenous people turned to plantation labour.

The introduction of tea and coffee, coupled with rapid increases in swidden agriculture by Badagas, led to the destruction of most of the forest on the Nilgiri plateau. This has left only a small, broken band of forest on the lower slopes of the hills, and it is in this area that most Irulas live.

## 1.2. The 'Scheduled Tribe' as a unit of study

### 1.2.1. Tribe and caste

I chose to study a group classified officially as members of a 'Scheduled Tribe' (henceforth ST) with the general intention of assessing what this label meant to those those doing the labelling, and to thus labelled. Hundreds of groups of people in India are classified as 'STs' by the Government of India, for bureaucratic and political purposes. This classification marks out fifty million people in India who, by virtue of some degree of separation in hill or forest areas, and in many cases by virtue of imputed racial, cultural, and linguistic distinctiveness, are identified as separate from the Hindu caste system of the plains. However, the categorisation is often misleading; it serves as a multi-purpose reserve category for a wide variety of groups ranging from the politically autonomous tribes of the North-East Frontier provinces to groups so well integrated into plains society that they differ little from the various Harijan (ex-Untouchable) castes. The ST category includes those who live in almost total isolation as hunter-gatherers, other isolated groups who practise swidden agriculture, and some who combine these activities with horticulture, trading forest products, and whatever employment may be available to them on the fringes of multi-caste society.

Members of the STs are usually referred to as 'tribals' in English or as *adivasis* - 'original inhabitants' - in most languages of India. It is far from clear that the majority of groups classified as STs are descended from aboriginals who inhabited India before the arrival of the Dravidians and Aryans (a distinction which is itself clouded in uncertainties). The question of whether *adivasis* have a longer pre-history of racial antecedence on the subcontinent is not a significant concern to me here, interesting though it may be to a palaeo-anthropologist. I am content to use the term *adivasi*, as this term is used by Irulas and most others in the Nilgiris to identify those groups which are considered to have been indigenous to the mountains for numerous generations. The term is often used with pride by those to whom it refers, and in the Nilgiris it refers to the endogamous groups called Irulas, Todas, Kurumbas, and Kotas.

Badagas, who are thought to have moved to the Nilgiris several centuries ago from Karnataka, are not officially classed as STs, but are sometimes called *adivasis* by people from the plains, simply because they are identifiable as a mountain community. Nilgiri Irulas, who intermarry with other Irulas of the plains in



Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala, may well have moved to the hills a few centuries ago, but unlike Badagas they have tended to occupy the forested foothills rather than the open savannah of the Nilgiri plateau. Their consequent isolation and low profile is doubtless what put them, but not Badagas, in the ST category.

It is isolation - some degree of political, economic and ritual independence from multi-caste society - which distinguishes STs from other groups such as religious sects and denominations, linguistic minorities, Harijans, and others that are also in some ways marginal groups but which nevertheless are involved in some kinds of symbiotic relationships with other castes. Politically, the segmentary principles which characterise most ST organisation might usefully be contrasted with the organic principles of caste society, but this is by no means clear-cut. Mandelbaum, for example, has suggested that in the Nilgiris 'the economic relations among the indigenous tribes were much like the usual *jajmani* system, and the tribes formed a kind of caste system of their own, although it was not in early centuries geared into the general caste system' (1955: 223).

In the popular and academic imagination in India, the stereotypical image of *adivasis* also invokes racial distinctiveness as well as general cultural backwardness and simplicity; but these are nebulous notions which cannot meaningfully be applied to all those groups categorised as STs. The category ST is not by itself a useful way of classifying peoples in India for anthropological purposes - as B eteille has pointed out, the process of intermingling of 'tribal' populations and Indian 'civilization' has been going on for thousands of years, and those currently classified as 'ST' 'cover all the modes of organization from the band to the chiefdom'(1980: 827).

The degree to which a group adopts the stratificational criteria of the caste system might be another means of distinguishing a Scheduled Tribe from a Scheduled Caste. Moffatt has emphasised that the alienation and degradation of those who fall into the latter category does not produce any compensatory or alternative ideology among them:

Untouchables do not necessarily possess distinctively different social and cultural forms as a result of their position in the system. They do not possess separate subculture. They are not detached or alienated from the 'rationalizations' of the system (...)The 'view from the bottom' is based on the same principles and evaluations as the 'view from the middle' or the 'view from the top.' The cultural system of Indian Untouchables does not distinctively question or revalue the dominant social order. Rather, it is continuously

recreated among Untouchables as a microcosm of the larger system. (1979: 3)<sup>1</sup>

By contrast, Irulas, like STs generally, do not seem to create intra-group stratification; rather than a 'view from the bottom,' theirs would be better described as a 'view from the side,' since they are not directly involved in ethnic stratification. Neither did I come across any clear emphasis on the stratificational ranking of ethnic groups in the Nilgiris described by Mandelbaum (1955) and Hockings (1980); the contexts in which any inter-group ranking might have been asserted were largely absent from my fieldwork situation, and the multi-caste festivals I visited were simply too large and chaotic to have served as arenas for the assertion of local chauvinisms.

It should be mentioned that although the categorisation *adivasi/ST* is generally imposed on groups by outsiders, the demand to be classed as ST may constitute a political claim made by those so classified; if ratified, this claim enables members of the group to take advantage of numerous governmental and charitable schemes aimed at 'tribal uplift.' These include special schools, drastically lowered pass marks in exams, and reserved places in higher education, the civil service and in government. Although ST is by no means a generally coveted social status it does, unlike the ex-Untouchable 'Scheduled Caste' status, at least have the virtue of ambiguity, and denotes independence. Badagas of the Nilgiris, for example, are engaged in a long-standing bureaucratic struggle to have themselves categorised officially as a ST instead of their less lucrative current bureaucratic status as a Backward Class. The economic and political advantages easily outweigh the social stigma which, many Badagas feel, is carried by the *adivasi* tag.

### 1.2.2. Race

The racial aspect of the ST categorisation deserves mention not because race in itself merits the interest of anthropologists, but because it is important to show how the ST categorisation has tended to provoke an interest in racial classification. A

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<sup>1</sup>In Mencher's article entitled 'The caste system upside down,' we are given a rather different 'view from the bottom' - 'those at the bottom appear to have a more explicitly materialistic view of the system and of their role in it than those at the top' (1974: 476). However, since this version is based on explanations elicited 'covertly' from informants rather than observations of their behaviour, it is not as incompatible with Moffatt's presentation as it might seem. It would seem plausible that those degraded by the caste system might overtly give verbal endorsement to high-caste rationalisations, covertly reject these rationalisations, and behaviourally give them implicit endorsement.

striking example of this is von Eickstedt's astonishing introduction to Iyer 1935, which includes the following passage:

In the open stretches of country, one finds light-coloured people of medium stature, ...in the forests live men of small stature and very dark skins ...in the secluded, massive, fortress-like Nilgiris, very fair-skinned and tall people are to be found. Thus, we see that the *various kinds of landscape find complete parallels in certain racial differences*. (1935: 7-8)

He contrasts the 'culturally and racially primitive types' of the jungles with the 'progressive' types of the open country, and suggests that though the former are 'zoologically' distinguishable from the latter, tribal men exhibit more 'transitional features' than do women, 'partly because of their sex, partly in consequence of the more or less strong intermixture with the progressive groups' (*ibid*: 16).

Clearly this would be a biological impossibility even if we could distinguish racial groups. Yet even Furer-Haimendorf, who has devoted most of his life to the study of 'tribals' in South Asia, appears to confuse racial and cultural distinctiveness:

The extreme primitiveness of physical type found among the Chenchus tallies with the basic characteristics of Chenchu culture and it is indeed rather the more primitive type which in this part of the world we would expect to find in a tribe of semi-nomadic food-gatherers, than the more progressive type, which resembles that predominant among the lower castes of the neighbouring plains population. (1943: 18)

Needless to say, I will not be trying to place Irulas on a continuum of either racial or cultural 'progressiveness,' nor trying to correlate their genetic make-up with their aptitudes to different ways of earning a living. The racial element in categorisations of STs has certainly influenced what has been reported about Irulas, however. Like the more famous Todas, they have been assigned to numerous racial types. Breeks (1873) found it hard to distinguish Irulas from Kurumbas, though according to him, they 'have a more marked Mongolian type of feature than Kurumbas. Their cheekbones were more prominent, the nose shorter and flatter.' More recently, Furer-Haimendorf (1943: 4) assigned them, along with Kurumbas, to the 'Malid' racial type, assuming that 'originally the Irulas and the Chenchus belonged to the same racial and cultural stratum.' (1943: 290), whereas Iyer and Bala Ratnam find a 'Negrito strain' in Irulas (1961: 48) and Noble (1968: 5) describes them as 'Caucasoid-Australoid' (whereas according to him Kurumbas are 'Australic-Caucasoid' and todas are 'Australoid-Caucasoid').

This erstwhile parlour game of genetic misfits may seem a frivolous target for a modern academic diatribe. But it seems worthwhile alluding to it, since it has also

tended to result in assumptions that *adivasis* are somehow congenitally disinclined to take up 'progressive' occupations like settled agriculture. This is an opinion which I frequently heard in India. Fürer-Haimendorf more recently (1977) emphasised the reluctance of 'aboriginals' to take advantage of government cultivation schemes; the simple use of the word 'aboriginal' in such a context carries implicit racial determinism. A Census Village Survey Monograph made a similar claim for Irulas in the Nilgiri village of Hallimoyar (Nambiar and Bharati 1965), again explaining their agricultural inadequacies with reference not to their recent history of plantation labour and enforced abandonment of swidden agriculture, but to the simple fact that they are 'aboriginals.' The reality is that many *adivasis*, including Irulas, do cultivate their own pieces of land successfully, both individually and in small cooperatives. If this is somewhat haphazard, then the reasons should be sought in social rather than in biological factors.

A great deal of the stereotyping of *adivasis*, like racial stereotyping generally, is not deprecation but rather well-intentioned romanticising. Thus Mahapatra writes of Santals, in a chapter headed 'A Good and Happy Life,' that 'looking at the Santal personality-structure, one notices that he is driven by "pleasure principle". ...for the Santal, disease and sickness are inimical to happy life. Disease and sickness are unnatural. He believes that a human being has a natural right to health and life, and consequently he ought to live to an old age' (1986: 38). Who, one might ask, doesn't value health and happiness in this way? There is an implicit child-metaphor in this kind of patronising writing, which portrays tribals as children whose play-garden is under threat by the big, bad, serious outside world. Mahapatra cites Huizinga's *The Decline of the Middle Ages*, suggesting that tribals, like Huizinga's medieval Europeans, are fonder of play than 'we' are; K.S.Singh is also clearly inspired by Huizinga's vision of lost medieval play-gardens when he tells us that 'A tribal is *homo ludens*' (1985: 84).

### 1.2.3. Adivasis and Hindus

Since this thesis is mainly concerned with religion, it is necessary to outline here some of the assumptions that have been made about the religion of *adivasis*. As long ago as 1909, Mauss chided Rivers for his failure to recognise the Hindu elements in the religion of the Todas; this is cited by Dumont and Pocock, who also note that 'most so-called "primitives" in India are only people who have lost contact' (1957a: 8). But although the majority of *adivasis* would also call themselves Hindus (depending, of course, on the context in which they were

asked), it has often been suggested that their religion is to be distinguished from Hinduism. Thus an article in the 1961 Census on the Kadars, a ST in Kerala, has this to say about their religion:

The Kadars are returned as Hindus in the Census, but it is safer to classify them as animists. They believe in ghosts, demons and evil spirits. They think that if they cannot keep the ghosts in good humour by offering chicken, cock and arrack, they will get angry and inflict curses on them. (Nambiar 1961)

This betrays the view that such beliefs and practices are theoretically outside the pale of Hinduism and peculiar to *adivasis*. One wonders how such writers arrived at the conclusion that 'animism' is alien to or distinguishable from Hinduism, an idea which had been effectively refuted nearly fifty years previously by Risley, who acknowledged (1915: 245) that 'no sharp line of demarcation can be drawn between Hinduism and Animism.' In any case, W.C. Smith has cogently argued that the idea of 'Hinduism' is not an indigenous concept of long standing, but a product of India's encounter with Islam and Christianity (1978 [1962]: 64). Once this idea became entrenched, the way was then open to the idea that the label 'Hindu' might be a diacritical feature of participation in a caste system; thus Mathur was able to assert that 'each caste tries to fit itself in one of the five broad [varna] divisions (in order to indicate that it is part of the 'varna' system, and thus *bona fide* Hindu)' (1964: 68). The implication is clear: 'tribal' groups which are not allotted a place in the *varna* system are not *bona fide* Hindus. The idea of deviation from a norm is likewise evident in Fürer-Haimendorf's insistence that Chenchus' use of Hindu names for their deities 'only thinly veils the original Chenchu beliefs,' which are 'clearly discernible beneath the veneer of Hinduism' (1943: 179).

While it is most important to recognise that deities' names are often false friends referring to a bewildering variety of contrastable deities, this warning should be applied to the study of Hinduism generally, rather than used to draw a sharp dividing line between 'tribal' and 'Hindu' deities. Berreman similarly states that 'Pahari Hinduism deviates from Hinduism of the plains, and by plains standards is not only unorthodox but actually degraded' (1964: 54), citing among other practices widow remarriage and worship of ancestor spirits, demons, stones, weapons, dyed rags, the sun, the moon, and constellations as evidence of this degradation. It is, however, unclear from his account how other Hindus would express their branding of the Pahari religion as 'unorthodox,' and in southern India at any rate, the worship of stones would hardly be regarded as 'degraded.' This word betrays the implicit use of an altitudinal metaphor according to which 'tribals' are inevitably 'lower' than everyone else. Even those who are honest enough to

recognise the absence of disjuncture between 'tribal religion' and 'Hinduism' tend to stratify religious practices in this way; Iyer and Bala Ratnam, for example, inform us that

There is a dovetailing between the lower forms of Hinduism, and the higher forms of tribal religion, so that it is rather difficult to draw a line of distinction between Hinduism and tribal religion. ...In all essentials, we may say that their religion today is a very simple form of Hinduism. (1961: 190)

Jebadhas and Noble, who carried out fieldwork (I presume briefly, judging from the superficiality of their ethnography) among Irulas in the same area as I did, even go so far as to reject the term 'deity' for the object of Irula worship:

Shortt (1868: 64) mentions cockerel and goat sacrifice to Maari, the Hindu goddess of smallpox. It is, however, probable that this was not a fully accurate recording. Irulas do not directly worship Hindu deities, so much as make sacrifices to appease spirits; this, an aspect of their animism, and the basic worship of the male and female principle (found also among Kotas) are important to Irulas. (1989: 287)

Having found 'deity' inappropriate for 'tribal' religion they then go on to reject the term 'temple': 'that Irulas associate spirits with natural objects (trees for example), may in part explain the general absence of temples in their communities' (1989: 287). Apparently they define 'temple' as a permanent building with a roof; perhaps they would call Irula temples 'shrines,' but the fact that these are often given temporary roofs at festival time indicates that there is little point in analytically distinguishing these from temples. These same authors also indulge in ridiculous sophistries in their attempt to distinguish Irula worship from that of Hindus; referring to the Irula priestly participation at the Rangasaami mountain-top festival, their interpretation is as follows:

We wish to stress, however, that the Irulas are promoting a dualistic system of worship. A participant observer at Rangaswami Betta will see an Irula priest performing typically Hindu ritual before stones, on one of which Lord Krisna's symbolic image is clearly sculptured. Ranga, in the Hindu's perception, is equated with Krisna and Vishnu. The Irulas themselves are worshipping the male principle. (1989: 299)

Noting the puzzling (to them) co-presence of a Shiva-*linga* and Nandi bull at this otherwise ostensibly Vaishnavite temple, they continue:

As the Irulas can readily appreciate the symbolic significance of the *linga* as representative of the male principle, their personal symbolic use of the *linga* and associated bull may easily be incorporated into the ritual which they perform for the benefit of Hindus as well. (1989: 301)

They make no attempt to say how Irulas express the 'male principle' or how it manifests itself in worship, or where they got this idea from. We will later learn from my own account that maleness and femaleness of deities in Irula festivals is not of paramount importance. Nor, of course, is there any interest in drawing a sharp distinction between Shaivite and Vaishnavite worship - but in my discussions with non-Irula Hindus in this region I rarely found these clearly distinguished in any case. Zvelebil is likewise bothered by the vague Vaishnava-Saiva syncretism of the Rangasaami temple:

the Irulas are not Vaishnavas; their religion is 'tribal,' i.e., non-Hindu, with a vague, indiscriminate Hindu (Vaishnava and Saiva) traits. How confused and superficial the Vaishnavism of the Irulas is may be seen from the fact that my informant could not answer my question as to a small idol on the top of the peak. (1988: 11-12)

He insists that the 'tribal' elements in Irula religion must be distinguished from the recently acquired Hindu elements, and that they themselves distinguish their own 'tribal' deities - *toga* - from Hindu deities which they call *dēyva*. I visited a majority of the villages which he went to, and never did I come across anyone making such a distinction - these two terms are used interchangeably, along with other terms for 'deity.' He even suggests that the Irula worship of 'the ancient triad' - anthill, snake, trees - is a pointer to 'ancient totemism'; again one is left wondering how he came to the conclusion that there was anything 'non-Hindu' about the worship of these three (Shulman 1980: 46ff, 110ff; Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1987).

English speakers in India often use the word 'superstitious' when describing *adivasis* - as they do also when disparaging village Hinduism as against Sanskrit Hinduism, or village people as against city people. Most anthropologists would probably agree that the word 'superstitious' generally serves only to indicate that the user regards the beliefs or practices alluded to as different from and inferior to his own.<sup>1</sup> It would not be hard to pick out numerous Irula practices and label them 'superstitious,' if by this we mean that the actions concerned are not empirically linked to the explicit instrumental ends which they affirm. But from a Western point of view, and defined negatively by the 'superstitions' they lack, Irula beliefs and practices would probably seem far less 'superstitious' - less different from

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<sup>1</sup>As it presumably does when Zaehner says that 'one of the paradoxes of Hinduism has always been the yawning gap that separates its higher manifestations from the frankly superstitious and magical practices that go to make up the religious fare of the rural masses' (1957: 3).

ours, less empirically inadequate or morally culpable - than those of most other Hindus. They don't consult astrologers or soothsayers, they have little idea of auspicious and inauspicious seasons, phases of the moon, days, or times of day, and they don't believe in institutions like *sevvai doosham*, the inauspicious astrological formulation which makes some Brahman girls virtually unmarriageable, or in *karma*, which rationalises the social injustices of the caste system. They aren't fastidious about pollution - outside a ritual context they appear unafraid of the wrath of deities coming down on them if they pollute their shrine; their aniconic worship links their religious practices with those of ascetics who are expected to 'meditate on the formless Supreme Soul' (Ghurye 1964: 87); they don't believe menstruation is polluting; their sex lives are uncluttered by any insistence on pre-marital chastity for either men or women; they aren't fussy about right-left symbolism in more than a vague sense, and don't believe that widows are inauspicious or responsible for their husbands' deaths; they are not obsessed by evil spirits and you will not find trees outside their villages laden with exorcistic charms and shoes, or bristling with anti-demon nails, as you will outside most southern Indian villages.

One small anecdote from a diary entry early on during my second field trip will serve to illustrate what might be called the 'pragmatism' in Irula attitudes to the supernatural. I was discussing one of the Irula myths with MuTTu, a Tamil from the plains, and GaDDä, an Irula. In the story, a poor man with sixteen children decides to shame a deity into feeding his family by stopping work and lying down to die with all his family. In the night, a band of robbers come into the forest and mistakenly hide their loot in his roof, and the poor man and his family find it in the morning and live happily ever after, thinking that they have indeed succeeded in shaming the deity into performing a miracle for them. MuTTu's interpretation was that this really was a miracle performed by deity, and that the poor man was stupid for thinking it only came from robbers. But GaDDä the Irula provided a more pragmatic interpretation: it wasn't really a miracle at all, and the poor man was credulous for believing that it was.

#### 1.2.4. Purity

Another reason for the categorisation of *adivasis* as 'non-Hindus' is that they lack the emphasis on the pure:impure opposition which is generally thought to be fundamental to Hinduism. Dumont and Pocock note that restrictions on menstruating women do not apply strictly among Coorgs (a fact which Srinivas found 'surprising' [1952: 104]) or among Pramalai Kallars - both of which live in



relative seclusion from other castes: 'we may propose the hypothesis that the restrictions are not found in cases where the caste lives in relative isolation, and remain in force in places where a greater number of castes live together. (Dumont and Pocock 1959a: 22) In other words, impurity is the concern of inter-caste but not intra-caste relations:

in an ideal isolated group of medium status, there would be a tendency for the neutral or profane condition to enlarge its boundaries by disregarding mild forms of impurity, whereas, on the contrary, this would subjectively endanger the status of a group living in close cohabitation with other groups of similar status. (*ibid*: 23)

The Kallar example does not support the isolation theory, however, for the simple fact that they aren't isolated. They are numerically predominant and socially dominant, however, and it would be reasonable to hypothesise a connection between absence of status competition and lack of concern with ritual purity. I was struck by the Irulas' lack of concern with the impurity which among castes in a multi-caste context surrounds menstruation and all life-crisis rites other than weddings. But to say, as Dumont and Pocock do, that those *adivasis* whose priests are slap-dash in their pre-ritual ablutions are 'not Hindus'<sup>1</sup> (1959b: 60) is to exaggerate the distinctiveness of the category 'Hindu.' In any case, contextual lack of concern with the pure:impure opposition is common to all Hindus, and to concede this is not to deny the fundamental significance of the opposition in Hinduism.

That the pure:impure opposition is emphasised more in a multi-caste context than among segregated groups appears to be consistent with Douglas's (1970: 14) theory that a group which seeks continually to affirm its closed identity vis-à-vis other groups is one which is likely to employ bodily metaphors in the emphasis on group boundaries. If *adivasi* society is characterised by some degree of independence it is hardly surprising that purity, which is primarily a group concern, should be less all-pervasive in *adivasi* society. Neither purity nor group conformity play important roles in Irula everyday life. In Irula ritual, as we will see, the notion of purity is crucial to the separation of the human from the divine and of the sacred context from the profane; but relations between people are not governed by rules concerning purity.

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<sup>1</sup>They refer to the Hill Saoras of Orissa, following Elwin's (1955) assertion that they do not place great emphasis on the notion of ceremonial impurity, and that shamans and priests often omit to bathe before worshipping.

If the greater individualism of *adivasis* makes them 'non-Hindus' because it limits the importance of purity for them, this contradicts the attempts that are made to distinguish them from Hindus by reference to their lack of concern with individual salvation and the Hindu doctrine of *karma*. Again, Fürer-Haimendorf has suggested that for Hindus

the belief in the effects of merit and sin on the modes of reincarnation reflects the operation of the individual conscience and sense of moral responsibility independent of direct social pressures. This is the beginning of a motivation of moral conduct different from the prudential and often opportunistic incentives prevailing in most tribal societies. (1967: 180)

It is true that Irulas, like many *adivasi* communities, are for the most part ignorant of the doctrine of *karma* and make few connections between behaviour in this life and the fate of the soul in the afterlife. But I doubt if they can meaningfully be distinguished from Hindus on this account - ignorance of the doctrine is common in the South of India, and rejection of it is not unheard of in the North (Sharma 1978 [1973]a: 26; Keyes and Daniel 1983 *passim*).

### 1.3. Fieldwork

#### 1.3.1. First field trip: August to December 1986

I went out with the intention of carrying out a comparative study of Irula villages in the Nilgiris and surrounding plains, concentrating on variations in cultural patterns according to the degree and kind of contact they had with members of other castes. I chose them as a group which seemed to be interstitial both topographically - living between the 'tribal' society of the Nilgiri plateau and the 'caste' society of the plains - and culturally - having no clear political unity and having probably migrated up to the Nilgiris from the plains, at some earlier date than the Badagas had done.

My first field trip was sadly made difficult and curtailed by the unexplained reluctance of the Government of India to grant me a research visa. Although I was quite entitled, as a tourist, to travel around the Nilgiris, it was made clear to me by various local people that if I spent too much time in *adivasi* villages I would soon land myself in trouble. Anthropologists ought not to resort to surreptitious fieldwork where honest fieldwork is possible, or carry out fieldwork at all where they are unwelcome. But though this field trip necessitated some subterfuge and ignoring of the bureaucratic lack of welcome, I nevertheless felt justified in continuing with my work so long as Irulas themselves understood what I wanted to do and appeared happy to have me around. In the end, I have no qualms in saying

that the original decision not to grant me research permission represented neither the feelings of Irulas nor those of the majority of Nilgiri police and forest guards.

I can't say that this was a successful visit. I arrived full of enthusiasm and left despondent, having only occasionally stayed overnight in Irula villages and having made no close friends among Irulas. Although I insisted on visiting the villages alone, the nature of day-time visits prevented me from collecting field notes beyond the standard shell of 'hard' ethnographic data, rather like a slightly modernised version of the notes collected by Thurston and Rangachari (1909) nearly a century before me.

From the start of my first field trip, all my work was carried out without the aid of anyone engaged as an interpreter or field assistant, though there were many occasions on which I was helped initially by educated Irulas and their neighbours in translating through various permutations of English, Irula and Tamil. Although more 'data' could have been gathered more quickly had I engaged an interpreter or field assistant, there appeared to be several advantages in working on my own. Stumbling hopelessly over many sentences as I did to begin with, I was soon identified as a helpless child rather than a bureaucratic threat. On the occasions on my first field trip that I did formally engage an interpreter I felt considerably more uncomfortable than when I was on my own; despite the many government and non-governmental assistance programmes, many Irula villages are not accustomed to being interviewed at length by outsiders, and when I was using an interpreter I felt not only that people were less likely to start chatting voluntarily, but that my work began leaning towards sociological questionnaire methods, away from the true spirit of participant-observation.

I had another reason for wanting to work without interpreters or assistants. The direct questioning method of enquiry, problematic in most fieldwork contexts, seems to me to be especially unsuitable to most applications in India, where what Malinowski (1949 [1923]: 315) called 'phatic communion' is considered an appropriate mode of response to serious sociological enquiry. Malinowski was insistent that many linguistic exchanges were not intended to convey information:

Are words in Phatic Communion used primarily to convey meaning, the meaning which is symbolically theirs? Certainly not! They fulfil a social function and that is their principal aim, but they are neither the result of intellectual reflection, nor do they necessarily arouse reflection in the listener. Once again we may say that language does not function here as a means of transmission of thought. (*ibid*: 315)

Malinowski obviously exaggerates here, since certain thoughts - for example, thoughts of well-being towards the hearers - are conveyed even if conversation is 'phatic.' But a stranger in India who asks questions should always be aware of the probability that responses elicited in such encounters are concerned with channel maintenance rather than with the direct communication of information. Here, as in all phatic communion,

Each utterance is an act serving the direct aim of binding hearer to speaker by a tie of some social sentiment or other. Once more language appears to us in this function not as an instrument of reflection but as a mode of action. (*ibid*: 315)

In encounters between strangers in India, the motive for answering an enquiry is to restore the imbalance created by the question, no matter how inaccurate or irrelevant the answer. And this extends beyond questions requiring a yes/no response (which in India is virtually pointless from the point of view of scientific enquiry) to general questions requiring information telling you 'when,' 'how far,' 'where' and so on. To say 'I don't know' or 'I'm not absolutely sure about that' is not an adequate or polite response in India, and this cultural fact presents the fieldworker, like the tourist trying to find his way, with serious problems.

### **1.3.2. Second field trip: Biliyuur, January to October 1988**

It behoves the fieldworker to be optimistic, and I still retain an optimistic view of the first field trip as an essential backdrop to and preparation for my second field trip which, research permission granted, lasted from January to October 1988. On this occasion I arrived in the doldrums of despair over the separation from my wife whom I had married only a month before, yet perhaps because the conditions of my work were so dramatically improved in comparison with the previous visit, I was never once troubled by those dark periods of self-doubt that most fieldworkers seem to suffer.

It was my original intention to make a comparative study of Irula-only villages and those villages in which Irulas lived together with substantial numbers of other ethnic groups. It turned out that in the Nilgiris there are no villages in which Irulas live together with more than a handful of non-Irulas. I decided to base my study on a single large village on the assumption that I would have more opportunities to witness festivals and life-crisis rites.

Having on my first trip chosen the village of Biliyuur as the most suitable place to stay because of its many contacts with other villages and ease of access by bus, I

settled there from the start of my second field trip. It is near the road about half-way from Kotagiri in the Nilgiris to Mettupalaiyam on the plains; there are half-hourly bus connections to Kotagiri and Mettupalaiyam, either journey taking an hour. There is a population of about four hundred, most of whom live in three lines of small tin-roof huts built for them by the government about twenty years ago. Many Biliyuur people frequently stay overnight in still smaller mud and thatch huts in their gardens up to a mile or so from Biliyuur. There are two small hamlets with about six households each, Tudikere and Mandarai, each about a mile away from Biliyuur. Paths lead directly through the forest to eight other Irula villages within a three-mile radius.

The day I arrived in Biliyuur at the start of my second field trip, I was allotted a hut to myself in the centre of the main village. I had considered trying to arrange to live with a family, but given the size of the huts I would have had no place to keep my notes and other possessions. Several neighbours offered to cook for me, but it was clear that there would have been no way to reciprocate in kind, so I decided to do all my own cooking. The only difficulties I had to begin with were in persuading neighbouring women that I wanted not only to do my own cooking but also to fetch water, wash clothes, clean the hut and purify it with cow-dung, by myself. After a week or so, this idiosyncrasy was understood and accepted with good humour.

During the initial stages of my stay in Biliyuur, many of the men seemed more suspicious of me and more reluctant to talk with me than the women were. I later learned that this was because they were involved in illegal wood poaching, and were worried that when I wandered along forest paths conversing (albeit in halting Irula) with my hand-held tape recorder, I was radioing back to forest guards or to what they called my CIA base. Although I did not find, as I had been warned I would, that Irulas were so antisocial and introvert that whole villages would empty on my approach, it is only fair to note that segregation from the outside world is a feature of the vast majority of Irula villages. Most are on inhospitable steep, rocky ground, connected to roads by tortuous paths and often surrounded by dense forests; members of other castes living only a mile away will not have any clear idea of where the village is, and will assure you that if you set off without an Irula guide you are bound to get lost or bump into rogue elephants, bison bulls, and tigers. And although most Irulas regularly visit market towns it did seem to me that they were remarkably quiet when I met them on plantations, on the buses, in the markets, and at the coffee board; in these settings they conform closely to the

stereotype of linguistic deprivation which Shakespeare encapsulated in the phrase 'dull and speechless tribes' (Sonnet 107). Amongst themselves, however, they are not only not speechless but indulge themselves in orgies of supererogatory linguistic exchanges.

One aspect of Irula culture did, however, have a most important and, I think, beneficial influence on the way I carried out my fieldwork; in contrast to my experiences with members of other Indian communities, there was a striking absence of over-enthusiastic informants in Irula villages. Whereas Dumont (1986 [1957]) appeared to collect most information for his monograph on the Pramalai Kallar from one informant,<sup>1</sup> I could never have achieved this among Irulas, since no-one ever wanted to lecture to me or dictate notes<sup>2</sup>, myths or exegeses to me unless I asked persuasively for this kind of information. Connected with this, I think it fair to say that just as Hinduism may be said to be a tolerant religion in contradistinction to the converting religions, so Irula culture - at least with respect to me and to the other outsiders in the village - is the extreme antithesis of what might be called 'converting cultures'<sup>3</sup>; it was entirely up to me how I spent my time, what activities I joined in with. They were glad if I came to a festival or to a funeral or wedding, but seemed not to care whether or not I made an offering or contributed, as others did, to wedding or festival expenses. They were evidently pleased that I

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<sup>1</sup>Revealingly, he describes the man who could reel off the most names of deities as a 'much better informant.' Why judge the value of an informant on the amount he says, on the number of names he can reel off? Surely many such informants are misleading windbags who are liable to waste the ethnographer's time and fill his notebooks with twaddle. This is a clear indication of Dumont's entelechic approach to ethnography - find the most 'informed' informant and represent the system as it 'should' or 'might' be rather than as it actually is. (Dumont 1986 [1957]: 396)

<sup>2</sup>With the notable exception of one man who very repeatedly and formally, though drunkenly, insisted that I note down that 'our ancestors are all-powerful; if we keep them happy, they will help us succeed at whatever we do.' and that 'nowadays anybody can come and go in our village, but in the past nobody, not even one of your white ancestors, would have been allowed to pollute an Irula village.'

<sup>3</sup>It is possible that this is connectable with the status of the group concerned, and with the greater degree of concordance between cultural features of low-status groups in India and Western democratic ideology. It is noteworthy that Kathleen Gough (1956), Joan Mencher (1974) and Moffatt (1979) all say that they felt more comfortable among Untouchables than among higher castes. Zvelebil asks, 'why does a Westerner feel more comfortable and somehow more 'free' with a Toda, or even an Irula or Kurumba ...than with a high-caste Hindu? Because, like a Westerner, a tribal is basically (to use Louis Dumont's terms) a *homo equalis*, whereas a Hindu is typically a convinced *homo hierarchicus*' (1988: 3-4).

learned to speak Irula but would probably not have passed comment had I, like the other outsiders some of whom had been there for over twenty years, spoken only Tamil to them.

## 1.4. Irulas

### 1.4.1. Livelihood

There are at least 6,000 Irulas of the Nilgiri mountains (5,900 in the 1981 Census), and they constitute a continuous endogamous group. It may be that at some stage in the past Irulas lived principally by hunting and gathering, combined with shifting cultivation of millet in the forest. The first reference to Irulas in Western scholarship was provided by Ziegenbalg's *Malabarisches Heydenthum* in 1711 [cited in Zvelebil 1988], who describes them as living in dense jungle and avoiding other people.<sup>1</sup> But Buchanan, who visited the Nilgiris in 1800, reported that they lived by small-scale cultivation and by trading in timber, in addition to their hunting and gathering activities (1807: 462); and soon they were reported to be taking work on the plantations (Shortt 1868; Thurston and Rangachari 1909: II, 377; Francis 1908). At the same time, Lushington (1902: 147) noted that Irulas were bringing beeswax, deer antlers, gum, honey, avaram bark, red creeper, myroolam fruit, tamarind fruit, and soapnut to official Madras Forest Department collection centres.

Compared with the much less numerous Todas and Kotas - both of whom number under a thousand - Irulas have received remarkably little attention from visitors to the area. Astonishingly, Mandelbaum actually fails to include Irulas in his enumeration of the 'four indigenous peoples' of the Nilgiris (1989b [1956]: 144ff), and when he does mention them, he describes them as a 'tribelet' in contrast to Todas and Kotas, who rank as 'tribes' (1989a: 7).

The fact that they mostly live away from roads on the forested slopes of the Nilgiris, rather than on the Nilgiri plateau, doubtless goes some way toward explaining their low profile. More important perhaps is their liminal status as a people who, though classified as a 'Scheduled Tribe' and referred to as *adivasis* ('aboriginals'), nevertheless have relatives on the plains and may well be descended from people who moved up to the mountains only a few centuries ago. They lack a

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<sup>1</sup> 'Iruher, welche Leute gleichfalls sich in groszen ticken Wildnissen aufhalten, und nicht viel unter andere Menschen kommen.' [sic]

clearly bounded culture like that of the colourful Todas whose clothing, social structure, religion and physique have attracted the attentions of hundreds of scholars worldwide, of whom the most famous is Rivers (1906). Still today, a proportionately far higher percentage of the government grants made available for the 'uplift' of Nilgiri Scheduled Tribals is spent on Todas than on Irulas.<sup>1</sup>

Today, although no Irulas derive more than a tiny fraction of their livelihood from hunting or gathering, an air of mystique still surrounds them due to their relative isolation in forest areas. Most of them live by combining small-scale cultivation of cash-crops (coffee, tea and fruits) and crops for domestic use (grain and vegetables) with wage labour on tea and coffee plantations and on the roads, and keeping some livestock, most commonly a few goats and hens. Gathering forest produce - soap-nuts, honey, firewood, and sandalwood - brings in additional income.

Although at the turn of the century they were already living mainly from plantation labour and trade in forest produce, Rivers refers to Irulas, along with Kurumbas, as 'wild, dwarfish tribes' (1906: 6). And recent government tourist publications describe them as a wild, forest-dwelling tribe living by hunting, going around semi-naked and wearing elaborate tribal jewellery, none of which is true apart from the fact that they live in the forest. The linguist Kapp, who worked among the neighbouring Kurumbas in the 1970s, describes Irulas as 'hunters setting traps and snares, and food gatherers' (1978: 167), and I can only assume that local people, probably including some of the Irulas themselves, fed him this kind of misinformation. Such romanticisation can be readily explained by the mystique of the forest and the tendency throughout India to attribute specific occupations to castes for decades after they have abandoned them. Just as the cobbler castes remain cobblers long after the plastic flip-flop industry has put them out of business, so Irulas remain 'hunter-gatherers' long after the prohibition of hunting and gathering in the Nilgiris. Similarly, Mandelbaum (1989b [1956]: 176) describes Kurumbas as 'mainly a hunting and gathering people' even though they were already described as swidden cultivators in 1603 at the time of Finicio's visit.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Verbal communication with members of the Kotagiri Tribal Women's Cooperative.

<sup>2</sup>Exaggeration of 'backwardness' produces scaremongering still today. A retired Deputy Tahsildar at Ooty to whom Zvelebil kindly gave me a letter of introduction on my first visit, insisted that the remoter Irula villages were the last places in the world where smallpox was still rife. He also told a story of being captured as a child by Kurumbas who intended to use him as a human sacrifice. On that visit I also saw an article by sixth-formers of the Kotagiri Public School which



The problem, again, is that of entelechic representation; it is formally satisfying to represent forest-dwellers as hunter-gatherers and plains-dwellers as agriculturalists, But the livelihoods of most communities in the world are more diverse than either of these labels could convey - and since diversity is often crucial to survival, this untidiness must be recorded as an ethnographic fact.

Irulas have probably never been 'pure' hunter-gatherers, and have always been an interstitial group between the 'tribal caste system' (Mandelbaum 1989b [1956]: 177) of the Nilgiris, and the caste society of the plains. It does appear, however, that the Nilgiri Irulas are characterised by one cultural feature common to most foraging societies - namely, a reluctance to save money or food or to make long-term investments in land or in careers. This was noticed by several observers in the nineteenth century; Ross King blamed their lack of cultivation and storage, and their on-the-spot consumption, for the fact (or claim) that they often suffered starvation.

Obviously today, armed with our more relativistic understanding of the alternative 'affluence' of hunter-gatherers (Sahlins 1974 [1972]: ch.1), we would be more likely to applaud than disparage this kind of *ad hoc*, limited-want survival strategy. I myself noted what might be called a 'foraging' attitude to sources of income; although Irulas can increase their earnings on estates by accepting the responsibility of *meestri* - an estate foreman in charge of a group of casual workers - most are reluctant to do so as they would be committed to working more days than they want to. Most also prefer to remain as insecure, poorly paid casual workers rather than committing themselves as contract workers and reaping the insurance and pension benefits. Also, most families had numerous sources of income, resorted to on an *ad hoc* basis. As well as seasonal income from their own gardens, they could earn money from the sale of various forest products including, illegally, firewood and timber; several went for occasional building work or sold winnowing baskets and brooms they had made; the local Nilgiri Adivasi Welfare Association, which sponsors 800 ST children in the Nilgiris, was also seen as a source of occasional income on occasions of rites of passage, and of presents of clothing at festival time. In sum, whereas Zvelebil bemoans what he calls the 'proletarianization' [sic] of the Irulas, saying that 'socially and culturally coolie-work [on plantations] represents

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informed me that Todas still regularly throw unwanted female offspring off mountain-tops.

disintegration and demoralization' (1982: 114), I found myself admiring their steadfast refusal to be proletarianised.

Also, almost every Irula family in the Nilgiris has been allotted some land, usually one or two acres per family, and never more than four. In all the most populous Irula areas, the lower foothills, coffee is the main crop in these gardens, and is usually sold at the coffee cooperative society in Kotagiri. Tea, guavas, jack-fruit, oranges, and papayas are often grown as commercial crops, and various grains and vegetables are grown for domestic consumption. On average a man will spend up to half his working week tending his garden (depending on the season), and spend other half as a wage labourer on plantations, in the forest, or on the roads.

There is a slight preference for men to work the gardens around the village and for women to go further afield to work on the plantations. It is always men who inherit and are in control of gardens, though during harvest-time and regularly for tea-picking they are helped out by women. There are very few Irula gardens which bring in greater financial dividends than plantation work.

Sunday is always a day off work, when the men, sometimes accompanied by their wives, go to the markets at Kotagiri and Mettupalaiyam to sell and buy. Those who can afford to do so take Monday off too, and this is also a market day in these two places.

#### 1.4.2. Identity

It is interesting to note that the association of Irulas with the forest influences not only the popular image of them but also academic anthropological accounts. In places, the account of Coimbatore Irulas by Govinda Reddy and Chellaperumal of Madras University (1987) makes them sound like a special kind of forest-dwelling wild animal - for example, having referred to the Irula as 'a fairly primitive tribe' they refer to 'the Irula mating pattern' instead of discussing this as marriage customs (1987: 73); similarly, Zvelebil (1982: 13) discusses their 'habitat.

Politically, wildlife metaphors seem to colour the attitude of bureaucrats towards Irulas. The strong injunction against foreign tourists visiting 'tribal' settlements, for example, can only be understood as a protectionist measure. Irulas are also thought to need protection against themselves: although many of them in theory possess full (*paTTa*) rights to the land they till, the title deeds are all kept in the

Taluk office, because the officials assume that they would sell the land if they had the papers. In other words, it is official policy to treat Irulas as not quite fully rational human beings.

The attitudes to Irulas as I came across them in conversations with non-Irulas could generally be characterised as mild disparagement mixed with wonder. As with other forest and mountain-dwellers in India, they are attributed with special powers as magicians, sorcerers, and diviners, but on the more positive side they are also the custodians of forest and mountain deities. There can be little doubt that in some ways their status is associated with that of venerated forest-dwelling ascetics. Yet at the same time they are held up as negative models of licentiousness, simply because marriages among tribals are 'love' marriages rather than arranged by parents. This illustrates the relativity of values in India; the sexual licence of film stars occasions only mildly tarnished respect, but with reference to *adivasis* it brands them as cultureless creatures of the jungle. Free love is not characterised positively as an alternative value; rather, *adivasis* are characterised negatively by what they lack. It is assumed that they have love marriages because they don't know any better, rather than from choice.<sup>1</sup>

The apparent incongruity of this mixture of respectful association with renunciation and disparagement of their hedonism disappears once we recognise that the two are intimately related. The aura of mystical powers deriving from renunciation attaches to Irulas synecdochically through the pre-festival austerities of the Irula priests at the forest temples. Likewise Hanuman, the monkey-god, derives his special powers from sexual renunciation, and this constitutes a rite of reversal, since it is patently obvious to anyone living in India that monkeys are not sexually continent. Since monkeys are seen as less sexually continent than humans, an ascetic monkey is all the more striking and his tapas is all the more powerful as a result. Something similar might be said of the Irula priest in the eyes of other castes. To them, tribals are closer to animals and less sexually continent; so an ascetic tribal who lives in the

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<sup>1</sup>A Tamil soft-porn magazine called *ParuvakaaLam* ('puberty, ripeness'), has picked up on Paul Hockings's *Sex and Disease in a Mountain Community*, and loosely used it as a basis for a series of titillating articles about 'wild tribals' living in the forests of the Nilgiris - illustrated with photos of colourfully attired but scantily-clad New Guinea highlanders. The original book is about the Badagas, the largest of the Nilgiri communities, who aren't officially classified as 'Scheduled Tribals' and most of whom don't actually live in the forest; but their mountain abode is enough for plains people to see them as *adivasis*.

forest away from his wife will acquire great powers through this renunciation, just as a rich man acquires more merit by renouncing wealth than does a poor man.

The ambiguous status of forest-dwellers who are outside the caste system becomes clear in terms of their interstitial position between both human and animal and between human and deity. Leach's theory of taboo, drawing heavily on Lévi-Strauss's *La Pensée Sauvage*, is of considerable assistance:

The general theory is that taboo applies to categories which are anomalous with respect to clear-cut category oppositions. If A and B are two verbal categories, such that B is defined as 'what A is not' and vice versa, and there is a third category C which mediates this distinction, in that C shares attributes of both A and B, then C will be taboo. (1964: 39-40)

Forest-dwelling tribals are deprecated as impure and semi-human, yet because of their association with the forest are seen as ideal mediators between humans and deities. Their wildness is symbolically exaggerated in ritual - in their their minimal dress, their chaotic tangle of hair, their theriomorphic actions when possessed, and so on. A few individual Irulas derive some income from their priestly functions and from employment as diviners, magicians and even, it is generally agreed, as sorcerers (though I never met any who admitted to this). Those who play these roles are likely to play up the mystique and wildness of their association with the forest.

As regards group identity, however, it is noteworthy that Irulas are uninterested in converting outsiders to their ways, and in practice rarely enforce group norms within the community either. This evidence contradicts Dumont's linkage of egalitarianism with intolerance and stratification with tolerance; bemoaning the increasing inter-group intolerance in India - notably the modern practice of forcing Untouchables to mend their ways before being admitted into the temple - he asserts that

The traditional hierarchical tolerance gives way to a modern mentality, and this is a totalitarian mentality: hierarchical structure is replaced by a single rigid substance ...egalitarianism, leaving the limited zone in which it is well tolerated, causes a profound modification and brings the threat of religious totalitarianism. (Dumont 1980 [1966]: 231)

I would agree that the result of imposing egalitarian ideals on a hierarchical society may be the appearance of religious totalitarianism, but it does not follow that this is generally a feature of egalitarianism. Nor can we assume any axiomatic linkage of inter-group tolerance with hierarchy - what about the strictly enforced rules against

lower castes dressing above their station, or trying to gain access to sacred literature? Dumont exaggerates the liberty of religious choice in the traditional system: there was no religious body imposing rules on people, but the framework within which choice operated for individuals was seriously circumscribed by notions of what was appropriate for one's caste. In any case, earlier in the same work he himself links egalitarian values with freedom of the individual. This crops up during his extraordinarily naïve discussion of 'traditional' and 'modern' societies:

As opposed to modern society, traditional societies, which know nothing of equality and liberty as values, which know nothing, in short, of the individual, have basically a collective idea of man, and our (residual) apperception of man as a social being is the sole link which unites us to them, and is the only angle from which we can come to understand them. (Dumont 1980 [1966]: 8)

Irulas think of themselves as *ërlä:ru* in distinction to the *kongä:ru* - a term they use with reference to all people from outside the Nilgiri area, though it particularly refers to people of *konganaaDu* (Coimbatore District). The diacritical identity marker most commonly used by themselves is their language, a Dravidian language closely related to Tamil and, like Malayalam, at least partly comprehensible to Tamils. It is this unique and ancient language that most clearly distinguishes Irulas from other castes; misleading statements in many past publications that describe Irula speech as a 'corrupt dialect of Tamil' or as a 'mixture of Tamil, Kannada and Malayalam' are no more true than to say that Kannada is a mixture of Sanskrit, Tamil and Telugu. I fully endorse Zvelebil's view that the Irula tongue must be seen as a language rather than a dialect, in recognition of the fact that it is not fully comprehensible to non-Irulas, though I don't share his enthusiasm for searching after a lost 'pre-Dravidian' language and for trying to 'sift what was genuinely Irula from what was acquired' (1988: 109). The important point for understanding their identity is that Irulas themselves refer to it as 'our Irula language' (*namma ërLa baasu*), and don't regard it as a form of Tamil, inferior or superior.

It is ironic that Morris, despite recognising that 'the Hill Pandaram form what Birdsell termed a dialectal tribe, a social unit defined primarily by linguistic and cultural criteria' (1982: 29-30), nevertheless falls into the trap of describing their language as derivative from Tamil and Malayalam rather than creative in its own right. I have argued vociferously against those authors who try to separate tribal religion off from Hinduism, and I would similarly recognise tribal languages are not disconnectable from those of neighbouring populations; but I find it equally important to insist on the recognition that tribal languages are not parasitic on

mainstream languages. They are not just the product of acculturation, but develop in their own way.

Linguistic factors seem to have limited influence on marital ties, and many marriages occur between Irulas who barely understand one another's language. Their villages are usually almost exclusively comprised of Irulas, although I never heard of any strong objections to non-Irulas living in their villages, nor did it seem that the few mixed marriages with non-Irulas were scorned or regarded as inferior.

Zvelebil (1982: 14) has tried to distinguish the *meele naaDu* (upland) Irulas of the Nilgiris from the *vëTTe kaaDu* (hunting forest) Irulas of the nearby Coimbatore plains, and from the *kasabas* (cow-herds) of the northern Nilgiri slopes near the Karnataka border. I am far from convinced that these are meaningful divisions, and they are certainly not unequivocally endorsed by Irulas themselves. If we take marriage as the most important criterion for assessing group composition, it is clear that there is no restriction on marriage between these groups other than that dictated by distance and difficulty of travel. As for Irulas' own statements, they tended to say that they could marry their own people (*namma êrLa makka*) wherever they lived, even (theoretically) as far away as Madras, and certainly in practice as far from the Nilgiris as Attapadi valley in Kerala and Mysore in Karnataka.

#### 1.4.3. Cultural heterogeneity

After my first field trip I came away with a strong impression of the extreme cultural heterogeneity of the Irulas - far more than I would have expected to find among any single caste on the plains. Areas of extreme diversity in Irula life include language, marriage customs, attitudes to temple worship and choice of deity, occupations and attitudes to gardens, dress, choice of residence and attitude to house improvements, food consumption, attitudes to drinking, and attitudes to the Nilgiri Adivasi Welfare Association and to the outside world in general. I think it safe to presume that this lack of homogenisation of culture, even when making representations to outsiders, is *because of* rather than *in spite of* their relative isolation from the caste society of the plains. Having no status relations to maintain vis-à-vis other communities, there is no need for Irulas to put on a homogeneous front to the outside world; but there is, nevertheless, enough contact with the outside world to result in what might be called *cultural foraging*, a relatively *ad hoc* selection from neighbouring cultures which produces a wide heterogeneity of attitudes and practices.

This impression did not change on my second field trip. My first visit had taught me that attitudes and practices varied widely from one village to another. My second field trip showed me the extent to which one single-caste village, Biliyuur, could be internally varied. There are Irulas living here who were born as far away as Mysore in Karnataka and Attapadi valley in Kerala; some families have members sending money home from government jobs up to a hundred miles away, others are entirely dependent on wage labour on local plantations. Some have joined several plots together to form well-kept and highly profitable tea estates, while others grow nothing but weeds and a couple of guava trees on their land. One or two were building themselves big houses in the village, while others have let their government-built huts fall apart and gone to live in tiny thatch huts on the edge of the forest. Some regularly visit major temples in the region, others have scarcely been to any Irula festivals outside Biliyuur. There is similar variety in the diligence with which custodians of deities keep their various outlying shrines: some go to great lengths to hold their festival every year in grand style, with large numbers attending, while others either just offer a couple of coconuts without any fuss, or else let the months go by while they argue about when to hold the festival.

Unlike lower castes and *adivasis* elsewhere in Tamil Nadu, Irulas have actually received numerous direct assistance from government 'tribal uplift' programmes, and this has undoubtedly brought sweeping changes in the last few years. Almost every village now has a school of some sort, and approximately 75% attend school at least until the age of 12. There is a wide variation in the kind of village Irulas choose to live in, ranging from roadside villages of 500 occupants with high school, hospital, and *pakka* (permanent-roofed) huts, to hamlets of two or three huts miles from the nearest large village (though not all the small hamlets are remote nor are all the large villages near roads). What is surprising, however, and was disappointing for me initially, given my intention to look at the integration of Irulas with other castes and tribes, was that none of the Irula villages have more than one or two members of other castes living in them, and that I never came across any Irulas living in non-Irula villages except temporarily for employment.

Since the 1980s it has been inadmissible to write an ethnography without making some assessment of 'what it is to be a person' in that society. Anyone writing on the category of the person in India is now bound to address Dumont's monumental suggestion that Indian society, like all 'traditional societies,' has 'basically a

collective idea of man,' and that the individual is present here as an 'empirical agent' but not as a 'rational being' and 'normative subject of institutions' (1980 [1966]: 9); thus, for Dumont, Indian society is 'holistic' whereas modern Western society is 'individualistic' - 'Where the individual is a paramount value I speak of individualism. In the opposite case, where the paramount value lies in society as a whole, I speak of holism' (1985: 94).

The pivot of such an assertion is whether a 'paramount value' is constituted by stated preferences or by practice. It is quite possible, for example, that a majority of the inhabitants of the U.K. would agree that the individual was of prime importance in our society, yet Bernstein was nevertheless able to draw a broad distinction, within this society, between '*position-centred*' families in which the status aspect of any social relation is salient, and '*person-centred*' families (1972 [1970]: 174-5). Regardless of the empirical validity of Bernstein's claim that this distinction follows the cleavage between classes (working class families being 'position-centred' and middle and upper class families being more 'person-centred'), it still suggests the inadequacy of describing the values of a whole society without reference to the level of interpretation; the same family might well assert the value of person-centredness or individualism despite practicing position-centredness or holism.

Actually, in the Irula case, the situation would seem to be the inverse of this. As in Bernstein's person-centred families, Irula practice pays little attention to status, role or privilege, and gives primacy to the person; but we will see later in this chapter [1.4.7] that there is a proliferation of apparently formal hierarchical roles in Irula society which suggest the preference for a 'positional' orientation. The lesson to be learnt is that characterisations such as these may not be applicable either to class in the way suggested by Bernstein (*ibid*) or to whole societies in the way suggested by Dumont (1980 [1966]: 9) and Douglas (1970: 35). A more prudent approach would be to apply them instead to particular *contexts* or to *levels of analysis*. It is a pity that Daniel, sensitive though he is to contexts and levels of analysis, feels he can nevertheless generalise about the 'person-centric orientation of Hindu culture' (1984: 70). This is in direct contradiction to Dumont, but he neither points this out nor acknowledges his indebtedness to Bernstein; had he done so, he might have recognised that the relativity of *dharma* (codes for conduct) might with equal justification been used to classify Hindu values as 'position-centred,' or 'caste-



centred.’ As for Irulas, their expressed values look highly position-centred; but in practice it becomes clear that individuals go ahead and do as they please.

It is worth contrasting this dichotomous characterisation with Gardner’s portrayal of the Paliyans of the Palni Hills. Like Irulas, they live in partial isolation on southern Indian forested mountain slopes, and follow livelihoods very similar to those of the Irulas. As in my account of Irulas, Gardner emphasises the ‘variation in form, variation in belief and knowledge from individual to individual’ (1988 [1972]: 438). But a contrast with Irulas emerges when he asserts that

it is usually impossible to elicit from Paliyans valid statements about behavioral modes or norms. They are not disposed, for example, to articulate rules about either the preferred place of residence for a young couple after marriage or the usual practice or range of practices in this regard. ...Again and again one runs into what is perhaps not so much a lack of order as a lack of concern for standardized formalization. Individuals rather than the group create order. That is, order is not taught. There is little conscious accumulation or transmission of generally accepted bodies of knowledge, no concern for traditional usage, and no appeal to precedent. (*ibid*: 438-9)

There is a similar lack of consciously collected or consistently applied tradition among Irulas; but in their conversations with me and in any ritual context there looms paramount an unrequited passion for form, for the right way of doing things. This is a theme which will be taken up in various parts of my analysis of Irula festivals.<sup>1</sup>

#### 1.4.4. Ritual integration with other communities

Irulas have an important place in the minds of other Nilgiri inhabitants and Hindus of the surrounding plains as *puujā:ris* (ritual officiants), musicians, and custodians of many of the forest and mountain temples. The pan-Indian phenomenon of forest and mountain-dwellers acting as ritual specialists<sup>2</sup> was a major topic of interest to me as I embarked on my fieldwork, and an influence on my choice of Irulas as subjects of my study.

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<sup>1</sup>Actually, it emerges elsewhere in Gardner’s account that the Paliyans are not entirely unconcerned with form: ‘if esthetics is defined as a concern with form as such, Paliyan disinterest should almost be predictable. But our expectations are not wholly borne out by the data; dance and music are enjoyed immensely by men and women alike. ...The enthusiastic performances and grinning faces during a night of dance speak eloquently for its importance’ (1988 [1972]: 439).

<sup>2</sup>Singh tells us that ‘the Sri Venkateswar temple of Tirupati, one of the foremost shrines in India, has been associated with Kurumbas, who have now moved away to the Nilgiris’ (1985: 98). Probably the Kurumbas he refers to are not those of the Nilgiris, but equally probably they were, or are, conceived as forest-dwelling tribals.

In major festivals in the Nilgiris and nearby plains the services of Irula *puujā:ris* and musicians are often required (though the musicians are often drowned out by larger Harijan bands and raucous Tamil film music). In particular, many Badagas feel dependent on the ritual services of Irulas in their festivals, though I found no evidence of a complementary feeling among Irulas of any dependence on Badagas. An Irula *gowDā* (priest-headman) performs this role for both Irulas and Badagas as initiator of agricultural activities - starting the ploughing, sowing the first seeds and beginning the harvest; this is explicitly associated the forest austerities he is ideally expected to undergo, which will be discussed below. Ross King mentions that a Kurumba performs a similar role for Badagas who require him to begin the ploughing of their land - 'otherwise the evil power at his command might be let loose to blight the expected crop' (1870: 43). Singh (1985: 89-90) refers to the practice, common all over India, of retaining the services of tribal priests even after tribals have been driven out of a village. Since they are the original tillers of the soil, their services are required for propitiation of local deities and demons. There are thus two logically contradictory preferences for favouring tribals as ritual specialists - as original tillers, they are required to propitiate local deities, and as forest-dwellers, they are required to conduct the worship of forest deities.

Hockings has remarked that 'there is a status hierarchy in the Nilgiris, but it has economic and educational determinants that should not be confused with the ritual determinants of caste ranking elsewhere in India' (1980: 8). His use of the term 'status hierarchy' is of course singularly inappropriate if, as he says, the 'determinants' of rank really are economic and educational. Actually Hockings' account informs us that in the Nilgiris, as elsewhere in India, hieratic and general ritual functions are typically assigned by the dominant to the dominated. Kotas have various roles to play at Badaga funerals, and Badagas reciprocate by attending but not playing any special roles in Kota funerals. Badagas often help todas by mediating at their council meetings. Such a system is the logical converse of 'hierarchy' in the etymological sense, since those who are priests are precisely *not* those who rule. Wherever possible, Irulas will employ lower-status Kurumbas as priests, just as the dominant Badagas employ Irula priests whenever they can.

This is of course not unique to the Nilgiris; all over India the priests at village temples and those who specialise in possession by village deities tend to be from low-status castes (Panikkar 1918; Harper 1957; Gough 1958; Berreman 1964), and

some authors have acknowledged that those Brahmans who act as priests are the lowest ranked among the Brahmans (Fuller 1979: 471; Parry 1980: 102). I cannot agree with the assertion of Das and Uberoi that 'the Brahman is seen primarily as the mediator between man and the forces of positive sacredness, while the impure castes are regarded as the mediator between man and the forces of negative sacredness' (1971: 38).

The obvious objection is that there is a conspicuous absence of indigenous terms for 'positive and negative sacredness.' I do not think that sacredness is ever regarded unambiguously as 'positive' or 'negative' in India or anywhere else, although the status of deities served by Brahmans is generally higher than that of the deities served by Untouchables. But though Irulas are much closer to 'Untouchables' than to Brahmans, it would be quite misleading to see the Irula priest as the mediator between man and the forces of purely negative sacredness. The deities served by Irula priests - the various manifestations of the goddess and Rangasaami, the main male deity of the Nilgiris - are objects of devotion as much as fear, and it would be entirely wrong to conceive of these as malevolent beings to be propitiated out of necessity by low-status priests.

During my first field trip and in the early part of my second visit, I paid considerable attention to the role of Irulas in large multi-caste festivals. Although this is not a major focus of this thesis, I will be referring to these festivals from time to time for comparative purposes; for the time being it is worth noting that despite the fact that they are in high demand at these festivals, Irulas seem to be quite uninterested in capitalising on this. Throughout the Nilgiris, they regard attendance at their own Irula-only festivals as more important than participation in major festivals in larger temples. Especially significant in this regard is the fact that the festival at Rangasaami peak, described by Thurston and Rangachari (1909: II, 374)<sup>1</sup> as the most important festival for Irulas, is no longer attended by most Irulas except those who live within walking distance; the majority of pilgrims at this festival now come from the plains, thousands making the complicated journey via two or three buses and ending in a three-hour walk. Instead, Irulas hold their own festivals on the same day in honour of the same deity, in smaller temples near various Irula villages.

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<sup>1</sup>Noble (1968) cites a reference to this as a multi-caste festival with Irula priests as early as 1812.

The relations between Irulas and the neighbouring Kurumbas are marked by an institution which inverts the superior rank of the Irulas in a striking way. Each Irula *siime* - a 'territory' comprising about twenty villages - employs a member of the Kurumba tribe, the *modāli*, who has special responsibilities at all ritual events. He should be present at all their life-crisis rites (especially funerals), and may be called in to settle disputes. The *modāli* is treated with great respect, even veneration, by the Irulas. When they tried to explain the institution to me, they referred to him as *namma guru* - 'our teacher,' *namma televā* - 'our headman,' and even *namma dēyva* - 'our deity.'<sup>1</sup> A week after my arrival in Biliyuur, the *modāli* intervened in a dispute and replaced the Kunjapane *maNiagā:r* - one of the headmen - on grounds of drunken irresponsibility. Annually at the *pongāl* festival in January, the *modāli* is presented with money collected from each household in his *siime*, and honoured by Irula musicians and dancers at his house. This is quite different from, though related to, the institution mentioned by Thurston and Rangachari (1909: II, 375) whereby two Kurumbas must shave one another to remove impurity at an Irula funeral; this obviously conforms much more closely to the pan-Indian phenomenon of lower castes removing the impurity of higher castes.

#### 1.4.5. Kinship

Irulas are divided up into exogamous *kulas*<sup>2</sup> (patriclans), which are generally reckoned to number about twelve, with between two and six or seven represented in any one village. Each *kula* is linked with a local ancestral memorial hut and spoken of as a territorial group linked by common descent. In all but the smallest villages, there are at least two *kulas* which inter-marry, and this results effectively in a moiety system. In Biliyuur it so happens that two *kulas*, *kuppā:r* and *pungā:r*, are fairly equally represented, with most members of other *kulas* having an *aNNā* -

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<sup>1</sup>The term obviously derives from the Dravidian word *modal* - 'first,' but this leaves an ambiguous etymology. Bird-David (1989: 272-3) assumes that, for Naikens, the ritual title *modale* means the 'original' settler of a particular village. Although it may have this derivation (the Irulas themselves acknowledge that their ancestors moved into Kurumba territory), the emphasis now seems to be on 'first' in the sense of 'precedence.'

<sup>2</sup>*kula* derives from a Sanskrit word meaning 'group.' Oddly, although *kula* would normally be translatable as 'clan' or 'lineage' and *jaadi* as 'caste,' the two tend to be used interchangeably in common speech. Thus I heard '*namma uurili raNDu jaadi - pungā:r jaadimu, kuppā:r jaadimu.*' ( 'In our village there are two *jaadis*, *pungā:r* and *kuppā:r* ') as well as '*namma kula ërLa kula-dä*' - 'our *kula* is the Irula *kula*.' Presumably this doesn't mean that they really confuse the opposite principles of endogamy and exogamy. Fürer-Haimendorf similarly notes that Chenchus use the word *kulam* for clan, though in ordinary Telugu usage it means 'caste' (1943: 87).

*dambi* ('brotherly') relationship with the *pungā:r kula*. The important social implication is that the principle of opposed but mutually dependent moieties is expressed constantly in Irula life. This is most dramatically evident during rites, but it is always evident in daily life, since any adult member of an affinally related *kula* must be addressed and referred to using respect forms, whereas all members of a brotherly *kula*, regardless of seniority, will always be addressed using familiar forms.<sup>1</sup> This expresses the opposition of categories; the ego-centred relation of an individual to close affines is expressed in the strict avoidance-behaviour which must be practised between married adults and opposite-sex parents-in-law. These pairs should neither address one another nor refer to one another's names, and they should avoid physical proximity.

Irulas readily talked about their *kula* system, about which *kula* could marry which, and about how marriages were arranged and conducted. Although they did not often readily compare their own system to that of other castes, they would when asked about it usually agree that they differed from Tamils in not allowing elder sister's daughter marriage; some, who had heard about the iniquities of dowry harassment, expressed pride in the fact that this practice is unheard of in Irula society.

The fact that Irulas divide themselves up into named exogamous *kulas* and that they usually know the *kula* of a friend or a relative makes it relatively easy to sort out the clan composition of any village and to assess favoured directions of marriage alliances. However, when eliciting statements in the abstract about which *kula* may marry which, complications arise; different informants in the same village will give different versions of this, according to which *kulas* his or her friends and relatives have married into, and the difference between statements on this matter elicited from different villages is even more marked. Almost always, they would say that there were twelve *kulas* and that the only important rule was that you musn't marry

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<sup>1</sup> This presents a striking contrast to mainstream Tamil society, where relationships between classificatory 'brothers' are typically strained and formal, whereas those between (male) cross-cousins are informal (Good, *pers. comm.*). I am tempted to interpret this contrast with reference to the ever-present threat of property disputes in mainstream Tamil society, and the comparative absence of these in Irula society; however, Morris tells us that among the propertyless hunter-gatherer Hill Pandaram of Kerala, 'close relationships between brothers are comparatively rare ...It is brothers-in-law rather than brothers, who associate most frequently. Where brothers associate freely they are almost invariably married to sisters' (1982: 141-2).

within the *kula*; further questioning however always revealed that they could only enumerate eight *kulas* at most, and that they thought of certain pairs of *kulas* as being in an *aNNā -dambi* relationship (i.e. brothers, not inter-marrying).

In many villages, one *kula* had a *baawā -maccā* (inter-marrying) relationship with all the others, and was said to be the *kula* whose ancestors had founded the village. Most of my data were collected from the Eastern Nilgiri area between Kotagiri and the plains, and in this region the following *kulas* are found: *kuppā:r*; *koDuvā:r*; *kurunagā:r*; *sambā:r*; *pungā:r*; *deevanā:r*; *kalkaTTi*; *pō:rada*; *uppaLiga*; *koppaLiga*.

The *kula* is not a group which regularly acts together for any purposes. Its main importance arises in discussions of permitted and forbidden marriages. In some disputes, notably those concerning marriage, the *kula* members will club together to provide each other with moral support. But the idiom of symbiotic interdependence of *kulas* dominates not only marriage relations, but also all rites of passage as well as festivals generally. Ideally each *kula* has its own deity and priests, and in some villages they have special festivals for the larger *kulas*; for example in Vaagapanai the *kuppā:r* members regard Maasani (Mā:riamma) as their special goddess; the whole village celebrates the goddess festival together at the village temple annually, but there is also a separate festival only for the *kuppā:r*. There are no villages where only one *kula* is represented, but in many villages and in certain areas there is a clear preponderance of one or more *kulas* (for example in Biliyur over 80% were either *kuppā:r* or *pungā:r*).

The *kulas* may at some stage have identified themselves with totems; the name *kalkaTTi* most probably means 'stone-tying,' and Dr Perialwar (Ooty Tribal Research Institute) tells me that some members of this clan still hold the snake-gourd in special reverence, and tie it to stones at special ceremonies. The *sambā:r* *kula* may at some time have held the *sambā:r* deer in special reverence. But I never met anyone who had any clear notion of this, nor any who could give any explanation of the origins or meanings of the *kula* names.

In any dispute, regardless of whether the main disputants are from different *kulas* or not, those discussing the dispute arrange themselves in opposite rows as if the principle of moiety opposition were relevant to the dispute. One incident will serve to reveal something of the significance of the *kula*. At Maasanā Meestri's funeral a colossal argument broke out suddenly, with the two main *kulas* immediately

rallying to the cause. All the *pungār* said they had been collectively insulted on a day when they had just performed sacred duties at the funeral. The argument raged for an hour or so, but was solved very formally with various people going off to buy betel and areca-nut to give to the *jaattis* (*kula* functionaries) and main disputants, and bowing to Mallā . The whole argument concerned a trifle - someone had forgotten to return a padlock key to somebody else. But it illustrated how important the *kula* can be in formal contexts - and how an informal incident can be turned into a formal dispute, and used as a pretext for reaffirming the opposition of the *kulas*.

Generally, after some enquiry, most Irulas will admit that they don't practise or even much admire arranged marriages; they don't believe they will last, because they lack that quality which we would call 'love' and they refer to either as *anbu* ('love, affection') or using verbal constructions such as *avāru riNDu peer paLagi-dā maduve maadinā:ru* ('they got married when they'd grown to like one another'). Even where marriages are arranged, it is normal for the groom to come and live with (and have sex with) the girl for a trial period, when he is known as *menemaappiLLee* - 'house-groom' - for a couple of months or so before the wedding; this actually happened in the case of the two Biliyuur arranged marriages I witnessed, though it was strenuously denied at the time. The trial period always involves the groom living in the bride's village/house; when she goes to live in his village or in his parents' house (if they are in the same village), they are regarded as married.

It is worth noting that although neither the principles of village exogamy nor of virilocal marriage are observed in practice, there are ritual indications that these principles ought to operate. Obviously a *kula* could not be thought of as a territorial unit if this were not so. Another indication is that the ideal man for the job of becoming possessed by the village deity is often said to be both an affine and an outsider. And the existence of these ideals was brought home to me at the funeral of a Biliyuur woman which occurred early on during my fieldwork. She was born and married in Biliyuur, so that her 'brothers' and 'brothers' children' mainly lived in Biliyuur; when the moment came for their arrival at the funeral, they had to leave the village and make a ceremonial entrance in procession, carrying their white cloths and being 'welcomed' by Biliyuur musicians.

#### 1.4.6. Gender relations

It would be impossible to spend much time in an Irula village and not be struck by the fact that women are considerably more outgoing, outspoken and independent than women in most Hindu castes (though gender relations vary widely in India, depending on caste status and occupations). I myself found it easier, to begin with, to make friends with the women than with many of the men, and this was a new experience for me in India. Many women work on plantations, and this doubtless gives them an economic leverage as well as solidarity which they would lack if they were homebound.

More significant is the fact that most of the women do not have to move to far-off villages in arranged marriages. At least half the marriages in Biliyuur were within the village; where a man and wife are from different villages, it is common that the couple will live or at least spend considerable lengths of time in the woman's natal village. Although in courtship the assumption is that men are the agents and women the passive recipients of attention, the freedom of Irula women to choose spouses (and to have experimental love affairs) even after they have become widows, constitutes an important right which is denied to the majority of Hindu women. An elderly widow living a few yards from me began having an affair with a younger man during my stay, and this occasioned affectionate joshing rather than any embarrassment or disapproval.

It would be quite wrong for me to present gender relations as characterised by equality, however. Women are formally excluded from village politics and have to sit on the side-lines, and generally not participate, when the men are holding a meeting. Although legally entitled to inheritance, women do not inherit the parcels of land which were allotted by the government about thirty years ago. I didn't investigate this fully, but it is safe to presume that when the land was allotted, it was men who were consulted as 'heads of household,' so that only men's names were recorded in the title deeds. If this is indeed the case, it may constitute an important external influence on gender relations. They may help male kin with planting, weeding, and harvesting, but the men are entirely in charge of managing their land and marketing the produce.

Women never go to the market unless accompanied by men, and this constitutes an important restriction on their economic power - any surplus household cash is liable to be spent on alcohol by the husband unless the wife is forceful in insisting that it



be saved or spent on clothing. It is easy to see why the large multi-caste festivals, with their vast attached fairs, are attractive to women, who use them as opportunities to buy clothes, trinkets, toys for children, and household utensils.

Women's participation in village festivals is in practice, although not in principle, restricted; most of the worship and the séances are conducted and participated in mainly by men, and often women only arrive near the end, to make a family offering and to eat the communal meal. Women may become possessed and act as spirit-mediums, but the usual response to a possessed woman is to assume that she will not have anything worthwhile to say.

#### 1.4.7. Village functionaries

I have stressed that Irula society must be characterised as highly egalitarian. However, at a jural (as opposed to ideological or behavioural) level it could be said to be archetypally hierarchical in the etymological sense of the word, since each village ought to have a headman (*gowDā*) who is at the same time the custodian and *puujä:ri* (priest) of the main village deity. Ideally, the headman ought also to be the priest, and his control over the village is explicitly linked with his ability to 'control' the deity - in a sense he is the shaman who makes the spirit descend during festivals.

Irula society could therefore be said to be 'hierarchical' - or, to avoid confusion, 'hierocratic' - since the priest is ideally in charge of the village. The family, too, could be called hierocratic, since the senior male is 'priest' (*puujä:ri*) at the installation of an ancestral stone. This presents an important contrast with the Dumontian model of the rest of Indian society, in which the priesthood ('status' in Dumont's terms) legitimates but does not directly wield power (1980 [1966]: 213). Irula society is formally hierocratic but egalitarian in practice; Indian society is definitively non-hierocratic, but in practice it could be called so in the sense that members of the 'priestly' caste ally themselves, as Dumont has shown, with the rulers. Dumont inexplicably calls this 'the pure type of hierarchy' (*ibid*), and would doubtless regard the Irula form of hierarchy as an aberration.

However, the phenomenon of village headmen as religious leaders is not confined to 'tribal' society in India: Beals tells us of the Brahmin Gauda who is both ritual and political leader in the Karnataka village of Gopalpur, which 'creates its Gauda because the village has a need for a superior being, one beyond the ordinary.

Someone is needed who can deal with the great forces of the world outside the village, with government officials, and with the mysterious higher deities' (1966 [1962]: 53). Similarly, the Irula *gowDā* is both a pillar of the village (he adjudicates in disputes, his house ought to be in the middle of the village, and his compound should be the scene of most dancing in the village) and a communicator with the unknown world outside the village.

However, the emphasis is not on his special ability to deal with human officialdom, but rather in his contact with the spiritual and biological wilderness of the forest. Ideally he should, like Siva, spend half the year as an ascetic<sup>1</sup>, living alone in the forest and never washing or meeting people. This is no longer followed strictly, although I knew of several priests who spent some time in the forest in preparation for a festival. But it was often mentioned to me, and is often emphasised in public debates about proper conduct, that it is a shame that this custom is falling into abeyance. Ideally, the headman ought to match his centrality in social affairs with an equal time spent outside society altogether; in his ascetic phase, he should reproduce in exaggerated form the forest seclusion which sets Irulas off from other castes.

The *gowDā* is assisted by several village functionaries who are referred to as *paDittavā:r* - which literally means 'those who have studied,' but comes to mean 'those who have responsibilities.'<sup>2</sup> Each of the main *kulas* in the village should have a *jaatti* - a representative who officiates at all rites of passage and acts as spokesman for members of the *kula* in marriage negotiations and disputes. In addition there may be a *maNiagā:r* who is simply another kind of headman; in Biliyur there was never really a *maNiagā:r* during my stay, since the old incumbent was a drunkard and his younger brother, appointed in his place, was reluctant to accept office. In other villages, the *maNiagā:r* was the priest in charge of the temple, and might interchangeably be referred to as *gowDā*.

The proliferation of terms for various offices which are not, in practice, clearly distinguished, indicates, as I have said, the jural hierarchy as opposed to the ideological and behavioural egalitarianism. This is evidenced, too, in the wide

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<sup>1</sup>I use this word advisedly; the terms 'renouncer' or 'world-renouncer' are often misleadingly applied to those who perform austerities altruistically, as a social duty.

<sup>2</sup>cf the phrase '*anda paDippu nimma-gūTTa irukkudu*' - 'you're responsible for that.'

choice of tags added on to the end of sentences, which indicate degrees of formality. By contrast, the proliferation of personal nicknames used by Irulas indicates an interest in persons as individuals which we should not expect to find in a position-centred society. Burling suggests that westerners have lots of alternative forms of address because interpersonal relationships are complex and varied in our society (Dr, Miss, Sir, etc.): 'If Arabs need many words for camels, because camels are important to them, and if Eskimos need many words for different types of snow, so we too need many alternative words for our closest personal relationships' (1970: 88). But this analysis fails to distinguish terms like Dr, Miss, Sir, which are role-oriented, from nicknames, which are self-oriented; in the Irula case, the contradiction between the jural and the behavioural levels is indicated by the proliferation of both person-oriented and role-oriented terms.

### 1.5. Development of research interests

During my first field trip and the early part of my second visit I concentrated much of my effort on understanding the role of Irulas as priests and musicians in multi-caste festivals in the Nilgiris and surrounding area. In September 1986 I paid two visits on successive Saturdays to the mountain-top Rangasaami festival which I understood from Abbé Dubois (1906: 196), Thurston and Rangachari (1909: II, 375), and Zvelebil (1982: 156) to be of great importance to Irulas. During that visit and the early part of my second field trip I attended ten major festivals at which Irulas had important roles to play either as priests or musicians or else were involved in the mythology of the temple. The largest of these, the *baNNā:ri mā:riamma* festival, was attended by an estimated 300,000 pilgrims; although many Irulas were there, none had important roles to play, despite the fact that most people I spoke to associated the festival with either Irulas specifically or *adivasis* of the mountains.

Although Irulas often encouraged me to go to these festivals and assured me that they were 'Irula' festivals, and although many Irulas went along too, I gradually became aware that their prime interest was not in these large-scale multi-caste festivals but in their own Irula-only festivals held usually near their villages. The first of these I witnessed was the Mandarai Mā:riamma festival near Biliyuur, at which the *gowDā* officiated and which most of the villagers attended. I was immediately struck by the significance of the event to the participants as an occasion for entertainment, demonstration of village solidarity, and for discussion of private and public matters with deities and ancestors through spirit-mediums. This was

something quite different than what I had been led to expect by Zvelebil's assumption (without having witnessed the events) that Irula mediums uttered 'no more than a few words, in language not always quite intelligible' (1982: 159). Already at this first festival I was convinced of the importance of these séances as the key to understanding village ritual, cosmology, the relationship between humans and spiritual beings - in short, the metaphors by which Irulas live and die.

I was invited to make recordings of the séances so that I might understand them better, and from then on I decided to concentrate the bulk of my efforts on attending as many village festivals as I could, and on discussing the content of my recordings of séance discussions. My main justification for this research is that Irula society seems to me to provide few other opportunities for entertainment; few people saved enough money to go regularly to see films in nearby towns, and there were no sports or organised games outside the festive context. Holding festivals appears to be the main form of collective effort and hence of pride and collective identity; individual pride and identity, too, are worked out mainly in a festive context, although had I been more linguistically capable for a longer period of my fieldwork I have no doubt that everyday *ad hoc* meetings on verandas would have provided another rich source of this kind of data.

Recording of séances seemed to provide a kind of access to beliefs which is radically different from responses that are obtained from questions about beliefs; I will be emphasising the role of elaborate metaphor, irony, joking, scepticism, and even profanation in the séances - none of which would have been expressed in responses to an ethnographer's questions. The recordings also gave me a rich source of linguistic data providing insight into relationships between people, between spiritual beings and between spiritual beings and people, as well as an invaluable and reliable anchorage for discussion of religious and profane topics. Recordable séances provide a 'god-given' source of data for the anthropologist studying a society with no written tradition of its own, few myths, and a tendency to play down its own traditions in favour of 'great-traditional' Hinduism in discussion with outsiders.

I reiterate that I remain firmly convinced of the superiority of this kind of data, where it is available, to that which could be obtained using direct questioning methods. As I have said, during the early days of my fieldwork Irulas had given me no inkling of the importance of these smaller festivals to them, let alone hinted at

the content of séances. In recent years there has been increasing grumbling (e.g. Rosaldo 1984: 185) about the tendency in anthropology to focus too much on rites, ceremonies, games, and other activities which are clearly bounded and hence easily recordable. This problem of *entelechic representation* is endemic in social analysis; perfect rather than imperfect forms of social activity, and precepts rather than practices, tend to speak loudest and to lend themselves more readily to the process of encoding in texts. It is apparent in our popular use of the term 'culture' to refer to rigidified and explicitly-framed performances rather than than the flexible and implicitly-framed performances of everyday life.

Of course I am guilty of recording neatness rather than untidiness to the extent that I have chosen to write my thesis about ritual. But festivals leave considerable leeway for relatively free, unformalised behaviour; and I have paid as much attention as possible to the ragged edges of festive behaviour, which might have been dismissed as mere background noise by other writers more entelechic in their approach. Although I recognise that my discussion of the ritualism of the festival and of the séances would have been greatly helped by full comparison with the ritualism and linguistic exchanges of everyday life, there are practical limits to what can be achieved by carrying out fieldwork in a short time in an unfamiliar culture in a difficult language. It is to some extent inevitable that we will tend to bring back those bits of culture which are readily up for grabs. It is one thing to want to celebrate and record the untidinesses of a culture; it is quite another to accomplish this in a short time in an unfamiliar culture.

## 2. Festivity

### 2.1. The festive frame

The festivals described here took place in various Irula villages between February and September 1988; for the most part they were attended by Irulas only, mainly from the one or two villages concerned in each case, plus a few relatives from outlying villages. I call them 'festivals' because despite the frequent insistence that people went out of duty, there was always considerable enjoyment, entertainment and jubilation, and in each case they were in theory annual events, although not usually tied to any calendar.

A festival day and everything in it must be sacred, which means it must be framed in a variety of ways. This does not mean accepting Durkheim's insistence on an 'abyss' between the sacred and the profane (1976 [1915]: 318). Of course the sacred never can be hermetically sealed, so we must conclude that Durkheim's approach is entelechic - saying what 'the sacred' *ought* to be, but can only approach. What is important is the sacred:profane contrast, rather than the 'contents' of either pole. Societies vary considerably in the extent to which, and the manners in which, they try to frame entities, days, and behaviours off from profanity. Since framing works most obviously by processes of exclusion, it will help if I run through the kinds of exclusion involved in the various frames of Irula festivals:

- *Community exclusion* - non-Irulas are not generally present. This is not rigid, and outsiders like myself do turn up from time to time; but the presence of outsiders did on occasions become a topic for frame negotiation during the séances - in the presence of a Tamil forest guard, for example, there was a lengthy debate about whether the goddess was the goddess of the Irulas or of the Tamils.
- *Temporal exclusion* - the festive day is by definition a non-working day; even when not held on a Sunday or Monday, the festival precludes the possibility of working. Night, too, is excluded - at least from the part of the festival that takes place outside the village.
- *Activity exclusion* - in addition to a ban on work, there is a theoretical ban on what is normally done on a non-work day - going to the market.

- *Gender exclusion* - women are in practice absent from the first part of the celebrations in the forest, and are formally excluded from the blood sacrifices and from the men's dance. Menstruating women are excluded altogether, as is the priest's wife.<sup>1</sup>
- *Impurity exclusion* - ritual arenas must be purified by being sprinkled with water; and shoes may not be worn to the shrine (ideally they should be excluded from the path to the shrine also).
- *Exclusion of Domesticity* - the main part of the festival takes place outside the village; the domesticated goat must become not only purified, but metaphorically wild - it must jump three times before it is sacrificed.
- *Dress Exclusion* - the medium must take off his shirt, the priest's young assistant mustn't wear everyday clothes, but must wear a brand new women's cloth and women's jewellery.

### 2.1.1. Organisation and timing

A festival will usually be announced by word of mouth several days in advance by the priest, the keeper of the deity, who in more than half the cases was also the *gowDā*, the headman, of the village. Ideally, an image of the deity should be taken round the entire *siime* - the Irula 'territory' comprising about thirty villages - for several days or weeks before the event. This practice was only followed in two of

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<sup>1</sup>Fuller informs us that in the Madurai Minaksi temple, priests must be married, and this is usually explained by the need to have access to *sakti*, the divine power incarnated in the goddess - 'Only through sexual relations with his wife can a priest legitimately gain access to this power' (1979: 463). The Irula priest must likewise be married, and his wife plays a vital role in the festival, framing the event by washing the path as the deity leaves and returns to the village. The explanation for priestly pre-festival sexual abstention, which I heard from Irulas and others, was that the period of forest-dwelling renunciation, especially abstention from sex, was that this built up sufficient *sakti* to be able to deal with the goddess. In other words, whereas Fuller's informants claimed heterosexual intercourse as a pre-requisite to priestly ministrations, mine claimed *abstention* from sex as a pre-requisite. The explanation for this is quite simple. In both Fuller's experiences and mine, the idiom of the priest behaving in a wifely manner to the goddess is prominent; in order to take on this feminine role - a role of ritual reversal - the priest must temporarily renounce his husbandly role. The abstention from sex is part of the construction of the ritual frame - and this is all the more clearly marked if the priest has a normal sex-life to abstain *from*. In other words, in order for the priest to take on a wifely role with respect to the deity, he must have a normal husbandly role to temporarily abandon. [The phenomenon of transgenderism in male approaches to Hindu deities has also been discussed by, among others, Hildebeitel (1982: 80) and Bradford (1983 *passim*)]

the festivals I witnessed. The usual term for festival is *puuja* - an encompassing category best translated loosely as 'worship,' though it may in some contexts be used specifically to refer to the presentation of coconuts, bananas, incense, and camphor as individual family offerings to the deity.

Another way of saying 'festival' is the verbal phrase '*toga maaDugeemu*.' The verb *maaDugeemu* means 'we are doing,' and the noun *toga* means 'assembly,' 'crowd,' 'festival,' 'temple,' 'corpse,' 'dead person's spirit,' 'ancestral spirit,' 'forest spirit,' and any kind of invisible force. The linguistic evidence points to an emphasis in these festivals on communal rather than private worship: the phrase for 'to worship' is the same as the phrase for 'to call an assembly,' whereas if a family goes independently to a temple they will say '*puuja maaDugeemu*' - 'we are worshipping.' We will see later how '*toga maaDugeemu*' can also with some justification be translated as 'we are making the deity,' since there is emphasis in symbolic action and in séance discussions on the total dependence of the deity on human worship

Although festivals are not usually calendrically fixed (though Irulas often talk as if they were), they may be tied to a particular day of the week. Irulas will insist that their festival days are rubricated by tradition and by the stars, when in fact they are rubricated relatively spontaneously in *ad hoc* debates about who can come on what day. Several days before the festival, a large bunch of home-grown bananas must be buried or placed in a tree near the temple; the deity protects these from animals and insects during this time as proof of his/her willingness to control animals and prevent them from eating crops<sup>1</sup>. These bananas are then retrieved and used as offerings made by the priest at various stages throughout the day. They are clearly distinguished from the purchased bananas which people bring as individual offerings.

Rites in Irula village settings are consistently held during the day-time only, and although there may be dancing into the night in the compound in front of the priest's house, the emphasis is on finishing the forest rites before dark. The phrase 'it's getting dark' (*jaama aagudu*) is said even in the morning, as a hyperbolic

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<sup>1</sup>Srinivas tells us that at Coorg festivals, the head of the goat sacrificed to BhadrakaaLi is suspended from a tree until the communal dinner. 'It is said that vultures and kites do not touch the carcass of the "village goat," nor does the flesh go bad as it normally would in the heat of summer. This is attributed to the power of BhadrakaaLi.' (1952: 197)



phrase meaning 'hurry up, we have to finish all this before nightfall.' This is an important contrast with the multi-caste festivals I witnessed, which spanned several days and at which most of the key ritual events took place at night or at dawn. Also, the fact that all but two of the Irula festivals I attended were completed in a single day casts doubt on Zvelebil's confident assertion that 'The structure of *any* Irula worship ...is a tripartite event spread over two to three days. Usually the three parts are a procession, the worship proper, and a feast accompanied by song and dance' (1988: 144); most probably, this is the product of an informant who felt that festivals *ought* to be conducted in this way.

Typically, signs of activity become apparent by nine or ten o'clock, with the priest and family making preparations and reminding others that a festival was to take place. The first ritual event is often delayed till mid-day, usually by a combination of disorganisation and quarrelling. Irulas insist on reconciliation *before* a festival; this is a manifest denial of what is an essential function of the rite - namely the resolution of differences. The desired result of communal harmony must not just be performatively expressed by the rite but, according to Irula exegesis, achieved before the rite even begins.<sup>1</sup> There are cases where the true effectiveness of a rite must be emphatically denied if the rite is to retain such effectiveness. This is such a case, although of course the manifest denial of the harmonising function of ritual actually constitutes a latent expression of this function.

### 2.1.2. Village *puuja*

Before worship can begin, the compound in front of the priest's house is purified with holy water, sprinkled from a brass vessel with *tuLachi* (sweet basil) leaves. The priest should be helped from the beginning by a boy, typically his son; whereas the priest will usually wear a simple white *lungi* (waist-cloth) - often old and not even washed for the occasion - his assistant is contrastedly dressed up in semi-female attire, consisting of ankle-bells, women's coin necklace, and new length of floral cloth hung over the left shoulder. Accompanied by Irula musicians - a *kwā:l* (oboe-like reed instrument) and three kinds of drum, playing at this stage the 'deity-

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<sup>1</sup> Much the same is reported from villages in Karnataka by Beals (1974: 155), where people insist on goodwill before performing a festival, so that there is at least a pretence of peace between enemies, yet at the same time ritual provides a forum for adjudication of conflict.' Indeed, we might say that the defining feature of religious adjudication or resolution of conflict is that the event is masked or denied. This would shed light on the Biblical injunction to 'first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift' (Matthew 5: 23)

music' (*toga kwā:l*) they make offerings of coconuts, bananas, camphor, incense, glowing embers, betel and areca-nut, set out usually on two separate banana leaves on the ground in front of the house. A bell is rung at all key moments. Sometimes a mixture of bananas, jaggery, milk, and dried pulses (the standard *panjamiirdam* offered in temples all over India) will be prepared and offered too. Both priest and assistant take great care to keep their left hands behind their backs throughout, and they will usually have a folded banana leaf in their mouths or a cloth over their mouths to prevent them from breathing on the offerings.

This *puuja* brings the deity out of the house where he/she is 'kept'<sup>1</sup> by the priest. The deity at most of these festivals is usually thought of as a goddess, and even at those festivals where the main deity is male, participants tend to forget this, and address or refer to the deity as *taay* ('Mother'); however the more usual word for addressing the deity is *saami* - which in normal parlance means (male) 'master.' Femaleness, albeit an ambiguous non-empirical femaleness, is the default gender of the deity at these festivals, so I will generally refer to the deity as 'she.'

After *puuja* offerings, the deity is incarnated by a medium; this will usually not be the priest but someone selected after *ad hoc* discussion. Unlike most communities in southern India, Irulas do not have hereditary mediumship; becoming possessed and allowing the deity and other spirits speak through you is a skill that is acquired through practice at festivals, and is practised effectively by only a few people in each village, most of them men. At this stage the séance discussions are usually kept to a minimum, the main object being to solicit the deity's permission to hold the festival and proceed to the forest temple.

Sometimes, there is a movable image which is brought out of the house; otherwise, the deity is represented at this stage by ritual paraphernalia such as offering plates and bells, as well as all the *puuja* offerings (betel, and areca nut, incense, camphor, glowing embers, coconuts, bananas). The important point to note is the circularity of the symbolism - the deity *is* the items offered in worship (temple plates and brass bells have been previously donated in fulfilment of vows). People prostrate to these offerings, to the prospective medium, and to any goats which may have been

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<sup>1</sup>The phrase used is *nii aanDa dēyva* - 'the god kept by you.' It is important to note that the verb *aaLigee* (from which the participle *aanDa* comes) incorporates the ideas of both protection and control.

brought for consecration.<sup>1</sup> The reader may be, as I was, somewhat puzzled by what appears to be the proleptical divinisation of the *tools* rather than the *objects* of worship. I suggest that the following syllogistic reasoning is behind this performative divinisation:

- All objects of worship are divine.
- When deities accept offerings, they inhabit them.
- *Ergo*, if we worship the sacred offerings, they will become divine and hence accepted.

As we will see, however, there is an important caveat which reminds participants that this optimistic syllogising doesn't work automatically; the deity must be seen to inhabit, that is, to divinise and hence accept the offerings. The goat must 'jump,' the medium must enter a state of trance, and, ideally, the temple fire must start burning without the aid of a match. If these events are slow in happening, it is a sign that the deity is displeased.

Typically, such displeasure is expressed later on; for now, the deity, speaking through the medium, gives permission to proceed to the forest temple. The priest's assistant, accompanied by the musicians playing a special 'path music' - '*vöyyi kwä:l'*' - takes the temple tray with *puuja* items and, ringing the bell, leads a procession straight out of the village and (usually) uphill into the forest temple. Before they set off, the priest's wife must pour water over the priest's and/or his assistant's feet, and along the path for several yards. She must not leave the homestead at all during the day, and in the evening she must pour water along the

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<sup>1</sup>We should not be surprised that the deity inhabits all the materials used in the construction of her identity; the offerings indicate, and hence *are*, the deity's power to attract worshippers. Reiniche tells us that at the goddess festival in Tirunelveli District, the goddess is often represented by a pot of water with a coconut on top. Thus the symbol used to purify and sanctify the shrine (being poured over it) is also a manifestation of the deity herself, having been divinised by *agamic* mantras.. The pot 'has, so to speak, the functions of the *utsava muurti* [moveable image]'(1979: 164). From Logan we learn that in Madurai domestic worship, 'the lighting of the lamp constitutes in itself an act of worship *for* the gods, an idea expressed by informants. ...Yet, there is also a sense in which the burning oil lamp is representative *of* the gods. It may be circumambulated and special verses recited for it, just as for a deity' (1980: 77-8); unfortunately, she doesn't tell us how a distinction between worship *for* and worship *of* the gods could be expressed in Tamil. In the *lrula* case, I doubt if such a distinction could be made.

path as the procession returns to the village, and once again wash the priest's and assistant's feet.

### 2.1.3. Temple *puuja*

On arrival at the temple and again later before the offering of both kinds of *pongäl*, there will be circumambulation of the main shrine, either in clockwise or anticlockwise direction and sometimes several times in each direction; the nearest I could get to a consensus on this was that ideally it should be three or seven times anti-clockwise, then clockwise - and this is often done when *puuja* items are offered. What is worth noting at this stage is that while practice suggests an *ad hoc* approach to clockwise and anti-clockwise movements, there is a clear preference for denying that there is anything *ad hoc* about it. The importance of getting the direction right is expressed in commentary throughout the rites and not just in response to my queries; Irulas are aware of the importance attached to the direction of circular movements by other Hindus, but are quite unsure which is meant to be auspicious.<sup>1</sup>

At the temple, more of the same offerings are made; now the deity will be represented usually by several stones and sometimes some statues. Deity-stones are usually unhewn stones said to have been dug up from underground after being indicated to the priest's ancestor in a dream, and they may be flat and wide, or tall and pointed. Sometimes there are also rounded river-stones, like those representing ancestors in the *koppe* (ancestor-hut). Any distinction, then, that may be drawn between deity and ancestor with reference to their representative stones is not clear-cut. Neither may we draw any clear distinction between statues or images of deity and stones or trees, since both of these may be decorated anthropomorphically with pairs of eyes and pieces of cloth.

There is always a main shrine and an outer stone or shrine known as the *edirmuDi* - 'opposite image.' The former is usually more elaborately decorated with green branches, mango leaves, long trailing green *kundapene* flowers, and coconut shoots. Much of the day's ritual activity involves making offerings first to the main shrine, then to the *edirmuDi*. Offerings brought by individuals, though, are only brought to the main shrine.

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<sup>1</sup>See section 3.5, for a fuller discussion of this issue.

The way to the shrine will have been cleared in advance, and the shrine itself may have been cut free from the encroaching jungle - and it will later become apparent that this action is of paramount importance as an all-pervasive metaphor of the festival. Now the *puuja* begins. *Puuja* can be analytically categorised into various kinds of process, each of which merges into the others: these are *purification*, *embellishment*, *personification*, *feeding*, *honouring*, *sanctification*, and *exorcism*.<sup>1</sup> Limes are cut and rubbed over all deity-stones and spears (*purification*), thrown in four directions (*exorcism*), and impaled on spears (*embellishment*); oil, milk and a mixture of bananas, unrefined sugar and pulses are smeared over the deity-stones (*purification*, *feeding*, *embellishment*); the deity-stones are sometimes dressed in red cloth and given tinsel eyes (*embellishment/personification*); betel leaves and areca nuts are offered, camphor is lit on top of the leaves, and coconut, camphor flame, embers are circled three times, usually clockwise (*honouring*); musical instruments and pots for cooking are decorated with red dye and/or ashes (*sanctification*, *embellishment*).

It is noteworthy that the symbolism of white-red-white, often represented in Tamil ritual by stripes of ash and red powder (Beck 1969: 555), is paid little heed here; both red powder and white ash are always available in Irula rites, but either may be smeared indiscriminately on foreheads, deity-stones, etc., at will, without any systematic attention being paid to their opposition or combined patterning.

Milk is poured over the deity-stones, and though this is on the one hand a purificatory or 'cooling' action, it also alludes to the mythical motif, common throughout Tamil NaaDu, of a cow 'feeding' a forest deity by shedding its milk over the bush, anthill or stone in which the deity resides (Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1987). Similarly, the banana mixture and coconut milk are smeared over the stones as well as being offered as food which may be returned as *prasaada* (sacred food which has been offered to a deity). Even the ashes from the fire must be interpreted both as part of the purificatory apparatus and as *prasaada* left over after the deity has 'consumed' the fire, and smeared on the foreheads of the worshippers. In other words, purification and feeding merge into one another.

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<sup>1</sup> Irulas very rarely refer to the corresponding Hindu textual categories, such as *abisekam* (anointing), *alankaram* (embellishment), *cakkur daan* (eye-giving), *praaNapraisThaa* (breath-giving), *naivediyam* (feeding), and so on.

#### 2.1.4. *Pongäl*

Another major event is the preparation of a cooked offering, vegetarian *pongäl* prepared from rice, vegetables, pulses, and ghee. Theoretically, but not always in practice, this should be prepared by 'sons-in-law' of the priest. This is cooked beside the temple and in a ritualistic rather than a casual way: pots and the cooking site must be purified, the fire lit from the sacred flame. Most significantly, as the mixture comes to the boil the event is treated in a manner analogous to the 'possession' of the medium and of the goat by the deity. Musicians play the deity-tune as it comes to the boil, everyone shouts with joy as it finally froths up, and at the last possible moment handfuls of rice are thrown on top to prevent it from boiling over. The process and the metaphors associated with it are much as described and analysed by Good (1983: 234ff); the emphasis is on the transformative excitement of boiling, an excitement which must be controlled at the final critical moment, at which point the priest (and by extension the worshippers) demonstrates control over a literally effervescent event. However, unless there is to be no meat offering, this *pongäl* does not form the basis of a communal meal; this will be provided instead by the non-vegetarian *käri pongäl* prepared from the sacrificed goat.

Throughout these early stages there will usually only be men and perhaps a few children at the temple; women begin to appear only in late afternoon, usually around the time of the second séance. There is no explicit prescription or preference for this, nor any jural or ideological basis for the clearly observable behavioural pattern whereby women keep further away from the main shrine than men, except when they come to offer *puuja*, to dance, or to get possessed. Yet these practices were adhered to rigidly in most of the festivals I witnessed.

There is a typical pattern of offerings in the village rites, from the pure raw banana and coconut offerings outside the priest's house and again at the temple and sometimes at a well or secondary site, to vegetarian *pongäl*, to raw blood at the moment of sacrifice (this is usually sprinkled over the deity-stones or at least over the outside shrine), culminating in the cooked *käri*, which is shared by everyone, with men and women eating apart but at the same time.

### 2.1.5. The séance: collaborative expectancy

The central event of the festival, never omitted in practice although often said to be inessential<sup>1</sup>, is the séance at which at least one medium, often several in series, induces in himself (aided by the manipulation of ritual symbols and by vocal support of bystanders) a state of trance in which occult entities 'enter' his body (*toga vārgudu*) and 'speak' through him (*toga sollugudu*) and hold heated discussions with worshippers. I will leave detailed discussion of the séance personnel and of the linguistic aspects of these séances for the next chapter, leaving open, for now, the question of the extent to which the language of the séance supports, elucidates, or contradicts visual symbolism and symbolic actions.

Briefly, the action of the séance is as follows. There is a preliminary discussion about who is going to get possessed; nominees protest, giving a variety of excuses for not getting possessed - most commonly that they are from the wrong *kula* (exogamous clan - the ideal medium is from another village and related by marriage to the priest), that they are tired, that they are ill or have been ill, that they have been drinking, or that they themselves have come with important questions they want to ask the deity. Finally someone is persuaded, and he takes his shirt off and sprinkles himself with holy water.

Next he assumes a foetal position, resting immobile for several minutes while the priest and others shout the deity to descend. Deity-music is played amid general clamour and chanting of 'hao! hao! hao!.' The medium begins tensing the muscles of his torso, hunching his shoulders and swaying slightly or quivering; more holy water may be sprinkled over the medium, and incense smoke will probably be waved at him by the priest. Others simply make gestures suggestive of willing the deity into the medium. Although the shouting is already addressed verbally to the deity rather than to the medium, gestures seem to be directed at the medium, but everyone prostrates repeatedly well before there is any visible sign of possession, and this is obviously directed at the deity. The medium may chew and swallow mouthfuls of bitter *neem* (*margosa*) leaves, whole limes, and lighted camphor or

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<sup>1</sup>Most of the contexts in which the séance was said to be inessential involved a taunt to the deity - 'Don't bother, we don't need you to come and talk to us!' This an obvious bluff, however, which becomes in effect an implicit admission of the importance of the séance. The overt message of the festival as a whole is that the magical power of things is greater than the magical power of words; in practice, the attention paid to lengthy séance discussions implies due recognition to the power of words.

flaming tapers. Occasionally the medium may burst out into violent shivers which look like the *proof* of possession, but as with the leaves, etc., this may be part of the process of *inducing* possession - actions consciously entered into by the medium as he attempts to go into a trance. This is an emic distinction, since the would-be medium may well get up after several bouts of shivering and a great deal of arching the spine, yet still say that he has had no sign of divine manifestation.

This may go on for an hour or more, with the medium getting up and apologising - 'sorry, nothing's happening.' He may give up altogether and another volunteer will be found. In addition to the above, the following methods may be resorted to in attempts to induce the deity to possess the medium: shouting encouragement and abuse at the deity; prostrating to the *puuja* items; confessing to faults (*tappu*); fetching more incense and other *puuja* items; cutting more limes and placing them among the *puuja* items or using them to purify the sacred arena - they may be crushed underfoot or quartered and thrown in four directions as an act of exorcism; everyone shouting 'hao! hao! hao!' in unison; bringing the music closer to the medium; sending word back to the village that more worshippers are needed.

Possession is announced suddenly with a dramatic display of shaking, hissing, bellowing, stumbling around and self-flagellation with a cane or whip, which are obligatory interchangeable items of ritual paraphernalia. There may follow a solo dance, with one of two postures being adopted by the medium - hands on hips, hopping with one leg crossed in front of the other, or squatting with hands on knees, hopping like a rabbit (these actions are unmistakably theriomorphic, and this significance of this will be discussed later). More lighted tapers, flaming camphor, or *neem* leaves may be consumed. Occasionally the medium may whip members of the audience but more commonly he will ask to be whipped by the priest or village headman. At some stage, usually following a bout of rage, the medium will be soaked with large containers of water. The deity-music continues until the medium raises an arm as a signal for silence; then the discussion begins.

The discussions may last up to a couple of hours and are divided up by interludes in which the medium takes a short break from talking. These interludes are conducted in and out by the verbal request and arm-raised signal, respectively, of the medium, and they consist of a bout of music (the deity-tune) and usually more running, stumbling, bellowing, and self-flagellation by the medium. The main human discussant of each topic is either the priest or a bystander brought in by the medium



either by verbal hints or by physically dragging him or her out of the crowd to the front of the temple. More men than women take part in these discussions, but this is partly because women tend to let men do their talking for them. A particular section of the discussion, which may span over several interludes, is usually terminated by a handshake between the main 'client' - the person whose problems have been discussed - and the medium; the 'client' will usually prostrate, as will anyone else concerned in the discussion.

The séance ends with the medium collapsing on his back. He is revived by the priest, who splashes sacred water on his face; he then sprinkles himself with sacred water and puts his shirt back on.

#### 2.1.6. The sacrifice

The next event after the séance is usually the blood sacrifice. Usually at least one goat, provided by an individual or family in fulfilment of a bargain struck previously with the deity, will be sacrificed.<sup>1</sup> The consecration may take place immediately before the sacrifice at the shrine, or several hours before at the priest's house; always it follows the same pattern which is parallel to the consecration and subsequent possession of the medium; the goat is brought before the shrine, decorated with flowers, and sprinkled by the priest, by the sacrificer (sacrificiant), and often by several bystanders, with sacred water. The aim is to get the deity to possess the goat and to announce acceptance of the offering by making the goat jump or shake, ideally three times, although once may be deemed sufficient. All the measures listed above with reference to beginning the séance also hold good for the consecration of the goat. Similarly, the process may take an hour or longer, but people are prepared to wait; the possibility of not offering the goat is often considered but in practice this never happens - eventually the tiniest movement may be interpreted as possession if need be.

Goats are beheaded beside the main shrine, with women and children absenting themselves or turning away; sometimes, but not always, a cloth is put up to shield the goddess's eyes, and this is explained in terms of feminine sensitivity. Usually the corpse is held over both the main deity-stones and the *edirmuDi* to sprinkle them with blood; the head, with severed right fore-leg in its mouth, is placed at one of

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<sup>1</sup>There is a myth known by several Irulas which relates how in the past a boy had to be offering to the goddess; a flea saved the day by giving the goddess the blood of a goat to taste, persuading her that goats' blood was sweeter than that of humans.



these shrines. Sometimes the blood is only spilled over the *edirmuDi*, but unlike in Tamil temples this pattern is not observed consistently enough to merit a contrast of the main shrine and the *edirmuDi* on this account (cf Good 1985: 123). A *kāri pongāl* - boiled meat and rice - is prepared, again by the 'sons-in-law,' and eaten communally after being offered at both shrines. The goat's head belongs to the priest<sup>1</sup>.

Cockerels are offered too, with less fuss, and their heads, too, go to the priest; but their bodies are kept for consumption individually by the families who offer them.

### 2.1.7. Dancing

Dancing is an essential activity at the forest shrine and again back in the village, where it may be continued well into the night. Dancing is the main idiom in which Irulas collectively honour anyone - a deity, a visitor, a marrying couple, a corpse. Like the music, the dance involves a short set of prescribed movements lasting about half a minute, which is repeated *ad infinitum* in cycle. There is a fast-moving 'men's dance' and a much more controlled 'women's dance' from which men are not excluded - indeed, it is paradoxically more often danced by men alone. Both dances go in a circular movement round the musicians, gradually moving round anti-clockwise. Many of the gestures are vaguely animal-like, and this suggested theriomorphism is accentuated by the 'hao! hao! hao!' shouts which are the same as those shouted by and to the medium.

### 2.1.8. Women's activities

The following ritual actions I see fit to call 'women's activities' even though they are not consistently categorised as such by participants. As with the explicitly-named 'women's dance,' men are not excluded from these activities, which may even be carried out entirely by men.

*Family offerings* - the standard offering is one coconut, two bananas, incense sticks, and camphor. This is one of the few festival activities in which women participate more than men. Offerings are received in the main shrine, the coconut is

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<sup>1</sup>Echoing the other name for the *gowDā* . which is *televā* - 'headman,' and bringing to mind the Hindu sociography which represents the Brahman as the 'head' of the social body.

broken, and usually half of the coconut and half of the total bananas brought are returned.<sup>1</sup> The remainder is kept and shared out by all after the main *pongāl* meal.

Another item of women's participation is the bringing of *flour-lamps* - cone-shaped colourfully decorated sweet offerings prepared by women in the home; this is omitted in smaller festivals. It is connected with human fertility and mainly carried out by young married and unmarried women (occasionally including pre-pubescent girls who don *saaris* for the occasion), but I have seen elderly women bringing these too, and even men bringing flour-lamps prepared by their wives.

Women are also usually expected to bring *water* to the temple, and this may be poured over the medium or, later on, over all the deity-stones. A more formal way of organising this is for seven young girls - 'virgins' - to take a special purificatory bath, worship at a nearby well, and each bring water; there are numerous corresponding Tamil myths about seven virgins, but I never came across an Irula who knew any of these.

*Peripheral possession* - although the occasions at which this may happen may easily be predicted, and although the women evidently make a conscious decision to get possessed, this is peripheral in that it 'just happens'; it is not set apart in a special place and time, it does not involve prior purification or collective action, nor is it expressly desired as part of the proceedings. It usually happens at key moments such as the village *puuja*, just after the offering of the flour-lamps, or as an extension of the dance. No attempt is ever made at verbal communication, and it is typically brought to an end with a splash of sacred water in the face, administered by the priest.

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<sup>1</sup>Since the standard offering is one coconut and two bananas, the return is usually half a coconut with one banana sitting in it; at first I resisted the temptation to see this as a transformation of the phallic siva-lingam found in every Hindu temple, but I was to learn that in India, as perhaps everywhere in the world, the banana is a standard phallic symbol in joking; so when I learned that coconuts stand for testicles in Irula jokes, the following Freudian interpretation suggested itself: one coconut and two bananas is a visual spoonerism, an anomaly, which is converted by the priest into the satisfactory phallic symbol of the *siva-lingam* and *yoni*. In this achievement, at least, the Irula rite can be said to have a happy ending. I rest my case.

### 2.1.9. Returning to the village

Women return in an *ad hoc* manner as soon as they have eaten, certainly before dark. Men will usually dance for a while longer, often in an increasingly uncontrolled, dionysian manner - by this time many will be drunk in any case. They, too, should try to get back before nightfall, but unlike the women at least some of the men should return formally in procession as they came, led by the priest and his assistant accompanied by the musicians. The women, then, return sober but informally and *ad hoc*; the men return drunk but formally and in a continuous straight line.<sup>1</sup>

There will be one final *puuja* offered inside the priest's house, and the festival concludes with dancing, which may continue well into the night.

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<sup>1</sup>cf Good (1983: 240), where we learn that in the village festival in Tirunelveli District, the male inhabitants go out to the festival venue as a politically and economically structured body, whereas women come individually or in domestic units.

## 2.2. Aspects of interpretation

In my exposition of the general pattern of behaviour at Irula festivals I have so far provided very little by way of interpretation of these events. For the remainder of this chapter I will attempt to provide some preliminary interpretations in order to bring this behavioural skeleton to life; major conclusions will only be arrived at after presenting and discussing the séance dialogue. I should explain the logic behind my discussion of the ritual symbols and of the linguistic play of the séance - both of which might be described as the *narrative metaphor* of the festival. I will be using the word 'symbol' in Turner's sense to refer to the 'smallest unit of ritual which still retains the specific properties of ritual behaviour' (1967: 19); I will try to avoid using the word in the common sense of signifier. Symbols are the tools with which people operate metaphors in ritual.

But I want to avoid the symbols-as-things versus metaphors-as-language dichotomy that tends to creep into analysis - for example, when Gilbert Lewis suggests that 'what the metaphor is in the sphere of speech, the symbol is in the sphere of things' (1980: 197). It is unnecessarily restrictive to locate metaphor in speech-events as opposed to action; unlike the word 'symbol,' which refers to things and actions, the word 'metaphor' implies cognitive processes which happen to be employed in speech, but which are also implicit in actions and thoughts. The fact that it is most readily recognisable in speech shouldn't blind us to its all-pervasive influence on cognition (Richards 1936: 94). Metaphor is the cognitive process whereby we arrive at new understandings of one thing, idea, or event, in terms of another (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 3). Words employ metaphorical understandings and so do symbols - both are specific modes of metaphorical operation. We understand the manipulation of symbols by analysing the metaphors that lie behind the selection of those symbols and the things people choose to do to them. Metaphor provides the dynamics which allow symbols to resonate.

Of course, the task of reproducing metaphoric resonance on paper is a daunting one, since written analysis must proceed systematically, reducing ambiguities of interpretation and thereby reducing resonance. I hope that by sorting out different 'levels' of interpretation, I will be able to 'capture' (a scandalously reductive term!) some of the echoes which ritual metaphors have in the minds of participants. I have no intention of being rigidly schematic in my approach, but I hope that these metaphorical 'levels' will prove heuristically useful. I refer to 'levels' rather than to

'arenas' of interpretation, since there appear to be differences of *degree* rather than simply *quality* of mental effort required to think about different kinds of metaphoric process.

The most obvious level is the *instrumental* level. Metaphoric performances, whether in words or actions, are informed by obvious intentions directed at subsequent empirical results; as such, actions and words look very much like the 'bastard science' which Frazer assumed 'primitive' ritual to be primarily concerned with (1922: 49). At this level, the content of séance discussions concerns problems and their practical resolution - individual sickness, everyday personal misfortune - such as the loss of a watch, or a court case for sandalwood poaching - group misfortune such as lack of rain or public disputes, or personal decision-making problems such as prospective marriage partners or the site for building a hut. Where a decision is to be made, the deity gives advice and expects payment by result; where a dispute or illness is to be cured, the deity usually demands advance payment for services rendered.

Second, there is the *expressive* level. Material symbols and pieces of practical advice are also concerned with the *manipulation of ideas*. That is, they are all involved in metaphoric transformations at the level of ideas (cooling, heating, tying, cutting). Actions on material symbols evoke metaphors which manipulate thoughts rather than physical events. Here, promises of divine aid are diffuse transformations of ritual symbols and symbolic actions - thus the vague troubleshooting function of the deity is consistently referred to in metaphors which involve cutting, which is a transformation of the ritual acts of cutting coconuts, goats and chickens. Similarly, an elusive wrong-doer will be 'tied up' in reciprocation of the money offerings which are 'tied up' for the deity.

Third, there is the more diffuse *aesthetic* level of interpretation, where the interpreter emphasises the *style* of the performance: ritual and linguistic styles make implicit statements that require more subtlety and less certainty of interpretation, but should be attended to nonetheless. Most writers on ritual in South Asia have commented in some way on the variety of styles of performance. Babb (1975: 27) emphasises the stratification of ritual performances according to ritual style, and Kapferer has pointed out (1983 *passim*) that much of the meaning of ritual is in the aesthetics of the performance. It will emerge from my discussion of ritual and séance alike that the Irula festival cannot be categorised monolithically according to

a particular style - that the style of performance varies from extreme and apparently rigid formality on the one hand, to grotesque informality and even irreverent parody on the other.

Finally, when the style is so marked that it is brought to the attention of participants, we must interpret this as *metacommunication*, which implicitly or explicitly comments on the metaphors involved. This term is of course borrowed from Bateson's analysis of *frame*:

a frame is metacommunicative. Any message, which either explicitly or implicitly defines a frame, *ipso facto* gives the receiver instructions or aids in his attempt to understand the messages included within the frame. (1972 [1955]: 188)

Interpretation of metacommunication, then, examines the commentary on the conditions under which communication takes place, as well as exegesis of the content of communication. For example, the whole séance performance takes place inside a frame which excludes the predictability of both the encompassing ritual and the everyday life of the village; and there is constant thematic interplay, both symbolic and linguistic, on the vacillation between chaos and control - it is both control and the deliberate inducement of disequilibrium that enables people to enter the chaotic world of the séance. Interpreted at this level, the festive idiom seems to indicate the contradictions in symbolic meaning and the numerous uncertainties of the linguistic event. Less negatively, the metacommunicative level is evidence of a positive cult of uncertainty and ambiguity.

The hermeneutic point I am making by sorting out these different 'levels' of interpretation is that there is no 'real meaning,' no absolute sense of the festivals which is independent of the uses which participants make of the festival events. This is a simple point and one which has been made with increasing insistence in recent years by anthropologists and linguists alike, notably by Sperber's (1975) criticism of the semiological approach to metaphor, and by Reddy (1979), who has fruitfully exposed the 'conduit metaphor' in our analysis of meaning, whereby we envisage thoughts as things which are parcelled up into code and sent to a receiver who decodes, or unparcels them. The danger of overusing the conduit metaphor is evident, for example, in Fuller's analysis of a priestly initiation rite in the Minaksi temple at Madurai, which he describes as 'empty' because it has lost the kind of significance which it appears to have in its textual version:

I doubt that any of the priests could attach any *real meaning* to the special initiation ritual. I therefore venture to suggest that it is, in the Minaksi temple, a

more or less *empty* ritual nowadays; lacking a clear structure and improperly separated from the initiation before and after it, its meaning to those participating in it is virtually nil. (Fuller 1985: 112, my emphasis)

The 'substance' of the ritual is the entelechic textual version, and once this is 'lost' the ritual is 'empty' or 'impoverished' or 'shallow'. It is probable that Fuller's entelechy reflects that of priests in a major urban temple, where practice is bound to be regarded as the imperfect rendering of injunctions 'contained' in texts. Fuller even goes so far as to refer to the rites as 'emasculated' (*ibid*: 115), and it would be intriguing if this implicit use of male genitalia as a metaphor for ritual meaning were an indigenous variant on the conduit metaphor!

In addition to being aware of the different levels of interpretation, it will always be helpful if we consider *the direction of metaphoric predication*. Most discussions of symbols and metaphors assume only one direction - in which something diffuse, absent, and/or unfamiliar is understood, in action or in words, via something material and present or familiar.<sup>1</sup> I call this direction *centripetal*<sup>2</sup>, reflecting the fact that many of the terms with which we discuss cognitive processes are products of an implicit metaphorical movement *towards* the thinker - *concentrating, organising, grasping, catching, comprehending, gathering, taking in*. Even the word *symbol*, deriving from the Greek verb *syballein* - 'to throw together' - implies that symbolic cognition works centripetally. Centripetal cognitive processes bring the unknown into the realm of the known. I want to emphasise that *centrifugal* predication, whereby a familiar referent (drought, illness) is re-presented as, or seen in a new light as, something more evasive and diffuse (divine anger, spiritual invasion), has not been given due recognition.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>For example, Fernandez, probably the most influential anthropologist on this topic, sees metaphoric predication as a movement from 'inchoate' to 'choate,' and assumes that 'symbolic understanding is understanding that is obtained by extension of our attention to something else which is more familiar'(1986: 226).

<sup>2</sup>My terms refer to the semantic movement from subject to predicate. Of course, when we hear a centripetal metaphor - say, 'the moon is made of green cheese' - our thoughts first of all move centrifugally, from the green cheese to the moon; but the metaphor familiarises us with the moon, bringing it nearer to our experience.

<sup>3</sup>Ogden and Richards are describing a similar process when they discuss the 'orgy of verbomania' in modern thought, whereby 'attributes found in experience to be contradictory are gradually dematerialized' (1949 [1923]: 40). In my above examples, material processes contradict the normal expectations of rain and health, and centrifugal metaphors are brought in to explain these contradictions.



It will be of considerable benefit to our analysis of metaphor if we place the domains of our experience on an axis from proximate to distant, and then relate this to other metaphorical axes. Employing I.A.Richards's terms 'tenor' and 'vehicle' for the two halves of a metaphor - respectively, the referent or 'meaning,' and the means of alluding to the referent (1936: 96ff), we can tabulate the assumptions made about centripetal predication, as shown in the table.

### Centripetal Predication

#### Vehicle

here/this/now  
 easy  
 microcosmic  
 material  
 concrete  
 ordered/entelethic  
 orectic/'grounded'  
 familiar  
 visible  
 tangible  
 sensible  
 low  
 literal/actual  
 indicative  
 simple  
 organic  
 empirical/experiential  
 data

#### Tenor

there/that/then  
 difficult  
 macrocosmic  
 ethereal  
 abstract/diffuse  
 chaotic/potential  
 transcendent  
 unfamiliar  
 invisible  
 intangible  
 cerebral  
 high  
 metaphorical/potential  
 subjunctive  
 complex  
 superorganic  
 mystical/imaginary  
 analysis

The list could of course be continued *ad infinitum*, and it will be clear that these axes don't all neatly parallel one another. My point is that we will misinterpret or grossly oversimplify metaphoric meaning if we assume that people employ metaphors to bring ideas from the right-hand column in towards the left - or, to phrase it differently, if we assume that the left-hand column provides *answers* to the *questions* we raise about the right-hand column. Taking the last pair on my list, if our analysis is supposed to be informed by the data of experience, we should acknowledge that data are likewise shaped by our analysis. Similarly, if we take

the proper meaning of 'empirical' phenomena to be *experiential* phenomena, we are bound to acknowledge that mysticism informs our empirical experiences, rather than simply being a 'superorganic' recipient of organic stimuli. As Das has pointed out in her criticism of Turner (1967),

even the 'concrete' experiences of the body, such as that of sexuality, are interpreted through a comprehensive cultural understanding of the cosmos. Far from ritual drawing its symbolism from universal, human, organic experience as Turner and many other authors contend, the organic experiences are conceptualized through means of ritual imagery. (1985: 181)

She overstates her case, though, for polemical effect - and this leads us to an infertile chicken-and-egg argument. I am certainly *not* denying, as she seems to, that ritual imagery is informed by or ectic phenomena; I am simply making a plea for more sophisticated recognition of mutual semantic borrowing from material and etherial domains. Metaphors don't just employ tangible or visible things to 'materialise,' and hence help us to understand, intangible, invisible phenomena.

Metaphors aren't always borrowed from the world of the senses to help us understand abstractions cerebrally. Thus when we find Lewis arguing - quite truthfully - that 'human ideals and values and counter-values are pre-eminently the sort of things for which people require symbols, because they are insubstantial and abstract. They are hard to grasp and apprehend' (1980: 198), and when Lakoff and Johnson say that 'we tend to structure the less concrete and inherently vaguer concepts (like those for the emotions) in terms of more concrete concepts, which are more clearly delineated in our experience' (1980: 112), we must add to these assumptions the complementary fact that symbols are also used for precisely the opposite reason: there are many aspects of life which are all too readily graspable, and which symbols may serve to obfuscate and mystify. If we take the most obvious example of physical pain, we can immediately see how the metaphoric reformulation of pain as an occult enemy or as part of a divine plan serves to detract the mind of the sufferer from the unacceptably banal suffering. Asymmetrical power relations are likewise too easily seen in everyday behaviour, and when this human might is symbolically reformulated as divine right, it is rendered socially acceptable.

A theme running through the rest of my thesis will be that when we try to understand via metaphor we are not simply materialising, ordering, and familiarising; we are also etherealising, disordering, and unfamiliarising. When Eliot refers to 'streets that follow like a tedious argument' and compares sunsets to

etherised patients<sup>1</sup>, our experiences are simultaneously ordered and disordered. If the dominant metaphor of early anthropology was centripetal - familiarising ourselves with strange customs - there has been increasing movement towards an anthropology which aims at making strangers out of our next-door neighbours, a centrifugal metaphor in cognitive terms (if we ignore the centripetal geographic movement of coming 'home'). Of course, the epistemological aims of anthropology have always been bi-directional, understanding the familiar by detour of the strange, and vice versa. It is often only too obvious why people use present, material objects to allude to or understand absent, abstract phenomena; but the task of the analyst is also to understand why, under what circumstances, people choose to reinterpret present, familiar objects and events by alluding to absent, unfamiliar abstractions or events.

Most of us nowadays would prefer to reject evolutionist assumptions about the movement of society 'upwards' from simple to complex, from material to transcendental concerns, from concrete to formal logic.<sup>2</sup> Yet in our analysis of metaphor we still concentrate almost exclusively on centripetal as opposed to centrifugal thought processes, and in so doing we are making people seem more simple and childlike than they are. If someone worships a tree, for example, we might call this the arborisation of divinity, the familiar, material tree being used to represent the unfamiliar, abstract deity. If our analysis stops there, we notice only the centripetal movement, and fail to notice that such worship achieves simultaneously the deification of the tree - if you like, the etherealisation or unfamiliarisation of the familiar tree. Deify a tree (or anything or anyone else) and you begin to think of it in the abstract.<sup>3</sup>

The philosopher A.N.Whitehead referred to human propensity for making cognitive mistakes as 'the fallacy of "misplaced concreteness"' (1927: 46). That is, people are hoodwinked by their own concrete representations into confusing these with the abstractions which they represent. The fallacy amounts to, in Whitehead's terms, a failure to distinguish 'presentational immediacy,' which is 'handy, and definite in

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<sup>1</sup> In 'Love Song of J.Alfred Prufrock'

<sup>2</sup>With the notable exception of Hallpike who is happy to go on believing that 'primitive' people are still, like the young children observed by Piaget, unable to think abstractly (1979).

<sup>3</sup>In the analysis of kinship, anthropologists have noted the familiarisation of strangers using terms borrowed from the family; considerably less attention has been paid to the estrangement of family members using terms expressing distance.

our consciousness' and 'easy to reproduce at will,' from 'causal efficacy,' which is 'vague, haunting, unmanageable.' Presentational immediacy is the 'superficial product of complexity, of subtlety; it halts at the present, and indulges in a manageable self-enjoyment derived from the immediacy of the show of things' (*ibid*: 51-2).

According to this portrayal of the human imagination, we appear to suffer from a flaw of cognitive optimism whereby we close our minds to the gap between representations and realities. The attribution of this fallacy has become a tool for ranking adults above children (Piaget 1951 [1945]), 'civilised' people above savages (Lévy-Bruhl 1926 [1910]); Whitehead 1927: 27<sup>1</sup>), and 'higher' or 'transcendental' religions above the more 'elementary' (Weber 1966 [1922]: 1). However, the phrase 'misplaced concreteness' carries the misleading implication that it is *concrete* or *centripetal* representations alone that mislead us; neglect of *centrifugal* processes is a neglect of what might be called *the fallacy of misplaced abstractness*. By this I mean the process whereby things or events which are concrete, proximate, and directly knowable are represented as mystical, absent, and accessible only indirectly through metaphor. The relation of flag to nation is one of concrete to abstract, so that to die defending a particular flag is irrational because it perpetrates the fallacy of misplaced concreteness; conversely, the relation of disease spirit to disease is one of abstract to concrete, so that to imagine that exorcising a spirit will automatically end the disease is to perpetrate the fallacy of misplaced abstractness.

In the latter example, though, metaphoric predication actually goes in both directions at once. It is centrifugal because the physical process of illness is metaphorically represented as an abstraction - an invisible spirit, or the abstract idea of spirit possession; it involves centripetal, too, since intangible social disturbances are concretised in the form of bodily disturbances. The belief in sorcery, along with its complementary remedies, involves both metaphoric processes too: material illness is understood in a metaphor of mystical attack (centrifugal), and the invisible causes of illness are encapsulated in the sorcery object which is withdrawn from the body or from the victim's house (centripetal).

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<sup>1</sup>'The repulsion from symbolism stands out as a well-marked element in the cultural history of a civilized people.'

Turning to a more general issue of the sociology of religion, it is worth noting the linkage between the social uses of two cosmographic axes - here:there and down:up. Religious discourse as well as analysis of belief and ritual concerns the positioning or moving of symbols or events on a 'vertical' axis of abstraction, on which 'up' represents abstract (although, paradoxically, 'deep' often means this too), and 'down' represents material. And since Weber (1966 [1922]: 1) saw what he called 'the rise of religions' as an evolution from concrete, 'this-worldly' orientation to abstract, transcendental, 'other-worldly' orientation, he would probably share Whitehead's view that 'it is the task of reason to understand and purge the symbols on which humanity depends' (1927: 7). But the inevitable result of excessive purgative zeal is that the concrete bases of our abstractions become forgotten or even denied. Referring to 'other-worldly' orientations, Weber is perpetrating a 'fallacy of misplaced abstractness': he interprets thoroughly mundane social activities like mysticism, 'world-renunciation,' and so on, as somehow 'higher' or more 'transcendent' than other kinds of religious behaviour. Dumont likewise reifies the abstraction of a world outside society:

The renouncer is self-sufficient, concerned only with himself. His thought is similar to that of the modern individual, but for one basic difference: we live in the social world, he lives outside. I therefore called the Indian renouncer an individual-outside-the-world. (1985: 96)

Actually, with the possible exception of solo astronomical travel, there cannot be asocial or 'other-worldly' human activity. What the world-renouncer does is to opt out of secular politico-economic power struggles; but this opting out is of course a social activity with social rewards both for the renouncer and for society in general. It is a mundane, socially sanctioned activity which is cosmographically mapped onto an abstraction - a posited extra-mundane arena. The social function of this is to provide an imaginary transcendental goal to mask the social goal which is, I presume, to step down (or up) gracefully from the politico-economic arena. In this regard, I would hope that my terms *centripetal* and *centrifugal* would be less misleading in the analysis of Hindu religious orientations than Mandelbaum's (1966) terms *pragmatic complex* and *transcendental complex*, since no human activities can transcend the pragmatics of social life.

As analysts of religion, we must not blandly endorse such fallacies of misplaced abstractness; we must be demystifiers to the extent that we recognise that religious abstractions are centrifugal metaphors which serve social functions in pointing away from concrete realities. In the end, we must recognise that religious

metaphors, like all metaphors, can neither be described as ultimately centripetal or centrifugal; rather, they *resonate* between the poles of concreteness and abstraction.

In my insistence on this resonance of ritual metaphors I am also making a general point about cognition. We tend to talk about 'concentration' and about 'focussing' our thoughts, and it is this metaphor which leads Eck, for example, to insist that 'the image [of the Hindu deity] is primarily a focus for concentration' (1985 [1981]: 45). Although these terms presumably refer to the cognitive processes whereby we try to exclude irrelevant thoughts, in another sense cognition operates by the logical converse of concentration: rather, it *diffuses* thoughts along avenues hitherto unexplored - as Edward de Bono's concept of 'lateral thinking' acknowledges. Omphalopsychites may claim to be concentrating on a single, central focus, but this should not blind us to the countervailing centrifugal processes which navel-gazing inevitably results in; the act of focussing on one word, sound, or point paradoxically gives the greater freedom to wander than it normally has. In short, *metaphor mediates between domains, and should be read palindromically*.

### 2.3. Festivity: objectives and activities

#### 2.3.1. Cooling

A good place to start interpretation is to examine the explicit objectives of the festival as a whole, as expressed by the metaphors which are put into play. There is a phrase often used with reference to both the intention and the meaning of a festival - 'there is a cooling down' (*kuLiccu maaDugudu*). This has a clear physical referent at the instrumental level - namely, the pouring of water over the deity-stones, the medium, the seven virgins who bring water, and the sacrificial goat, with the aim of rain-making; there is also a less specific but nevertheless instrumental objective of preventing or curing illness, which is conceived as 'hot'<sup>1</sup>. At the expressive level, it has a hidden, even denied, meaning of 'cooling down' disputes between humans and between humans and deities; in Austin's (1962) terms, the *illocutionary force* of holding a festival is equivalent to the statement 'there are no quarrels in this village'; but it is probably never *felicitous* - none of the festivals I participated in were conducted without major disputes breaking out.

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<sup>1</sup>Evidenced, for example, in the verbal phrase for illness in general, 'the body is getting hot' - (*oDambu suuDugudu*).

There is also a more diffuse aesthetic objective of overcoming and encompassing heat with coolness. At this level we should note that the direction of reference has shifted from centripetal to centrifugal. Where present water alludes to absent rain, and physical coolness signifies metaphysical coolness, we may call the metaphor centripetal. Where the idea of metaphysical coolness is used to signify the physical coolnesses of rain and health, we may talk of a centrifugal cognitive force whereby these particular physical coolnesses are expanded into a *metaphysical abstraction* - the idea of coolness, and thereby infused with general meaning. In this regard we should note that most of these festivals take place in the season which in the plains is hot, but in the Nilgiris it is often actually very cold, because of the rain; the claim that these are rain-making festivals can therefore be made with greater confidence than the vague proleptical sense in which they are rain-making in the plains. Yet still they are rationalised as 'cooling' the heat of the seasons, which is metaphorically represented by, and metaphorically represents, the heat/anger of the goddess and the practice of cooling her down with buckets of water. This gives a strong indication of the importance of what I have called the aesthetic level of interpretation, and of the independence of this from its material background.

So much for the various meanings of 'cooling.' But we are left with the apparent paradox that the festival seems to be just as concerned to metaphorically heat things up: the festival cannot be started without lighting a fire over which the drummers warm their drums; fire in various forms is included in the offerings to the deity, and at some festivals the deity is made responsible for the creation of fire without matches; the medium must 'heat up' in order to achieve the state of trance<sup>1</sup>, and he propels himself towards trance by swallowing burning camphor; rockets are lit in honour of the deity; the boiling of the *pongāl* is taken as a sign that the deity has arrived.

The ethnography of South Asia has often been concerned with the opposition of hot and cold and the relation of this to other important oppositions such as pure:impure, red:white, male:female, benevolent:malevolent deity (Beck 1969: 555-9). Space

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<sup>1</sup>The medium, whose behaviour in many ways matches that of the ascetic, achieves metaphysical heat in quite a contrasted manner; the ascetic builds up *tapas* through tranquillity, control, avoidance of 'hot' foods, and retention of breath; but the Irula medium achieves it by shaking, deliberately inducing disequilibrium, eating 'hot' leaves, swallowing fire, and hyperventilating. In the behaviour of both the ascetic and the medium there are ambiguities, with emphasis on both control and lack of control - but for the medium there is far more emphasis on lack of control.

does not allow for a full consideration of the issues here, but it is worthwhile pointing out that the most relevant interpretation of the hot:cold opposition is that provided by Babb:

Implicit in the heat-cold polarity seems to be a distinction between substance and animating energy as basic principles of existence. The quality of coldness seems to imply inert and inanimate corporeality ...In heat there is the suggestion of a dynamic component of existence, a vital force that kindles life, is present in divinity. (1975: 236)

Despite the clumsy word order in the first sentence of this quotation, it appears that Babb equates corporeality with coldness, and divinity with heat. What is missing here is an account of the resonance, inherent in the notion of divinity, between the vital heat of a present deity and the placid coldness of an absent deity. There is a paradox, a dramatic irony in all Hindu ritual: deities only become active by hypostatizing, and this can only be achieved by metaphysically 'heating up' - a dangerous process which humans must to some extent counteract by 'cooling them down.' The hypostatisation that is achieved by the séance at Irula festivals is strongly suggestive of giving birth - as I have said, the metaphor suggests that the worshippers help to 'create' the deity by participating in the trance-event; like a pregnant woman, the medium must be 'heated up' (with fire, bitter leaves, music and shouting) to assist the 'birth' of the deity. But once she arrives, the deity, like a neonate, is too hot and must be cooled down with water.

The salutary lesson here is that we should not expect a rite unequivocally to aim at either 'heating' or 'cooling'; the most important message is simply the highlighting of the opposition, which constitutes the dynamism of the rite. It is important for participants to demonstrate concern with the hot:cold opposition by manipulating symbols, but we expect too much if we look for consistency and coherence in this symbolic manipulation. Beck's (1969) analysis of colour and heat metaphors in southern Indian ritual, for example, amounts to an ingenious but over-zealous attempt to find total consistency in the matching of oppositions red:white and hot:cold. She claims that a formal rite illustrates the auspiciousness of white-red-white, because rice balls are thrown in at stages of ritual washing (white), then 'reddened by the addition of turmeric or lime,' then white is repeated (Beck 1969: 557); it is convenient for her to ignore the usual Indian interpretation of turmeric and lime as 'cooling' and 'purifying' substances, but she thereby misses an interesting paradox - that which cools and purifies may also heat up and pollute. She adds to her symbolic arsenal by pointing out that the 'cooling umbrella' used for south Indian kings was white; yet at various festivals, both Irula and multi-



caste, within a short distance of where Beck carried out her fieldwork, I have seen red and black umbrellas used to provide shade for deities, brides, and the newly dead alike. It is surely misguided to attempt to force the promiscuous practices of symbol-using, which tolerate and even celebrate cognitive dissonance, into the procrustean bed of formal logic, which is intolerant of cognitive dissonance. This is structuralist self-gratification in the Freudian mould, and does little to forward our understanding of the complexities of playing with symbols.<sup>1</sup>

### 2.3.2. Catharsis: exorcism and healing

The festival also aims at achieving the transformation from illness to health, which is not quite the same as, but is closely associated with, the transformation from hot to cold. Obviously, some go to the festival with a very specific illness that they hope will be healed, others with a general malaise or perhaps a worry about their crops which need 'healing' or require preventive protection by the deity.

The close connection between healing and public entertainment in South Asia has been noticed before (Egnor 1984; Kapferer 1983): the *séance*, in particular, may be interpreted as a diagnostic drama in which the 'patient' (as well as the participants, too, in a more general sense) is cured through the enactment of disease (pain, disequilibrium) and the process of getting to know and to deal with the causes through the manipulation of metaphor. This is consistent with the South Asian conception of illness as involving more than just the physical aspect; the public healing rite involves all those present in the healing of the patient, and disorders in social relations which may be part of the cause of illness can be sorted out.

The themes of exorcism, domestication and incorporation will be discussed in more detail below; for the time being it will be enough to point out that invocation of the spirit world in *séances* may be seen as a highly complex and revealing form of disease aetiology in which the patient is seen in a wide social nexus. The power of ritual to heal sociosomatic illness through performance of socially integrative metaphoric actions has often been recognised (Lewis 1971 *passim*; Skultans 1974: 29); possession is often a public event which amounts to a public admission by the patient, and anyone else implicated, of the social disorder that may have been

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<sup>1</sup>Her analysis of the 'logic' of flower-divination in the same article is equally misleading, relying as it does on the spurious dichotomy between the curing of an illness and the achievement of an auspicious future condition. As Daniel has shown, Beck's rigid analysis fails to account for contextual variations in the meanings attached to categories and substances (1984: 184, 191ff).

partially responsible for the illness. There is an exorcistic element in most southern Indian healing ritual, since there is usually some enactment of disequilibrium, of illness represented as divine invasion.

### 2.3.3. Reconciliation

But we must also ask ourselves, from whose point of view and in what senses are these intended transformations achieved? Any festival at which there is dancing, rejoicing, and commensality might be assumed *a priori* to have as its performative force the public expression of communal harmony. The séance likewise, with its arguments followed by handshakes, might be assumed to be a rite of reconciliation.<sup>1</sup> Yet Irulas insist that reconciliation must take place *before* a festival, and this seems to be their way of denying what is an essential function of the ritual. Likewise, Appadurai and Breckenridge inform us that in Tamil temples generally, if the ritual process is halted due to conflict among the worshippers, the deity is thought to leave the figure (1976: 190).

Also, although the expression of communal harmony is obvious, the festival equally obviously expresses a variety of hostilities - between the priest-headman and anyone who disobeys him by turning up late or failing to come at all, and between participants and the angry deity. The common interpretation of rites which express hostility is to emphasise the preference for expression of hostility as a cathartic prelude to reconciliation.<sup>2</sup> In Irula rites the manifestly preferred pattern inverts the order of events, demanding that reconciliation should *precede* the expression of conflict, though this is reversed at the level of practice. Although arguments and dispute-settlement theoretically have no place within the rite,

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<sup>1</sup>In the Kallar villages studied by Dumont, there is a stone platform under a tree with the standing stone of a god which is used to 'say the decisions' - *muDi solrattukku ambalakkallu*. This is taken to represent the Ambalakkarrar, the village headman of the Kallar who administers justice; the presence of the stone allows decisions to be made in his absence - thus for the Kallar, as for the Irula, the temple is intimately connected with the headman and with decision-making and the dispensing of justice.

<sup>2</sup>The most frequently cited discussions of framed, cathartic disorder are those of Gluckman (1956) and Norbeck (1974: 37ff). Monica Wilson suggests that 'much of what has been cited as evidence of rebellion in rituals elsewhere in Africa is in fact the formal admission of anger, the prelude to reconciliation. The body politic is purged by the very act of "speaking out"' (1959: 13). Grace Harris's account of the Taita *Butasi* religion of Kenya presents the main aim of their rites - *kutasa* - as 'both to effect the final casting out of anger and resentment from the performer's heart and to turn away the anger of the agent(s) addressed' (1978: 26).

quarrels inevitably break out during rites. These are invariably solved by *dancing* - peace-makers tell trouble-makers to 'dance together' instead of telling them to stop arguing. This seems to me to be a tacit admission of the peace-making function of dance; but as with the encompassing rite, dance is seen as *in itself* sufficient evidence that a dispute has been settled, rather than being explicitly *instrumental* in solving the dispute. Since you cannot dance together until you have sorted out your quarrel (to do so would be insulting to the deity, who is present in the dance), it is then axiomatic that anyone who is dancing together must have sorted out their quarrel.

This fact provides a striking illustration of the tendency of ritual metaphor to be efficacious *only if its meaning is denied by participants*. We will see later how the séance discussions are often aimed at expressing and, people hope, solving disputes, despite the fact that in theory there should be no disputes to solve.<sup>1</sup>

There is another way in which the rite can be used to sort out arguments; very often someone who has been arguing will be specifically told to get possessed; when he gets possessed, those who have been arguing with him will prostrate, and make their sick children prostrate. I found this practice strongly reminiscent of the Azande practice of blowing water on chicken wings to symbolise the 'cooling' of witchcraft and the end of a quarrel (Evans-Pritchard 1976 [1937]: 44). Like Irulas, the Zande accused of witchcraft denies that there is any witchcraft that needs to be cooled down, and the transference of a dispute into the euphemism of witchcraft denies that that there is any quarrel to be 'cooled down' either.

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<sup>1</sup> There was a major fight at the Mandarai hill-top festival, which officially was denied a place in the rite. But the fight was so histrionic, so dramatically choreographed, that it looked 'ritualistic' in sense used by zoologists referring to 'pretend' behaviour by animals, a formulaic display of argument for argument's sake. The crowd split into two factions, each preventing the two squabblers from getting at each other, but occasionally letting them go for each other and then pulling them apart. They even let one disputant run, brandishing a big woodcutter's sickle, at another man half his size, who was standing on a cliff-edge. They just stopped him at the last moment, and the general hilarity told me that this was as heavily scripted as any Giant Haystacks fight. Every now and then the two factions split into tangential groups with temporary separate squabbles - when this happened the hilltop was transformed into the Bolshoi Ballet, with five or six star-shapes of raised fists and pointing fingers dancing round the temple. A couple of minutes later they really were dancing together and so, by definition, there was no more argument.

It will have been noticed that the hostility expressed by the rite is not only that between man and man but that between man and the deity. Here again, it is emphatically denied that the festival can proceed if there is any such quarrel, since the deity's permission must be solicited in order to proceed, and the deity simply will not turn up if she has a quarrel with the villagers. This amounts to an explicit denial that the festival is a performance of dispute-settlement. Yet precisely this interpretation is suggested by other aspects of the symbolism, such as the handshake which concludes an argument with the deity, or the dancing which concludes an argument between men. Ritual reversals and ritualised rebellion have often been described as confirmations billed as transformations; what we seem to have here is transformation (the resolution of conflict) billed as confirmation (there was no conflict to resolve in the first place). So, *while it is obvious that participants in a rite may pretend to resolve conflicts, they may equally well pretend not to resolve conflicts; Irulas do both.*

Malinowski tried to distinguish magic from religion by the former's 'clear, straightforward and definite aim,' whereas 'in the religious ceremony there is no purpose directed toward a subsequent event' (Malinowski 1948: 21). I would suggest that a distinction like this is useful if applied not to *categories* like 'magic' or 'religion' but to *levels of interpretation*. At what I have called the *instrumental* level of interpretation of the metaphors of Irula festivals, there are clearly identifiable purposes directed at subsequent events - at the making of rain, at curing sickness, or at winning court cases brought against Irula men involved in sandalwood poaching. At the *expressive* level, the metaphor suggests reconciliation with the deity, affirming the control over chaos that is virtually always expressed at some level in ritual - in short, this level expresses the *assimilation* which Piaget found in children's play (Piaget 1951 [1945]: 3, *passim*). Generally, those who see magic as misguided science emphasise the instrumental level when they interpret magical actions; those who try to distinguish religion from magic emphasise the expressive level in their interpretations of religion, but only at the cost of ignoring participants' statements about their instrumental intentions.

Rejecting, then, Malinowski's suggestion that magic and religion can be distinguished by the instrumentality and diffuseness, respectively, of their aims, we can acknowledge that participants in the same rite may emphasise either instrumentality or expression, depending on their needs; at a given moment we

might then be able to distinguish the instrumental orientation of one from the expressive orientation of another, but we cannot usefully distinguish one set of rites from another according to its instrumental or expressive aims. The simple but vital point here is that it is the *participants* and not (*pace* Malinowski) the *rites*, that have intentions.

#### 2.3.4. Approaching the deity

The objectives of the festival could never be met without approaching a variety of spiritual entities, all of these encompassed by the umbrella term *toga*. I will elaborate in the next chapter on such distinctions as can be made between these beings [3.2, 3.3, and 3.6-9], but for the moment let us accept that the focus for the occult forces approached in the festival is the main deity associated with a particular shrine. There are two movements - an outward movement of people towards the deity, and a downward movement of the deity towards the worshippers. But it would be oversimplifying the cosmography to leave things at that. Although people shout to the skies to invite the deity, there is also a divine essence *within* the worshippers which must be brought out and, as we have seen, into the offerings. This is a familiar, albeit Brahmanical, movement in Hindu worship generally; as Biardeau puts it,

Whether one installs the divinity upon a diagram drawn on the ground with coloured powders or whether one invokes it in an imaginary setting, one always begins with the invocation of the god within. One cannot worship a god unless one is already consubstantial with him or her: in other words, one offers worship to oneself (1989 [1981]: 151).

In addition, there is a movement of the tame deity, kept in the priest-headman's house, outwards towards the deity who is invited 'down' to the festival (cf Good 1985: 127, 153). Once incarnated in the medium, the deity is remarkably accessible; people can have conversations with her and even touch her.

In a sense, then, the deity is brought to life by the festival. Appadurai and Breckenridge have suggested that temple rites establish and re-establish the 'sentient and corporeal' personhood of deities in a permanent sense, allowing the deity marry, take holidays, engage in conquests, quarrels or other playful acts (1976: 190). This permanent hypostasis in the southern Indian temple, though, must be rejuvenated on every occasion of worship - thus the worship called *praaNa pratiSTai* is explicitly intended to vivify the stone figure of the deity in the sanctum sanctorum by 'breathing' life into it; it is bathed, anointed, fed, adorned, etc. As

we have seen, this same life-giving paradigm pervades the Irula festival, with stones, animals, food offerings, and people being infused with divine life.

But if this suggests that the deity is proximate and accessible, this is contradicted in numerous ways by metaphors which suggest distance and inequality. If the handshake underlines the ready access to the deity through incarnation, this same gesture may, like so many other metaphors in the festival, carry a quite contradictory meaning. The handshake is not a normal, everyday gesture, and I have a strong hunch that it is a syncretic borrowing from British planters, since handshaking is not a gesture indigenous to India; for those older Irulas who remember the British, it is quite likely that the gesture is associated with them and so with social distance rather than proximity.

Similarly, if touching and talking with the deity makes the deity seem accessible, this is contradicted by the difficulty of the process of getting possessed. The location of the deity in the centre of the village, the priest/headman's house, is contradicted by her location in the forest shrine. The location in the forest shrine is contradicted by the fact that the deity also has to be invited to the shrine. And the path to the temple, symbolising the link between man and deity, also constitutes a reminder of the gulf that separates man from deity. In terms of character, the anthropomorphism suggested by the eyes and cloths used to decorate the deity-stones is contradicted by the rampant theriomorphism of the trance.

### **2.3.5. Incarnation**

There persist in the popular imagination in India two contradictory images of village Hinduism: on the one hand it is assumed that the emphasis is on exorcism rather than devotion; and on the other hand, practices without Sanskritic textual basis are disparagingly referred to as 'demon-worship.' If the so-called 'demons' are 'worshipped,' albeit out of fear rather than devotion, then it would be quite wrong to characterise such rites as unambiguously 'exorcistic.' It would still be possible logically to retain the exorcism-taming opposition by saying that undesirable forces, though they must be tamed, even worshipped before being exorcised, are nevertheless unambiguously exorcised in the end.

But the metaphors of Irula festivals suggest a refusal to categorise any sacred force as unambiguously malevolent and worthy of exorcism or benevolent and worthy of incorporation. It might be tempting, for example, to interpret the attitude to the

possession of women, haphazard and uncontrolled as it is, as negatively evaluated. Certainly, the priest's action of splashing the possessed woman with holy water looks exorcistic, and no-one bothers to communicate with the possessing spirit. But neither does anyone ever seem worried by the event, and the women, at any rate, indicate that they positively value trance; possession doesn't just happen to them - they untie their hair before getting possessed, and sometimes ask another woman to look after them while they are possessed.

At first glance the possession of the male medium looks far more positively evaluated, and this would be consistent with the much greater control over the event, with its greater ritual circumscription, and with its enshrinement in the prescription of the rite rather than being relegated, like women's possession, to the level of practice. But the deity, like the other spiritual powers that come along to the *séance*, is subjected to extraordinary amounts of abuse, and is often told to stop doing things rather than asked to do things. The *séance*, then, like the encompassing rite, involves both exorcism and incorporation, and we cannot say that it is malevolent spirits that are exorcised and good deities incorporated. It will be noted, too, that I do not use the word *domestication* here, since that would imply at least an exorcism of undesirable features of spirits - namely any of those features associated with disorder rather than order. That would hardly be an appropriate way of describing worship which takes people out of the ordered, domestic world of the village, and positively embraces disorder.

Dumont has suggested that, for Kallars, what distinguishes benevolent from malevolent beings is *containment in a temple*: 'However numerous and hospitable the temples may be, they do not embrace all the supernatural beings. The spiritual beings who are not contained in them can be called demons' (1986 [1957]: 449). Certainly, for Irulas, the idea of useful and benevolent occult entities is connected with ideas of containment. The term for a deity which has a special relationship with a particular person is *aanDa dēyva* - 'a kept/controlled/protected deity' - and the spirits of the dead cause trouble until they are contained in the ancestral *koppe*. The idea of residence of these beings is referred to with the verb *kwaa* - 'to sit, rest' - and in the *séance* discussions we will see that those who complain about inattention are likely to complain that they have *nowhere to sit*. However, while they are simply sitting, they are inactive, and must be activated for the festival.

But the deity is not just an entity who 'sits,' she is also 'wind' (*gā:li*) which enters the human body resulting in trance. Elsewhere in Tamil Nadu, 'wind is seen as the breath of life (*uyir*); it is another symbol of sakti; the demons and lower gods have no temple or iconic representations, so are seen as made of wind, ever-wandering; this is why somebody like Maariamamma is always seeking a resting-place in a human medium' (Egnor 1980: 24). In a later publication, Egnor tells us that Maariyamma has two characteristic forms, 'a form of wind and a form of mud. In the form of wind, bodiless spirit, she seeks a home by possessing people - 'coming upon their person.' ...In the form of mud, spiritless body, her image rises from the earth, waiting to be given life by human devotion' (1984: 31).

Egnor's material presents us with an important caveat to the assumption that the 'higher' deities are ethereal, and the 'lower' deities material. For Irulas, all deities are both ethereal and material, both wandering and located in the keeper's house. For Kallars, as we have just seen, the 'superior' deities are contained - and so, in a sense, permanently hypostatic as opposed to ethereal. The process of incarnation of the Irula deity involves movements from both static material and from mobile wind to mobile flesh. Both wind and mud feature prominently in the séance: air is waved into the medium and the medium rolls around in the mud. Bi-directionality is evident, too, in the twin movements of the deity at festival time - from within the village and from without the known parts of the cosmos, from below (notably from wells) and from above (from the sky or from mountains).

When Hindu deities become incarnate, they become more dangerous and malevolent, or at least ambivalent; unambiguous benevolence is a quality only of the most absent, uninvolved, and transcendent deities. Analysis of the Irula festival, however, gives a markedly different impression. The shaking of the medium, the jumping of the goat, the lighting of fire without a match, and the boiling of the *pongāl*, all indicate both the incarnation and the goodwill of the deity. Conversely the failure of these things to happen indicate to Irulas that their deity is refusing to manifest, and hence is angry and dangerous. Of course, when the deity does arrive, she comes more like a tornado than like a grateful guest of the party which Irulas are so kindly hosting; she comes in hooting, spitting, and shouting obscenities. But however cantankerous the deity may be, it is an adversary that people can do business with, and thus ultimately, or at least potentially, a friend.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ortner describes the invocation of deities (among Sherpas in Nepal) as a process of 'making the high gods themselves a bit angry, so that they will be



The deity that is feared is the one that doesn't appear, the unseen enemy that refuses to materialise. In a very general sense, the festival is a confrontation with the uncanny aspects of experience. This mission of the festival is analogous to what Fernandez calls the 'mission of metaphor,' which is to formulate 'a predication upon an inchoate situation' (1986: 8). If the inchoate deity refuses human attempts at predication, then they have cause for worry.<sup>1</sup>

### 2.3.6. Uction

Every sacred site is supposed to have been revealed to an ancestor of the priest in a dream; sent by the deity to the site, the ancestor finds a stone which becomes the central icon of the shrine. Each festival, then, is a re-enactment of, and thanksgiving for, this revelation. It is the deity-stone which receives most attention throughout the day. Things done to the stone, then, may be expected to stand synecdochically for the activities of the festival as a whole, and to point to the overall objectives of the festival. So far, we have seen that the stone is 'cooled down' by being watered, and that this has the instrumental objectives of rain-making, purification, and, more vaguely, the washing away of troubles. We have also seen that pouring milk over the stone is an enactment of the mythical motif of a cow 'feeding' a forest deity by shedding its milk over the bush, anthill or stone *linga* in which the deity resides. We could read into this the uniting of male and female principles of father-semen and mother-milk respectively; though I was never offered this interpretation, many Irula worshippers are aware of the cow-*linga* myth and think of the deity-stone as a *linga*.

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drawn down from their bliss long enough to engage in this struggle [against demons]'. She interprets this as 'a complex commentary on the regulation of mood - the question of the optimum interrelationship between self-absorbed bliss, random aggression, appropriately focused anger, and active benevolence' (1975: 144). Whereas invisible Sherpa deities are in a state of blissful non-involvement, invisible Irulas deities are angry guests refusing a feast.

<sup>1</sup>This unpredictability is a crucial feature of the festival, that the manifestation of the deity is not automatic. In this sense, the incorporation of divinity is anti-ritualistic by comparison with Brahmanical *mantra*-chanting as described by Logan, where 'there is a very definite sense in which the deity cannot refuse the invitation. The gestures and, most critically, the *mantras* accompanying these acts have a power of their own, for the mere act of pronouncing the *mantras* properly is sufficient to guarantee the deity's presence. These *mantras* refer to the deity directly and such *mantras* are considered to represent and embody the deity's essence. The deity's power is held to reside in the *mantras* relating to it, which renders the chanting of *mantras* an automatic means of conjuring up its power and presence' (1980: 86-7).

We have also seen that the stone may be anthropomorphised by being dressed up and having eyes attached to it. This is a pan-Hindu phenomenon; in Bengal this is referred to as the twin processes of *praanpratisThaa* [Tamil: *praana pratiSTai*], giving life to the deity, and *cakkurdaan*, giving eyes to the deity (Östör 1980: 76). In a sense, then, it becomes incarnated, though unlike the incarnation of the deity in the goat and medium, there is a dramatic irony in the attachment of eyes to a stone. Goats and mediums can actually see, but stones are obviously blind.

Indeed, the use of an unhewn stone as the main symbol representing the deity is resonant with a variety of ironies. A stone is reliable and tangible, deity is unreliable and intangible. A stone is infertile, a deity is supposed to be fertile. A stone is deaf and dumb, but a deity is supposed to hear and speak. A stone is immobile and unchanging, a deity is elusive and vacillatory. A stone remains the same without being fed, whereas a deity must be fed at regular intervals. The stone is monolithic, the deity is polyolithic. The stone was hidden and then found once and for all<sup>1</sup>, the deity is forever disappearing, having been found or revealed. However, many of the efforts of the rite appear to be aimed at obverting undesirable contrasts between the qualities of stone and the qualities of deity. The dull, opaque stone is made to scintillate with various unctions. Perhaps the biggest dramatic irony of all is that the stone becomes most life-like at the moment of the death of the goat, when it is spattered with the goat's blood.

In short, the Irula festival performs the most radical metaphoric transformations that it is possible to imagine. They select from the non-human environment the most lifeless, permanent, immobile, dull, infertile object they can find, and they associate it with life (vegetable, animal, human, and divine), with ephemerality (the coming and going of humans and of beings from the spirit world), with mobility (of water and flowers), brightness (the reflection of light on the wet stone), and with fertility (the promise of future growth). Yet there is no shortage of potential reminders that these transformations are illusory: the stone doesn't move, speak, hear, or consume the food-offerings, and it is not expected to disintegrate in the way that vegetables, animals, humans, and deities do.

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<sup>1</sup> Irulas don't emphasise the common Hindu distinction between 'revealed' and 'installed' deity-stones; all deity-stones are supposed to be divinely revealed, and may then be installed or left where they are as the finder pleases.

There is a complementary movement to the animation of the stone - the over-mobile deity ought through the rite to become less mobile, more like the stone. The deity is berated for her inconstancy and, like the married couples who in various parts of southern India place their feet on a stone as they marry (Thurston 1906), the deity is meant to acquire the stone's quality of constancy. In other words, both the stone and the deity, in the process of worship, become flesh - a process which should vivify the stone and calm the deity down. Conversely, people, who are already incarnate, sanctify themselves by, in Weber's phrase (1966 [1922]: 157) 'breaking down organic inhibitions' - that is, by a variety of forms of bodily dissociation and displacement which rob them of control over their bodies.

Another feature of unction, as I mentioned in my 'prologue,' is that it gives a stone the illusion of translucence. A similar interpretation is given by Harper, who notes that the South Kanara shamans threw water on stones before making a spirit enter a patient - this, he says, is 'a common method of looking into the supernatural world' (1957: 275). A wetted stone becomes shiny and can be looked into like the gypsy woman's crystal ball; again, of course, there is dramatic irony in the fact that a stone is and always will be opaque, but it is easy to see how gazing at a wetted stone can transport the participant beyond the here and now to a world beyond.

There is heavy irony in the action of planting and watering a stone with a view to increasing the fertility of the fields. The ancestors, likewise, are said to be responsible for the fertility of crops; but what could be a more infertile than a heap of stones? Two Badaga proverbs cited by Hockings support my insistence on the irony of stone-worship. One proverb - 'It's like rain falling on a flat stone' (1988: proverb No.329) strongly suggests that the imagery of worship may be ironically subversive of faith in the productivity of deity; another - 'Is low-lying land wise? Is a stone slab wise?' (Hockings 1988: proverb No. 336) recognises that a stupidity of stones, and hence, one might conclude, the stupidity of worshipping them.

Of course I am not suggesting that for the worshipper, the ironies of stone-worship are in the forefront of their minds as they worship; in any case, this may serve to remind them that their worship is aimed not at the stone, but at a transcendent deity. But what I want to emphasise is that the worship of stones must not simply be seen as an irrational or *non*-rational act. Since Lienhardt's analysis of Dinka ritual is still

regarded as a commendable example of relativistic understanding of apparently irrational behaviour, let us look briefly at the key passage in his text:

The practice called *thuic* involves knotting a tuft of grass to indicate that the one who makes the knot hopes and intends to contrive some sort of constriction or delay ...No Dinka thinks that by performing such an action he has actually assured the result he hopes for ...This 'mystical' action is not a substitute for practical or technical action, but a complement to it and preparation for it. The man who ties such a knot has made an external, physical representation of a well-formed mental intention. He has produced a model of his desires and hopes, upon which to base renewed practical endeavour. ...The principle involved ...is similar to that which obtains in symbolic action in situations which, by their very nature, preclude the possibility of technical or practical action as a complete alternative. (1961: 283)

There are three reasons why this presentation of an everyday ritual act will not do as a model for interpretation of ritual generally. First, we can't assume that 'mental intentions' which are represented in ritual are 'well-formed' in advance of the ritual; this would deny to ritual the role of intention-formation, relegating it to the status of mere parade; in ritual it is surely not only 'experience' which is transformed, but intentions and even events. Second, Lienhardt's model posits a neat fit between cognition and ritual display, and in this model there can be no place for ritual which contradicts cognition; in a sense, even in the simple action he describes, the symbolic constriction of the tuft of grass actually contradicts something which the performer doubtless is well aware of - that time has eluded him.

Third, and closely related to this latter point, Lienhardt's formulation is appallingly optimistic in its denial of a conflict between 'mystical' and 'practical or technical' action; far from 'complementing' practical action and 'preparing' people for it, mystical action is often accompanied by a promise *not* to engage in (logically contradictory) practical action - as in the case, for example, of the southern Indian villagers, described by Srinivas (1976: 247), who avoid medicine during epidemics for fear of displeasing the disease-goddess whom they begged for help. It is not hard to detect in Lienhardt's analysis an extreme version of the functionalist bias against acknowledging dysfunctional cultural phenomena. As Ortner (1978: 7) points out, Lienhardt's analysis prefigures Geertz's (1966: 7) insight into the functioning of religion both as 'model *of*' and as 'model *for*' reality; what none of these authors is prepared to concede is that religion also offers models *against* reality. Religious models tell us not just what happens and what we should do, but what *doesn't* happen and what we *shouldn't* do.

Sperber, on the other hand, has quite rightly pointed out that we understand behaviour as 'symbolic' precisely because of the absence of rational means-ends relationships (1975: 4). But my suggestion is that non-rationality is an inadequate description of some aspects of ritual action and religious belief; what we must recognise is that the symbolic acts of religious ritual do not just suffer from *inadequate* rationale, they may be glaringly *counter-rational*. If your objective is to make your fields fertile, and you choose watering a stone as the symbolic means to that end, you are being counter-rational. The dramatic irony here is similar to that in the Catholic choice of the Virgin Mary as the epitome of purity. Believers are not unaware that if she was a human, she was guilty of adultery; she becomes an object worthy of worship by challenging our rigid boundaries between humans and deities and between pure and impure women. The lesson here is that we grossly misrepresent the meaning of ritual if our efforts are aimed - as the bulk of analysis of ritual is aimed - at seeing how it *makes sense* [see further discussion in 4.3, 4.4, and 4.8]. In fact some of the most important messages of ritual are based very deliberately on *nonsense*. Indeed, this is inevitable when people turn to *occult* agencies when they are in search of *revelations*.

In my 'prologue,' I insisted that analysts of religion must not shirk their responsibility to confront the empirical invalidity of beliefs; the point I am making here is that those analysts who insist on the 'irrelevance' of empirical validity to religious belief are *side-steppers who are likely to misrepresent believers as similar side-steppers*, thereby concealing the *confrontational* nature of religion. For example, Luhrmann recently described participants in magical cults in London as 'not very concerned about the objective "truth" of their beliefs - a nonchalance at variance with modern ideals of rationality' (1989: 13). I simply cannot accept that this is true. Magic, like religion, is not *unconcerned* or *nonchalant* about rationality; the magic she writes about is set up in opposition to what the magicians refer to as 'science' (even if, paradoxically, they may borrow from the language of science to 'prove' its truth). Similarly, when they use the word 'knowing' to refer to 'emotional, rather than cognitive, awareness' (*ibid*: 12), the outsider is not expected to miss the dramatic irony of such a usage. 'Know' is being used ironically to describe experiences which, on the contrary can't be known, but can only be felt, desired, believed in. There is a similar irony in the Christian attachment to the word 'Truth' - the capital 'T' emphasising the confrontational nature of this alternative truth, emphasising, in short, *concern*.

### 2.3.7. Commensality

Ever since Hubert and Mauss's criticisms of Robertson Smith's 'communion' theory of sacrifice, the interpretation of sacrifice has placed more emphasis on exchange than on the twin themes of eating together with, and 'eating,' the deity. I will be discussing below the various transactional themes of the festival; for the moment, though, I want to emphasise that the performance of commensality as an act of communicating with the deity and with ancestors is of paramount importance in Irula festivals.

The significance of commensality cannot be overemphasised in the context of a society where outside festive contexts there is limited commensality even within households, let alone between families. Eating is in profane life the most private, individual activity; even defecating is less private, since it is not uncommon for friends to go off to defecate together. As every Western fieldworker discovers in India, privacy is not easy to come by in village life; but no-one ever disturbed me or stayed with me when I was eating. In festivals, by contrast, there were several occasions on which men insisted on publicly demonstrating 'brotherhood' with me by sharing a meal off the same banana leaf.

The festival meal becomes a focus for numerous contrapuntal themes. In addition to these *private:public*<sup>1</sup> and *individual:communal* oppositions, the cooking itself is opposed to normal cooking by virtue of the fact that it is performed by men as opposed to women. And to this we must add that it is affines of the priest who must cook and serve the food, that women and children are served before men, and that the food is usually non-vegetarian - and we can summarise these additional oppositions as *affinal cooking:family cooking*, *male cooking:female cooking*, *female precedence:male precedence*, and *non-vegetarian:vegetarian food*.

Two principles are used, then, in the construction of festive eating: the *infringement of boundaries*, and *ritual inversion*. This conforms to Bakhtin's interpretation of the enjoyment of banquets in the European medieval carnival:

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<sup>1</sup>Östör emphasises that 'puujaas are not congregational in the way Western religious rituals are. To look for concretely definable groups of participants would be a positivist, structural-functional fallacy' (1980: 35). In Irula festivals, by contrast, we can analytically separate individual and congregational worship. Individuals prostrate and make offerings, whereas the priest makes offerings on behalf of the congregation, and the medium gets possessed with the help of the efforts of the congregation.

In the act of eating ...the confines between the body and the world are are overstepped by the body; it triumphs over the world, over its enemy, celebrates its victory, grows at the world's expense. This element of victory and triumph is inherent in all banquet images. No meal can be sad. (1968 [1965]: 282-3)

Boundary infringement and ritual inversion are less obvious, however, with respect to relations between humans and occult beings as portrayed in the festival meal. As in everyday life, deities and ancestors are in the festival offered food separate from and before humans. Indeed, there is more than usual emphasis on separation, since the priest and the cooks should keep the mouth covered when preparing and offering the food, so as to avoid breathing pollution onto the food. Although feeding these entities is an act of both transaction and communication, the idea of commensality with them is qualified by reminders of separation.

But if there is some doubt about Robertson Smith's notion of eating *with* the deity, there can be no doubt that, so far as Irula festivals are concerned, his suggestion that the communal meal might be tantamount to theophagy - eating divinity - is justifiable. All offerings become divine when they are accepted by the deity; to eat these is to partake of divinity in a substantial sense, and this is a form of ritual boundary infringement. Conversely, we might also say that deities and ancestors, by accepting the festival meal, are also partaking of the essence of the human worshippers; Dumont and Pocock have noted that, for Hindus, 'it is almost as if, before being "internally absorbed" by the individual, food was, by cooking, collectively pre-digested. One cannot share the food prepared by people without sharing in their nature' (1959a: 37). In a sense, the commensality of Irula festivals is simultaneously a boundary infringement and a ritual inversion. Food, which in secular life is used throughout India to emphasise separation, comes in the festival to serve as a dissolver of boundaries. That commensality should also provide reminders of separation is consistent with the resonant ironies that pervade the ritual metaphors.

### **2.3.8. Music, noise, and dance**

It is not enough to honour occult beings by feeding them. It is just as important to entertain them with music, noise, and dance. The festival begins and ends with music, and the deity does not come to the festival if there are not enough participants shouting in unison; when the deity arrives, she 'dances' in the body of the medium. As we have seen, dancing is closely related with the divine function of dispute-settlement. The Kurumba *modāli*, the ultimate arbitrator of quarrels,

must be honoured annually by Irulas dancing outside his house at the time of the *tai pongäl* festival.

Music honours the deity and also forms the basis for the dance, which encircles the deity. Honouring, then, is intimately connected with control; Hart has pointed out the prevalence of this theme in Sangam literature:

from the most ancient times, one of the central ways to control sacred power has been to surround it in a framework of ordered sound: rhythm and music. Thus in Sangam literature, we find that the lowest castes, whose main purpose is to control such power (for example, in battle, at a funeral, when a warrior is wounded, or when the memorial stone is worshiped) are musicians, and that the ordering of dangerous power involves the making of music. (1986: 258)

In Irula music, the repeated tune goes on endlessly, perhaps suggesting predictability and continuity in the face of unpredictability and the lapse of time. But music can be an instrument of control in a much more direct fashion: a medium whose utterances are unwelcome can be drowned out by the musicians. However, the music is also associated with the chaotic aspects of dance and possession. This association of music with both chaos and control contrasts with Hart's assumption that it is associated unequivocally with control: Paraiyan drummers, he claims, 'create order by invoking the power of their drums (which are made of special magical materials) and by using its rhythm' (1986: 259).

Another important function of music is to make a noise, and this is connected with the divine function of protecting people from wild animals. The importance of this was first brought home to me when worshippers at the multi-caste *siruur mā:ri* festival, where worshippers enthusiastically pointed out to me the miraculous absence of threatening animals in the middle of the jungle at night-time; this was evidence enough of miraculous divine powers, despite the obvious fact that the noise made by 100,000 revellers aided by amplified film-music was enough to drive all animals miles away.

Noise, especially shouting and drumming, is recognised by all forest-dwellers as a means of keeping wild animals at bay, and thus the worship of the deity is intimately connected with one of the main functions of the deity. In this important sense, then, the deity is in Durkheimian manner created by the worshipping group. It is of course not a random quirk that the only Irula deity not worshipped with music, noise and dance is *vōTTetoga*, the hunting deity.



## 2.4. The Shape of the Festival

### 2.4.1. Movement

The basic A<sub>1</sub>-B-A<sub>2</sub> shape of the festival is clear, and this obviously corresponds closely to Van Gennep's model of rites of passage. At every Irula festival there is emphasis on going *out of the village, into the forest and usually up a hill, and back again*. Very simply, participants undertake an exercise or excursion of the kind favoured by the grand old Duke of York, returning symmetrically to the beginning. The festival can be contrasted in this respect with the Badaga festival as portrayed by Hockings (1988: appendix 14b): their festivals end in a different place to where they are started, and this is supported by a proverb which means 'celebrating the festival here, dismantling the efforts elsewhere.' By contrast, the Irula festival looks *circular* rather than *sequential*.<sup>1</sup>

The contrapuntal or contradictory message of the festive procession seems to have escaped Leach, who sees the procession as a comforting linearity in the chaotic jumble of the festival: 'Linearity suggests the rationality of ordered speech. We feel we can "understand" a procession even if the chaos of the total experience escapes conscious rationalization' (Leach 1984: 362). The implication here is that a procession, like a melody or a narrative, is a 'syntagmatic chain' (Leach 1976: 25) which can be seen to go somewhere. In that earlier publication, Leach suggests that we should read rituals, like myths and orchestral scores, both horizontally (lineal, sequential, syntagmatic) and vertically (paradigmatic, simultaneous relation of images, sounds, ideas). But most festival processions, although they may look linear and hence progressive, are actually circular, achieving nothing in terms of overall movement - although cosmographically they may serve as delineators of sacred space and metaphors of encompassment or of 'eternal return' (Eliade 1954 [1949]). By returning to the point of departure, the procession itself points towards what Leach would call a 'paradigmatic' or 'vertical' interpretation. Since the Irula festival returns to its point of departure, in Turner's terminology it looks in this respect like a 'ceremony' rather than a 'rite,' since circles intrinsically suggest *confirmations* rather than *transformations* (1967: 95). However, I hope it will become apparent that all these festivals were both confirmatory and transformative,

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<sup>1</sup>The return to a point of departure is one kind of circularity; the other kind indicates encompassment, the delineation of space, and this is evident in the encircling of the temple, the circular movements of priestly offering, and the two circles of the dance - the grand circle of all the dancers, and the individual spinning of each dancer.

and that the interplay of these contradictory objectives constitutes a major metaphoric theme.

In addition to the up-and-down-again shape, there is a movement from the domestic order of the village to the wild forest, where there is a problematic but potentially (some would say inevitably) fruitful encounter with the world of spirit, and finally a return to the safe world of the village and the restoration of order.<sup>1</sup>

There is often emphasis on the difficulty of getting there, *cutting a new path* through the undergrowth, and even on the *difficulty of finding the temple*. The meaning of this is ambiguous - on the one hand people may claim rewards from the deity for having gone to so much effort to reach them, but on the other hand the very fact that the path was overgrown, the temple hard to find, indicates that the deity has been neglected and therefore has good cause to be angry. This is worth bearing in mind, but I reserve further comment until we see what deities and humans have to say on this issue in the next chapter.

We have also seen that the festival is expected to achieve overall movements from *hot to cold*, *drought to rain*, *illness to health*, and from *divine anger to divine benevolence*; the additional movement, from *interhuman conflict to interhuman concord*, may be inferred although it is denied. The festivals are therefore transformative, and these transformations supposedly achieved do not depend on subsequent validation, they are achieved simply by being performed. However, these transformations are achieved by the same basic A<sub>1</sub>-B-A<sub>2</sub> shape, moving from calm to frenzy and back to calm again, from vegetarian offerings to meat offerings and back to vegetarian offerings again<sup>2</sup>. These twin movements are according to Sutton-Smith universal in children's play, which everywhere tends to follow the

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<sup>1</sup>The contrast with the multi-caste festivals should be noted here. In the Irula festival the village invades the forest during the day only - the night-day opposition is respected except, perhaps, to the extent that dancing may go on in the village throughout the night (greatest emphasis on this at funerals); not so the multi-caste festivals, which invade not only the forest but the night also. The powers of the goddess are explicitly said to protect the little oasis of day/safety/village which has been brought into night/danger/forest, notably by keeping wild animals at bay.

<sup>2</sup>The movement of the Irula festival is contrastable in this respect with the movement of the goddess festival in Endavur as 'a basically rising curve through the ritual sequence' from a low, fierce, impure form, in which she is fed meat by the low-caste priests, to her higher forms, in which higher-ranking *purohits* make vegetarian offerings. (Moffatt 1979: 266).

same 'biphasic structure' consisting of an 'upward' movement or *vivification phase*, followed by a 'downward' movement or *euphoric phase*, 'being the down slope after the peak' (1979: 308). Very simply, renewed calm is achieved through frenzy, and it is this movement which the festival takes the deity through.

There is also the movement from *containment* (in the village under normal social control) to *release* (out of the village, beyond normal boundaries of social control). The bodily dissociation of the medium of course suggests a kind of release, in which normal control is abandoned and the normally self-contained, bounded body opens its doors to spiritual invasion; and women who become possessed loosen their hair as they similarly abandon bodily control. Das has suggested that in Hindu life/death rites

the body in its constrained state stands as a metaphor for the social system representing the containment of categories. Play on hair, nails and extremities, enables one to use the body symbolism to express both the normal containment of categories and a state of liminality. It seems to me that it is the body as a natural, unconstrained, system which expresses liminality. (1976: 258)

This is a theme to which I will return later [4.3]; for the time being I must point out that there are serious limits to this rigidly structuralist kind of interpretation. The festival, and within it the trance, is not straightforwardly the expression of release: throughout, it is emphasised that festival attendance is a duty and that full attendance indicates the degree to which the priest-headman controls the village. Echoing this, the trance is achieved through the controlled efforts of the spirit-medium aided by the controlled efforts of the musicians and the chanting bystanders. Just as the social duty of the forest-dwelling ascetic's self-control must be recognised despite his apparent release from social control, so the importance of control in festive effervescence must be given due recognition in our analysis.

#### 2.4.2. Cosmography

Shulman's detailed analysis of Tamil sacred cosmography has indicated that primacy is given to the opposition of chaos and cosmos, with the latter inevitably dominating and encompassing the former:

like ritual generally, the shrine possesses a conventional, formal structure. It is, above all, ordered. Fences have been erected around the sacred, which in this way becomes manageable and accessible. The ritual ordering of the universe within the confines of the shrine creates an ideal opposed to the disorderly world of nature. At the heart of the shrine lies a concentration of sacred power; but this power is restricted, channeled, forced into an inherited pattern of symbolic relations. Chaos is represented through symbols that reflect its subjugation. (Shulman 1980: 26)

If the chaos of flooding is hinted at by the temple tank, and the wilderness suggested by the temple tree, these are both rigidly controlled by human effort<sup>1</sup>. By contrast, the Irula shrine seems to lack any such emphasis; rather than being confined within the sacred space, chaos is represented by the surrounding jungle; the flooding which results from the pouring of numerous large containers of water over deity-stones and mediums is neither contained nor controlled - it turns the shrine and surrounding arena into a mud-bath which is revelled in by medium and dancers alike. So the cosmography suggests a brave incursion of the ordered world of the village into the disordered world of the forest, rather than any representation of the forest as encompassed and controlled by human ordering.

If we do want to look for the optimistic exclusion of threatening disorder in Irula festivals, we will find it not in the metaphorical control of the forest, but in the exclusion of non-Irula people from the festivals. Although the forest may be threatening to Irulas, their attitude to it is bound to be ambivalent because it is also both a source of income (tradeable forest products) and of sustenance (until very recently, Irulas grew substantial millet crops in the forest), and a refuge in the face of the encroaching human world beyond. The threatening wilderness which Irulas fear is surely not so much the forest as the encompassing multi-caste society beyond. This society is both a threat to the forest and a source of a bewildering multiplicity of puzzlements, from the injustices of the police and the Tamil courts to the bureaucratic nightmare of the coffee board. It is no accident that Irula women, who are not afraid to wander (at least short distances) in the forest, will not go near market towns except when attending multi-caste festivals - rather in the way that plains people only dare go into the Nilgiri forests to attend major festivals. In the analysis of séance discussions, we will see the deity portrayed as a potential ally in the face of this threatening outside world.

The ideal landscape of Irula cosmography seems also to invert Eliade's assumed location of the sacred at the centre of civilisation<sup>2</sup> (Eliade 1954 [1949]: 11). In all

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<sup>1</sup>Anyone who has ever struggled to get to the *sanctum sanctorum* of a major temple will doubtless want to quibble with Shulman's optimistic assumption that the deity is 'accessible,' but in theory, at any rate, containment in a temple makes the deity accessible to worshippers.

<sup>2</sup>The assumption that the sacred is at the centre of civilisation (and, conversely, that the centre of civilisation is sacred) is implicit in the loose senses of the term 'hierarchy' which pervade our language. Any system of centralised authority tends to be called a 'hierarchical' system; by analogy, we talk of

his work he equates the sacred with cosmos, and the profane with chaos: but if we can talk meaningfully of the location of the sacred in Irula rites, it is surely located outside the ordered realm of the village. What the sacred amounts to is a highlighting of the interplay between order and disorder. A causeway is formed which links the ordered world of the village with the little island of order located in the chaotic world of the forest. The sacred is not then to be interpreted as representing either chaos or order, but the fruitful coition of the two. To talk of the 'location of the sacred' in Irula cosmography is in fact a contradiction in terms, since the metaphors of the festival strongly suggest the *unlocatability of the sacred*. We will later see how the endless proliferation of metaphors used in the construction of divinity similarly builds up a picture of the *elusiveness of divinity*.

The divine is located both in the forest and in the very heart of the village - ideally in the headman's house. Shulman informs us that

there is a decisive distinction between the Vedic concept of a movable ritual applying a set of standard symbols to any newly chosen site, and the Tamil belief in a rooted, totally localized godhead....The god is essentially immovable - even when he has been 'imported' into the shrine from somewhere else. (Shulman 1980: 48)

If this is so, then Irula cosmography is much closer to the Vedic model. I suspect, however, that the contrast is not so much one of *location* of the deity either in or out of the village, but one which concerns different *activations* of the deity. Tamil village festivals often involve an exodus into the wild, but there is subsequent (or simultaneous reverse) emphasis on bringing the deity into the village for the festival and on sending her away at the end, even if the image of the deity is permanently installed in the village temple - in the non-Irula village festivals I witnessed on the plains, such as at KaaramaDai and Puchuur, people went out to the wilderness and the deity was invited down and into the village, and the same pattern has been reported by Beck (1981) and by Good (1983: 234, 1985: 153). Irula festivals at least partially reverse this process, taking a domestic deity out into the wilderness where she is activated.

This would seem to be a movement towards what Malamoud describes as the Hindu 'utopia' where village and forest merge (1976: 18-19). This recognition of the mythical dissolution of the pervasive opposition of village and forest helps our

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'hierarchically' organised filing systems, indeed any kind of categorisation, when what we really mean is a system of levels of segmentation.

interpretation of a further complication in the Irula cosmography: the deity, located both in the priest's house and at the forest shrine, must also be called down to participate. There is emphasis on dual locality, but also, in terms of my above-mentioned schema for interpreting metaphors, moving an abstract principle 'downwards' until it becomes an active, material entity. It is only by persuading the deity to hypostatise that they can do business with her. The metaphoric message portrayed by the cosmography seems quite clear: the deity is located both in the forest and in the village, both in disorder and in order, but can only be communicated with in the meeting of the two.

### 2.4.3. Liminality

We have seen that the representations of liminality in these festivals conform in many ways to Van Gennep's characterisation of liminality in rites of passage; using his  $A_1$ - $B$ - $A_2$  model, we have begun to look at the movements from  $A_1$  to  $A_2$  which the festival is intended to achieve. But it is also incumbent on the analyst to try to understand the logic by which people choose to make these movements via the liminal phase  $B$ . In the hope of doing this, let us look at what we can glean so far about the opposition  $A:B$ .

The cosmographic movement of the festival suggests that  $A:B = \textit{village:forest}$ ; the shaking or jumping of the sacrificial goats and cockerels prior to sacrifice, and the disequilibrium of the medium, suggest a change from *domestic* to *wild* or from *order* to *disorder*. Since I also want to emphasise the role of the festival as entertainment, perhaps I should add that  $A:B = \textit{boredom:entertainment}$ . But since I also claimed that there was more to this entertainment than gratificatory symbolic games, I should add too that  $A:B = \textit{lassitude:intellectual ferment}$ . This I hope to justify in my discussion of the intellectual challenges that are presented by the séance dialogue.

Van Gennep also emphasised that the contrast  $A:B$  is likely to be highlighted by contrasts in dress; if people are going from  $A$  to  $B$  they may be expected to dress, or undress, accordingly. The Irula responses to this demand are conflicting. We have seen that the priest's assistant wears items of feminine clothing, some of which must be new. The priest's attire, on the other hand, is neither new nor usually even clean. There more to this than carelessness: every Irula knows that the priest, who should also be the headman, should also spend six months of the year

in Siva-like seclusion in the forest. He should not wash, cut his hair, see his wife or anyone else from the village.<sup>1</sup>

The ideal attire for entering the liminal zone is then either cleanliness combined with gender inversion, or exaggerated uncleanliness and unkemptness. For the rest of the worshippers, the ideal is to be clean and to have clean new clothes, but I have rarely seen the latter injunction followed at village festivals, nor was the former practised with much precision. Women, however, quite often put on clean saris and tie their hair up; but if they get possessed, they usually untie their hair, shaking it around violently until brought out of trance, when they retie it. For the woman who goes to the temple and gets possessed, then, the shape of the rite might be better described as  $A_1:B_1:C:B_2:A_2$ , with the  $B:C$  opposition portrayed as *order:disorder* or *kempt:unkempt*.

The man who gets possessed also must add a  $C$ -factor to his dress symbolism: he must take his shirt off before getting possessed, and put it back on again afterwards. Generally, male Hindus often take off their shirts as a sign of respect to deity, suggesting a servant: master relationship. Appropriate to a rite of passage, this action could also profitably be interpreted as an abandonment of role in order to present the person to the deity; as a body-metaphor, nakedness suggests rebirth. Shirtlessness provides a good example of how a symbol can have contradictory meanings. It is associated with Brahman priests and temple devotees, and hence with proximity to both divinity; it also suggests earthy, low-status agricultural labourers and proximity to nature; shirtlessness, like dishevelment of hair, would

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<sup>1</sup>Mary Douglas (1970) has shown that Hallpike's (1969) suggestion that short hair universally stands for social control and long hair for its absence is not only simplistic but often wrong; her own contention that *unkempt* hair is usually a sign that the wearer prefers to exempt himself from social control seems nearer the truth. However, the case of the Irula headman provides an awkward exception, for although his unkemptness and his abode outside the village symbolise his opposition to social structure, it is also his sacred duty to remain spatially and behaviourally liminal for six months in the year; the headman who exempts himself from social control is the one who remains in the village, neglecting this duty of canonical unkemptness. Firth claims (1973: 284) that 'The special status of ascetics [in India] is indicated by their lack of adherence to rule: some have their heads clean-shaven, others have their hair braided and coiled up on the head, often with artificial braids added, and others have long dishevelled locks. As religious devotees, they are above conformity.' On the contrary, the paramount concern of ascetics is, by definition, the discipline they live by. Firth's suggestion that ascetics are outside convention amounts to the rather odd assertion that that their behaviour is not governed by rules specific to asceticism, of which rules about hair are clear examples!

also have to be contrasted with head-shaving, which marks a cultural end to a period of natural hair-growth.

There is another prescription for appropriate attire which applies to everyone - they should not wear shoes. It is of course standard practice throughout India to remove shoes when entering a temple or a house; but Irulas extend this to prescriptive barefootedness *on the way* to a shrine or to any rite of passage of any kind. So those who do buy new clothes to go to the temple in must also display at least one metaphorical suggestion of renunciation. This was explained as the need to maintain contact with *buumi taay* - 'Earth Mother' - so again the metaphor links proximity to deity with proximity to nature, and in a sense with birth and beginnings.<sup>1</sup>

To approach a deity, then, you must to some extent abandon culture not only cosmographically but also sartorially; the new clothes and the tying up of hair remind us that this is only half the story - that at least some elements of *A* must be brought along on the visit to *B*. As is the case with the forest-dwelling ascetic throughout India, the excursion into disorder does not amount to a total abandonment of control, and divinity is to be found at the meeting of the two.<sup>2</sup>

#### 2.4.4. The séance as a 'play within a play'

It can hardly have escaped the reader's notice that the séance itself also follows an  $A_1-B-A_2$  shape which is to some extent isomorphic with that of the encompassing rite; recognition of this was of course implicit in the discussion above of the  $B_1-C-B_2$  phase in the dress symbols of both men and women who get possessed.

Once again this conforms closely to the Van Gennep rites of passage model: the foetal position, combined with shirtlessness and muscular spasms and pain suggest birth; the theriomorphic behaviour and supposed incarnation of deity suggest new life (and later we will see how the speech of the medium, abandoning as it does normal rules of grammar and semantics, suggests a radically altered person); and of course the collapse at the end portrays a symbolic death. And just as the path is

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<sup>1</sup>At the beginning of a day's work or when entering a dance, an Irula will touch the ground first.

<sup>2</sup>The opposition, which Malamoud (1976: 13) identifies, between the ritualism of the householder and the anti-ritualism of the ascetic, does not in Irula society result in a division of labour, since the priest-headman who performs the rites prepares for the festival by living in the forest as an ascetic..



watered as people leave the village and as they return, so the medium sprinkles himself with water immediately before and after possession (the control of this contrasting with the absence of the initial watering in all women's possession and some men's possession).

It is easy to see how some of the oppositions we found earlier to be appropriate glosses of *A:B* - *domestic:wild*, *order:disorder*, *boredom:entertainment* and *lassitude:intellectual ferment* are also applicable to the opposition *B:C*. The further oppositions *human:animal*, *normal syntax/semantics:abnormal syntax/semantics*, and *bodily control:bodily dissociation* present no new challenges to the earlier pairings. But there are further oppositions which will require more discussion as they are less obviously matchable with the *A:B* oppositions.

The verbal construction for getting possessed is *jaaya vü:ga*. *Jaaya* is a noun referring to the séance and without any secular referent<sup>1</sup>; *vü:ga* simply means 'to fall' and is also used as an auxiliary in the alternative verbal construction *toga vü:ga* - literally 'fall to the deity' - which can either mean to 'become possessed' or 'worship.' So to become possessed is an act of worship similar enough to the act of prostration to share a verb; and the opposition *standing:falling* can also be applied to *A:B*.

So far so simple. But there is another phrase used in connection with getting possessed - '*rangi ö:ri rangiTTadu*' - 'it came down, went up and came down again.' I heard this used frequently by those apologising for not having quite succeeded in getting possessed; the spirit descends, and then must ascend in the body of the medium, and when it re-descends the medium flops like a puppet with its strings cut. Deities and ancestors are invited 'down' to the festival. For the deity, *A:B* is *up:down*, but since the deity is taken up from the village to the shrine it is also *down:up*. For the worshippers, the *A:B* opposition is *down:up*, going up to the shrine from the village, but also *up:down* - *standing:falling* in worship. For the medium, *B:C* is likewise both *down:up* - the spirit rising and falling within him - and *up:down*, standing upright and then falling in trance.

Before the yo-yoing gets out of hand let me sum up by saying that while structuralist interpretation anticipates, and finds no trouble gratifying itself with, the

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<sup>1</sup>The term is almost certainly derived from the Sanskrit term *chaayaa*, which means 'ghost' (Gold 1988: 39)

coherent and consistent use of metaphorical oppositions, this kind of facile interpretation would be quite inappropriate to the interpretation of the conflicting oppositions of the Irula festival. Interpretation of the metaphors of the festival does not provide us with any clear boundaries between, or evaluations of, the great encompassing oppositions of *order:disorder* and *culture:nature*. Indeed, the metaphors of the festival appear to explicitly contradict the facile application of such oppositions. This point will be further elaborated in each of the following sections, and a further opposition - *script:improvisation* - will be discussed in the next chapter [3.11.4].

#### 2.4.5. Playing with symbols: toccata and fugue

Since I have emphasised the importance of entertainment as a feature of these festivals, I want to take up again a theme alluded to earlier - that in our efforts to schematise the coherent logic of ritual, we should not underestimate the playful aspect of the enactment of ritual. This is a theme which will emerge more fully in the analysis of séance dialogue and will be discussed more fully thereafter [3.11, 4.1, 4.7]. For the moment, let me introduce the idea that if the objectives of the festival seem clear and the schematic arrangement of metaphoric themes seems coherent, this is often the product of *ad hoc* improvisation with paraphernalia and metaphoric messages.

The contradictory meanings attributed to the *ossatta mā:ri* festival near Jemmanarai provide a striking example. This was called the 'new harvest' festival, and everyone behaved as if they really had just harvested various grains from the forest; but it was also said to be a rain-making festival, which is contradictory - you want the rain *before*, not *after* the harvest. As with the hectic and often contradictory attribution of metaphoric meaning to the failure of a medium to get possessed, what we learn here is that it is not the *meaning* of symbols that matters, but the *act of playing with symbols*. This reinforces what I said earlier about the independence of the *aesthetic* level of meaning from the *material* level - from a material point of view it makes little sense to combine a harvest festival with a rain-making festival; aesthetically, however, it makes sense to Irulas to indulge in symbolisation for its own sake, regardless of whether the meaning is consistent at the material level of interpretation. We might borrow a phrase from Western music and call the priestly ritual performance a *tocatta*, emphasising the much-vaunted dexterity of the performers' manipulation of ritual objects, and describe the counterpoint of the rite as a whole as a *fugue* which departs from, or improvises on, prescribed themes; the

most emphatic fugue is of course the séance, which is a flight from ritualistic order, from normal language, and from normal bodily control.

In other words, symbols may be used not to indicate a particular meaning, nor to inculcate social values or to achieve a particular practical result, but for the sheer intellectual joy of playing with symbols. No-one could call Irulas 'ritualistic' in Douglas's sense of rigid adherence to prescribed ritual formulas (1970: 14); yet apart from the séance discussions, most of the conversation throughout the festival concerns the correct manipulation of ritual symbols. This is most striking, even comic, in the frantic efforts to persuade the deity to manifest in the medium, in the goat, or in the sacred fire which must be lit without matches, using a twig and a block of wood. During the frustrating two-hour wait for the fire to light, the following reasons were given for failure:

- the presence of small children (i.e. they were getting in the way, and they should, like women, be excluded from most key moments in ritual);
- lack of cloths to protect against the wind and to shield the deity from pollution from outside;
- no music;
- wrong music;
- people holding the coconut shell down with their left hands (they should have had their right hands on the shell, their left hands on the ground);
- string-puller not keeping left hand lower than right;
- string-puller not keeping right hand lower than left;
- new hole, new stick, old hole, old stick, and so on.

Again, this tells us more about the pleasure of symbolic performance than about metaphorical meaning; individually, the interplay of left and right, the presence or absence of children, and so on, tell us very little. But the determination and inventiveness that go into the process of imputing meaning to a chaotic event takes us straight to the heart of the festival's meaning. The analyst observes people behaving as if they are obeying a code which reads: '*elaborate, entertain, enjoy.*' But these are not values which could be explicitly used to oblige people to take part: the illusion of a coherent system must be maintained.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Similarly, when looking at astrology, the most crucial thing to observe is the plethora of symbols which practitioners has at their disposal, the manipulation of which is impressive and beyond the understanding of clients; but we mustn't

If I am right in suggesting that the fact of playing with symbols is more significant than implicit messages which particular symbols might be expected to carry, then this provides a striking contrast to Turner's insistence that every Ndembu ritual symbol 'is more than it seems, and often a good deal more' (1969: 15). This is his celebrated principle of *parsimony*, which is a re-working of Freud's notion of the *condensation* of meaning in dream-symbols (Freud 1976 [1900]: 383ff). In our enthusiasm to delve into the 'more' that symbols are supposed to mean, however, we ought not to forget that playing with symbols is not only parsimonious; there is always an *extravagance* in this play, whereby banal meanings are alluded to in an embarrassingly baroque proliferation of symbols. Indeed, if people assume a plethora of symbols to have a plethora of referents, then these symbols might well be said to mean considerably *less* than they seem to. Participants in Irula rites all want to be seen to manipulate symbols, regardless of whether they do so in a consistent way.

The above explanations for the delay in the arrival of the deity are clear evidence of enthusiasm for participative exegesis. We would be misguided if we tried to read a coherent system from this; participants are showing their willingness to forge a link with the world of spirits through the manipulation of symbols, and that is all there is to it. This process provides an implicit commentary on the processes of cognition, central to which is the use of metaphor to forge links between the unknown and the known.

There is another illustration of this point in the actions and exegesis of the festival rite: having begun fieldwork with the assumption that the anti-clockwise direction was universally inauspicious in southern India, I was surprised to see that Irula dances always go round in an anti-clockwise circle, and that circumambulation of the temple might go in either direction, though more commonly anti-clockwise. Das has suggested that we avoid using these terms, since using non-indigenous categories 'masks the code behind the formalized system of ritual and belief' (1982 [1977]: 92). It is certainly important to observe that such terms as exist in Dravidian languages with reference to the 'clockwise:anti-clockwise' distinction make no mention of clocks. But since they make no mention of the movement of the sun either, I see no possibility of avoiding confusion in analysis without using

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assume that these symbols, either, are manipulated in a logical and consistent manner.

some some unequivocal way of describing the movement. Dravidian terms are usually complex terms and phrases placing emphasis on right and left; as long as the right side is given emphasis, a movement can be seen to be auspicious even if it is, in our terms, anti-clockwise. Thus it may be alright to circumambulate a temple anti-clockwise, so long as you say 'I'm going to the right' or 'I'm keeping to the right of the temple' (I heard this phrase used at the *siruur mā:ri* multi-caste festival when they went round the temple anti-clockwise). This may be quite acceptable because you have at least demonstrated your good intentions to manipulate symbols in an auspicious manner.

#### 2.4.6. Alcoholic and spiritual inebriation

There is another aspect of festive play which contrasts with the seriousness of this pretence at coherent ritualisation. It is common for a lot of the male participants in the festival to be drunk; although it is in theory forbidden to attend a festival if you are drunk, I became aware that the behaviour of drunkards at these festivals constituted an important ingredient in the panoply of the festival. On no account are the drunkards to be allowed to attempt to become possessed. The reeling and bellowing of drunkards is uncomfortably analogous to the behaviour of a medium in trance, and so these two phenomena must be kept separate. However, one of the favourite games of drunkards is to poke fun at the institution of possession by doing hilarious parodies of it during the festival. I have seen this often enough to feel happy to call it an informal but formulaic part of festive behaviour<sup>1</sup>. When they do it, of course, everyone realises that 'they are only playing' (*summa vaLaaDugā:ru*), so that in a sense the 'pretend' trance of the drunkards plays an important role in constructing the 'reality' of divinely-inspired trance.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Similar instances of people parodying divine possession are described by Gardner (1988 [1972]: 435) and by Gold, who tells us that her Rajasthani informants sometimes explained this as a symptom of *kali yuga* degeneracy, and referred either to the *mediacy* of human mediums versus former *direct* appearances of 'descended incarnations' or sceptically to possessions as mostly faked or induced by *mantras* rather than from gods: 'Popular perception well recognises the potential for absurdity and roguery in humans serving as vehicles to represent higher spirit powers to other humans. Yet this does not constitute a denial of priestly channels' healing powers when a *bhaav* [spirit-possession] is true.' I (1988: 41, 56). Bouissac has recently described the typical activities of the clown in Western circuses as the 'ritualistic profanations of the sacred' (1990: 196).

<sup>2</sup>We can thus say the same of the parody of possession as Gourevitch said of the grotesque in Medieval religious art: 'the Medieval sense of the grotesque is not opposed to the sacred,' for it may represent 'one of the forms that disguises an approach to the sacred. It profanes and affirms the sacred at the same time' (1975).

We will later see how the drunkards play an important role in parodying and undermining the validity of divine pronouncements during the séance. For the moment, suffice it to say that although deities often remind drunkards that they shouldn't come to the festival at all when they are drunk, this injunction is neither obeyed nor accepted without challenge. I have even heard sober people reminding the deity quite openly that a festival is no fun without drunkards; on one occasion, the metaphor of the boiling pot of festival *pongäl* rice was used to explain the value of drunkards to the deity - 'Why shouldn't the drunkards come? A pot of *pongäl* is no good without the froth, is it?' As I said, the offerings *are* the deity, so that this image links the deity with the drunkard by the shared property of frothiness. A drunkard, like the deity, is loquacious and verbally incoherent, and this is recognised in the use of the term *mandiri* - 'cabinet minister' as a common euphemism for a drunkard. So although explicitly it is quite wrong to come drunk to the festival, the sober worshippers would simply not allow this rudeness to go on if they did not recognise the principle of *in vino veritas*.<sup>1</sup>

Ritual inversions have a tendency to be simultaneously subversive and confirmatory; in other words, they strategically exploit ambiguity. It is perhaps best to interpret this parody of possession as a ritualistic inversion of ritual values; at the same time as making the entire séance seem farcical, the mocking behaviour of the drunkards may paradoxically make the séance proper seem more serious. The point I am emphasising is this: *drunkenness provides a ready metaphor by which Irulas construct the idea of divine possession*. Every metaphor brings into play *comparison*, which means both *similarity* and *contrast*: divine possession is both similar to and contrastable with alcoholic inebriation<sup>2</sup>. But we should also recognise that *metaphors leak*, so that in this instance the deity, too, becomes tainted with the metaphor of inebriation. This is implied by the bodily and verbal disequilibrium of trance, although unlike village goddesses in many other parts of southern India, Irula deities do not as a rule accept alcoholic offerings.

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<sup>1</sup> Saoras, on the other hand, operate on a principle of *in vino spiritus*; the shaman begins the séance by drinking on an empty stomach, and as he becomes intoxicated 'his alcoholic exuberance is regarded as characteristic not of him but of the spirit who has possessed him' (Elwin 1955: 480-1).

<sup>2</sup> In English, puns on the word 'spirit' remind us that we enjoy making these analogies too.

Goffman (1971: 64) has provided some excellent discussion of the especial importance in Western societies of controlling performance through control over the body - hence the especial inappropriateness of farting, going to the toilet, laughing, stumbling, at moments of high ceremony. At stake here is the display of culture as triumphant over nature. Of course, in a ceremony which takes participants out of the village and into the forest, we should not expect this kind of cultural triumph to be displayed unequivocally - indeed, trance seems to revel in just the kind of lapse of intentionality - 'something mechanical encrusted on something living' - on which Bergson (1980 [1900]: 84) founded his theory of laughter [see 3.11.4]. It would be a mistake to see trance as purely indicative of bodily dissociation, or lack of control; in fact, genuine trance may be emphatically the product of control over the body - or, in the Irula case, an expression of the tension between the two, between control and lack of control, between culture and nature.

What is performed, then, in the juxtaposition of human and divine inebriation, is a contrast of two different kind of what might be called *brinkmanship*, the one illegitimate, individualistic and uncontrolled, the other a legitimate and paradoxical performance of poise through instability. I am grateful to Goffman (1971: 81) for the reference to a passage in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* in which the portrayal of a waiter's demonstration of his waiterly slickness is reminiscent of the ambivalence in the performance of trance:

Let us consider the waiter in the cafe. His movement is quick and forward, a little too precise, a little too rapid. He comes towards the patrons with a step a little too quick. He bends forward a little too eagerly; his voice, his eyes express an interest a little too solicitous for the order of the customer. Finally there he returns, trying to imitate in his walk the inflexible stiffness of some kind of automaton while carrying his tray with the recklessness of a tightrope-walker by putting it in a perpetually unstable, perpetually broken equilibrium which he perpetually re-establishes by a light movement of the arm and hand. All his behaviour seems to us a game.

There are doubtless endless variations in the performance of poise, but I am sure that it can never be performed by sure-footedness alone. In the next chapter we will see how verbal poise is demonstrated by the deliberate abandonment of the sure-footedness of everyday language [3.11.6].

## 2.5. Transactions

A topic which will emerge more clearly from discussion of the séance dialogue is that of the relations of reciprocity between Irulas and their deity. Without discussing what is said by, to, and about the deity, it is hard to put together a valid

assessment of transactions; but I would like at least to comment on the non-linguistic transactions that are conducted between humans and their deity in the festival, reserving full analysis for later.

The process of making the deity materialise involves hectic efforts not just in coaxing the medium but in coaxing the crowd to make a lot of noise. If the crowd makes its presence felt by making enough noise, the deity will reciprocally make her presence felt in the medium. The cheering and shouting in unison, explicitly said to help a medium achieve the state of trance, is strongly reminiscent of audience participation at Western pantomimes in this country, when children are told that miracles will never happen if they do not all shout the magic words together and loudly; Western children are made to feel that they have all had a part to play in turning the pumpkin into a carriage, and Irula participants are made to feel that they have played a crucial part in achieving the miracle of divine incarnation.<sup>1</sup>

So trance, and by extension the hypostasis of the deity, is an essentially collaborative performance in which the audience's complicity is not just a by-product but rather a *sine qua non* of the medium's efforts. Paine has pointed out that the usual top-down model in which political rhetoric is generally understood needs to be balanced by greater recognition of audience participation in the construction of meaning: 'persuasion ideally begins with a suspension of disbelief among the members of the audience, then it moves to the inducement of their collaborative expectancy, and finally it achieves their complicity with the speaker' (1976: 11). In Irula trance-events there is overt insistence on a bottom-up model: successful performance is the product of a deal struck between worshippers, priest-headman, and deity.

The idiom of human-divine relations as expressed in Irula festivals is therefore one of inter-dependency, and a major part of the meaning of the festival can be inferred by examining the transactions that are alluded to metaphorically. As with other aspects of metaphoric interpretation, we need to look at the different levels at which the meaning of the transactions is to be found. There is the instrumental level at which objects are given in return for material rewards - goats, chickens, bananas and coconuts are given in return for health, rain, protection from wild animals, and

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<sup>1</sup>Lee, discussing the collective engagement in !Kung trance-events, has likewise referred to 'the unusual native belief that their power comes from men, and not directly from the gods or spirits' (1968: 36).



ultimately more goats, chickens, bananas and coconuts. Material gifts are also given for *non-material but clearly defined practical rewards* - acquittal in a court case, a new job. But there is also the expressive level at which the expression of humility and the honouring of the deity ('saying the deity's name') is reciprocated with benediction from the deity. And aesthetically, there is in both the human and the divine side a mixture of stern formality and informal irreverence. In the next chapter, we will see how a large part of the séance involves metacommunicative negotiation of the meaning of the offerings given to the deity [3.10.1, 3.10.2].

What is negotiated is of course also the reciprocity itself - who owes what to whom. This importance of haggling - over the manifestation of the deity in the first place, and then over the conditions of the deals struck with the deity - cannot be overstressed. This presents a direct contradiction to Hubert and Mauss's assumption that

These benefits of the sacrifice are, in our view, the necessary consequences of the rite. They are not to be attributed to the free divine will that theology has gradually interpolated between the religious act and its consequences. (1964 [1898]: 10)

In other words, the Irula sacrifice is not the automatic magical performance that Hubert and Mauss's theory of sacrifice veers towards - the reciprocity must constantly be re-negotiated. For Hubert and Mauss, 'perfect continuity' is 'an essential characteristic of the sacrifice,' and participants 'must have unshakeable confidence in the automatic result of the sacrifice.'

We should also be aware of the *temporal dimension* to the exchanges; we are looking at an ongoing system of delayed reciprocal exchange in which like may be exchanged for like or for unlike. Further, it should be noted that gifts to the deity are also gifts to man. Good has insisted that 'the ultimate prestations [at the goddess festival] are on the one hand the proper worship of the goddess by her devotees, and on the other her bestowal of health, human fertility and social order during the coming year (1985: 150). These exchanges may be 'ultimate' in that they are encompassing and all-important relative to the more petty exchanges that are conducted at the festival. But I would be rather inclined to see all human-divine exchanges as 'primary' rather than 'ultimate' transactions. Human-divine transactions are immediately evident, and shield the fact that transactions between humans are going on at the same time. The goat is a gift from one man not only to the deity but to the rest of the worshippers, a gesture of humility before the deity is

also a gesture of humility before the crowd of participants, as is the gesture made in public avowal of repentance at a village council.

It is important to see the deity as a tool that facilitates unthreatening mediation between human donors and recipients; it is helpful to interpret this divine function in terms of Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness - to make a public donation is what they call a 'face-threatening act,' both for the donor and for the community or individual who receives it. The deity becomes the metaphorical recipient and thus shifts the burden of gift-giving and gift-receiving away from humans. In fact, to crystallise Durkheim's hopelessly vague 'god-is-society' formula into something meaningful, we might say that the deity is (partly) the principle of politeness personified - that is, that the deity is the catalyst which enables transactions (linguistic or material) between humans to be carried out with a minimum of threat to the face of the transactors. Divine agency is invoked as a device for shifting responsibility for or authorship of actions - whether evil, in the case of murder, genocide, or war - 'God told me to do it' - or altruistic, in the case of making a donation to society indirectly, by giving it to the deity first. The denial of the individual authorship of trance-pronouncements<sup>1</sup> saves the faces of the medium and of the clients. Unsurprisingly given the personification of the deity, humans behave as if the deity also had a 'face,' which must be saved by human worship and food offerings; but this must not cloud our recognition that a major function of sacrifice is to enable a feast to be held without threatening the face of the host or the guests.

Srinivas (1976: 268) has observed that in Karnataka the concept of 'face' (*moka*) is all-important in the negotiation of status within and between castes. Irulas perhaps lack such a concept because the existence of asymmetrical relations between Irulas is denied; a man can't set himself up as a patron by providing an feast unmediated by divine acceptance and return, and this seems to indicate the unacceptability, for Irulas, of the kind of 'face' described by Srinivas.

### 2.5.1. Food transactions

There is a major problem in interpreting food offerings to deities in India: the awkward paradox is that the normal idiom for giving and receiving food appears to be inverted when it comes to relations between humans and deities. Among

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<sup>1</sup>Cf Van der Walde's discussion of hypnosis as an institutionalised shifting of authorship (1968: 62)

humans, the receivers of food, particularly in a festive context, are unequivocally inferior; the logic appears to be reversed when food is offered by humans to deities, who are unequivocally superior. Several interpretations based on universally applied frameworks for analysing ritual suggest themselves. First, we could call this simply a *ritual reversal* which serves to highlight normal social logic<sup>1</sup>. This interpretation would save both the superiority of the food-giver and the superiority of the deity. Second, we could see it as a ritual expression of *metaphoric control*, since the giver of food is also the master of the recipient. This has been used by child psychologists who interpret children playing at feeding adults as a ritualistic reversal of the normal relations of dependency of children on adults. This second interpretation leaves the deity at least partially denied her superiority: in séance discussions this becomes quite explicit, with deities being threatened with starvation if they don't do as they're told. A third interpretation might see the food offering as *simple reciprocity*, since they recognise that the food was given them by the deity in the first place. This interpretation can also be applied to the offering of food to ancestors, who were food-givers in the past. And still in an idiom of reciprocity, there is also the more *complex reciprocity* of material offerings which acknowledge or anticipate intangible favours.

But this still leaves us with a problem: if we agree with Mauss that the unrepaid gift debases the recipient, then feeding the deity suggests dishonour to the deity. Babb (1975: 56) has suggested that this dilemma is resolved by including the eating of *prasaada* - the leftovers from the deity's meal - as part of the rite. A transactional analysis must interpret the eating of *prasaada* not only as a gift from the deity to man, but also as what Harper (1964: 181) calls 'respect-pollution' - which could alternatively be phrased as the intangible gift of humility. Parry has helpfully pointed out that this may constitute the idiom of transactions between humans:

The inferiority of the Leather-workers and Sweepers is highlighted by the fact that until recently they would consume what was left over on the plates of the guests at high-caste feasts. This points to a fundamental aspect of pollution, its relativity: what pollutes the pure may even purify the impure. Just as the *jutha* of the high castes is pure enough to be consumed by the lowest castes, so the sacramental *prasad*, the food which is consecrated to the deities and is

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<sup>1</sup>It is also a reversal in that feeding the deity seems to reverse what is actually achieved: it is humans who need to be fed by the deity, not the other way round. It is in this sense counter-rational, though I should emphasise that the Irulas do perceive their deity as reliant on food offerings.

distributed after every *puja* to all the worshippers, is technically divine *jutha*. (1979: 100)<sup>1</sup>

In the case he mentions, however, it is far from clear that his conjunctive phrase 'just as' is appropriate. There is surely a fundamental difference between honouring a deity by consuming *prasaada*, and simply eating a higher caste's leftovers because it is convenient to do so. In the latter case, no honour is passed to the higher caste if the act lacks the publicity and intentionality of *prasaada*-eating. We find the same confusion, which is symptomatic of the failure to draw appropriate dividing lines between humans and deities, in Marglin:

Left-over food given from a superior to an inferior does not produce pollution; the typical example is that of the left-over food from the gods, *prasaad*, which is of the same type as the superior patron giving left-over food to inferior servants or the wife eating the left-over food of her husband. Similarly the water in which the feet of a superior person have been washed can be drunk by an inferior person. (1985: 66-7)

Of course I am not denying that transactions between humans and deities share the same *idiom* as those which constitute asymmetries between humans; but to assert that this idiom is applied in the same way in both cases is to turn a blind eye to ritual reversals in the portrayal of deities whose effluent purifies, and whose diet may include substances which would be polluting to many humans. Sharma not only makes the same mistake as Parry and Marglin - she adds the overtly functionalist suggestion that 'the purity-pollution principle is applied in the conduct of religious rituals of all types in exactly the same manner [as it is between humans]' (1978 [1973]b: 69). Further, she compounds this error with her manifest failure to acknowledge the relativity of purity and pollution:

the substances which are conceived as purifiers in the religious context are also those which are used for purificatory purposes in non-religious contexts. Cowdung, as the product of that extraordinarily pure animal, the cow, is used to purify the area where the image or symbols of the deities are to be placed for worship and to purify the hearth where *prasad* is to be prepared. When a housewife smears her kitchen floor and hearth with cowdung as a regular practice, even when no ritual is to take place ...the very same principle is being observed. (Sharma 1978 [1973]b: 69)

This analysis assumes that qualities of purity and impurity *inhere* in substances; it can't account for the *relativity* of these notions. Elsewhere, in southern India, cowdung is said to be 'intrinsically impure' - in fact it will defile a god, even though this most impure part of the cow 'is sufficiently pure relative even to a Brahman

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<sup>1</sup>By 'technically,' I presume he means that this idea is enshrined in texts, hinting that not all worshippers think of it like this.

priest to remove the latter's impurities' (Harper (1964: 182). Harper's point illustrates that a substance may be polluting in one context and purifying in another, and to understand this we need to invoke two principles: first, the *principle of relativity* which participates in the construction of a ranking system. And second, the *principle of inversion*; to understand this second principle, it is most important to distinguish *categories* (e.g. excrement) and *substances* (e.g. cow-dung). According to the principle of inversion, sacred beings and events are framed by the fact that categories normally associated with pollution - excrement and leftovers - supply the most potent purifiers.

In other words, secular categorical principles may be inverted; Sharma misses this crucial point by assuming that secular principles are 'the same as' or 'consistent with' those found in ritual. Divine leftovers are not 'polluted,' as she calls them; not only are they not polluting, they actually *purify* the worshipper. This is *not* true of human leftovers - with the notable exception of divinised human renouncers (Bradford 1985: 61) or other cases where humans are ritually treated as deities. Just as the dung of the cow, antithetically to human dung,<sup>1</sup> is not only not impure but actually a purificatory agent, so it is with divine leftovers. Both of these phenomena can be interpreted very simply as ongoing ritual reversals of the profane norms which dictate that excrement and leftover food are polluting. And it is worth noting that the reversal applies in a ritual context to some exchanges between humans too: as *prasaada*, even boiled food may be accepted from people you normally wouldn't consider accepting it from.

Fuller has argued vociferously against the assumption that Hindu food exchanges between humans and deities operate on a metaphor of inter-caste food exchange:

the crucial parallel is not the relationship between high and low castes, but between husband and wife. A wife normally cooks for her husband, although he is her superior and sometimes said to be her god. It is thus like a wifely servant, not a low-caste servant, that a priest or devotee acts towards his god. (1979: 470)

The adoption of feminine attire by the Irula priest's assistant lends support to this argument, although the shirtlessness of the priest invokes, surely, the image of a male rather than a female servant. But Fuller overstates his insistence that deities are immune to pollution by humans; in support of his case, he notes that cooked

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<sup>1</sup>Carrithers notes widespread fascination in the excretory habits of divinised Jain ascetics (1989: 233).

food would normally be unacceptable to human superiors, and that even raw food is similarly 'opened to pollution' because even bananas and coconuts are broken open before being offered. His argument cannot, I presume, explain why Irula priests, like many other non-Brahman priests in southern India, wear mouth-coverings to prevent them from polluting the divine offerings by breathing on them, and avoid, so far as possible, letting the left hand touch the offerings<sup>1</sup>. Yet he himself acknowledges that some aspects of human conventions for showing respect are evident in temple worship. The argument that deities can't be polluted assumes a radical distinction between deities and divine images, but this division is contradicted when humans - as Fuller himself acknowledges - approach the images as if they were pollutable human beings. Deities are constructed by metaphors, and the dominant metaphor here is that of a human who, like worshippers, must be purified before and after a sacred meal.

The same metaphorical axis of purity-pollution which humans use to frame social groups and arenas of action is also used, albeit in contrastable ways, to separate humans and deities, and to construct ritual frames. The contrasts between human-human divisions and human-divine divisions constitute the frame that separates sacred from secular offering. The use of the purity-pollution idiom in both kinds of relation emphasises continuity, and the contrastable application of this idiom emphasises discontinuity. Similarly, as Dumont (1980 [1966]: 43) has pointed out, the purity-pollution idiom both divides castes and establishes a continuous link between them.

The rite as a whole is framed by purification, and the food-offering sub-frame is likewise constructed by purification. The fact that a mouth-cloth is used to separate the priest from the food he is offering reminds participants that this is no secular food-offering, and that the gulf separating a priest and a deity is greater than that between wife and husband; not surprisingly, this is a peculiar sacred variant on a theme whose source - the opposition of pure and impure - is undeniably secular. That this is contradicted by the fact the bananas and coconuts are 'opened to pollution' should not bother us because it does not appear to bother the Hindu worshipper; it is enough that the idiom of purity-pollution has been used in a unique and therefore sacred way. I assume that Dumont and Pocock were making a similar

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<sup>1</sup>Similarly, Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi has noted that South Indian worshippers reduce the fermentation time for idlis and dosas by adding curd, so that they don't become too impure to offer to gods (1977: 543)

point when they wrote that 'the nature of the gods is not purity *per se*, but purity is a condition for contact with the gods to be beneficial to human beings' (1959b: 31). Of course the 'nature of the gods' can't be purity *per se*, I would add, because deities are not 'natural' but 'cultural' beings; *the deities are themselves constructed by the conditions under which they are worshipped*.

Of course, this is not a point of view that would be expressed by worshippers; but if we follow Fuller in simply reproducing informants' statements about 'absolute' or 'ultimate' pollutability or non-pollutability of deities, there can be no possibility of holistic analysis. By privileging this entelechic representation over the reductionism of structural-functional analysis, Fuller is simply replacing one kind of reduction with another. Detailed analysis of the metaphorical construction of divinity, on the other hand, expands analysis by recognising the intercontextual contradictions between different representations of divinity. The crucial point is that deities are not absolute entities but rather, like the purity-pollution opposition, source metaphors for an infinite variety of social uses. Fuller appears to have been carried away by the entelechic representation of inviolable deities; having insisted that the purity of the gods is inviolable, he then goes on to say that

given that purity and pollution define one of the most important sets of conventions by which Hindus can show respect, it follows that the inestimable purity of the gods must be respected *as if* it were violable. Purity and pollution, in other words, define an *idiom* by which respect to the gods is shown. ...all conventions of respect can be used towards the gods. This must not be interpreted in literalistic fashion. (1979: 470)

But Fuller himself interprets the metaphor of a non-pollutable deity in a 'literalistic fashion'! He has forgotten, it seems, that deities exist subjunctively, in an 'as if' world - they have no absolute existence independent of the things said or done to them and the uses to which they are put. A deity that is treated *as if* it could be polluted is *ipso facto* a pollutable deity even if behaviour or responses to different questions suggest otherwise.

Reminding ourselves of this, we can now return to the issue of power-relations, and we can reject Fuller's assumption (1979: 470) that the deity is unequivocally superior to the worshippers. Without this assumption, there is no longer a dilemma, and we can say simply that in one sense the food offering does indeed make the deity *contextually* inferior to and dependent on those who offer food. And we can use the same argument to reject his assumption that 'people do not worship the gods because they are pure, but because they are powerful' (*ibid*: 469).

If deities acquire their power by virtue of the respect shown them by worshippers, and if respect is shown by appropriate purification of the human worshipper and the divine image, then surely it is no longer relevant to draw such a sharp distinction between purity and power.

We must reject, then, Babb's suggestion that 'an asymmetrical transaction in foods ...lies at the heart of *puja*, a transaction both expressive of and supportive of hierarchical distance between the divine and the human' (1975: 57) [see Fuller's critique, (1979: 468-9)]. If the deity is, in some sense, distant and superior, the metaphor of feeding is a strange way to express these relations. Where worshippers say that the deity doesn't 'really need' the food offered, we might say simply that everyday transactional logic of intercaste relations is ritually inverted - or else we can endorse, for example, Fuller's suggestion (1979: 463) that the idiom of food offerings is that of wifely devotion to the husband. Where the deity is threatened, as she is at the Irula festival, we are forced to recognise the festive undermining of the normally taken-for-granted of divine superiority. Since man depends on the deity to provide food in everyday life, the festival feeding constitutes a ritual reversal of this, and the deity is portrayed as dependent on *puuja* offerings. This interpretation has the merit of being psychologically convincing; it seems likely that adults ritual should, like children's play, indulge in ceremonial inversion of normal dependency. That is, both children and adults like to play at being the feeders of those whom they conceive to be, in encompassing reality, their feeders.

This is not to say that these same worshippers might not also be capable of saying, especially in response to an ethnographer's questions, that deities don't 'really' need the food offered to them. If Fuller's informants tell him that food-offerings please the deities '*not* because the gods are in need; gods require no attention from human beings. They are not, for example, pleased by food-offerings because they are hungry' (1979: 470), we must note this as one among many representations which people have of their relations with deities. But in our analysis we must remember that deities 'are not' anything, since they exist in the world of make-believe, and in make-believe anything is possible. So if people offer them food it is not for the analyst to say that they aren't hungry. When people insist that deities aren't hungry, they are *reinverting their own inversion of normal dependency*. It may be that, *relative to ancestors*, deities are sometimes contrasted by their independence from human offerings and by the fact that humans are dependent on



favours given by the latter but not by the former (Bharati 1985: 209). But this is not true for Irulas, whose deities are in general assumed to be dependent on human offerings, and whose ancestors do return some of their offerings - food, clothes - and are expected, like deities, to help by protecting people from animals.

More recently, Fuller (1987: 23) has contrasted *puuja* food offerings, which are devotional and, when eaten as *prasaada*, are incorporational, with *bali* - sacrifice - which indicates negative, exorcistic motives. I have already rejected the idea that Irula rites, or aspects of rites, could be characterised as either purely exorcistic or purely incorporational - I deny that we can draw clear dividing lines between malevolent and benevolent spiritual forces. We can analytically separate the offering of fresh blood from the offering of *kāri pongāl* - cooked meat - afterwards; but although it may be that the deity is not offered fresh blood directly, this offering is hers as much as the cooked meat. There is not the clear separation of the offering found elsewhere in southern India. Even the cockerels, sacrificed at the shrine but cooked and prepared afterwards in the village by individual families, are also offered there to the deity, and so eaten as *prasaada*. Fuller also insists that limes in Tamil Brahmanic temples must be seen as *bali* and not as *puuja*, since they are used for purification and exorcism and do not constitute part of the food offering which is returned to the worshippers as *prasaada*. But I doubt if the boundary between purificatory exorcism and *puuja* can be drawn so clearly here. Limes are primarily used for purification but may later be used in preparing the meal, and more significantly eaten by the medium. Much the same might be said of the banana mixture, which is purificatory when smeared over the deity-stones, but becomes *prasaada* when eaten afterwards.

It may be that *bali* and *puuja* are not clearly distinguished in Irula festivals, but within the *puuja* offerings there is a division which is significant although not recognised by separate terms. The bananas buried in the ground or left in a tree for several days before the festival and subsequently offered by the priest must be home-grown rather than bought. Similarly, all the milk used in preparing the banana mixture and poured over the deity-stones should, ideally, be from a cow belonging to the priest. On the one hand, the insistence on home produce seems to exaggerate the assertion of independence which is central to all food offering; but the practice of burying bananas in the ground or leaving them up a tree for several days before the *puuja* carries a simultaneous explicit reminder of dependence on divine mercy for food, since it is hailed as a divine miracle that monkeys, birds and

insects leave them alone. In a sense, these offerings to the deity are already a kind of *prasaada*, since they have been returned safely to devotees so that they may be offered in the festival. Once again, the gift that ties the deity to man simultaneously ties man to the deity; the emphasis is on both reciprocity and interdependence.

I should also stress that it would be quite inappropriate here to distinguish, as Dumont did for the Kallar, between meat-eating 'demons' and vegetarian 'gods' (1986 [1957]: 409-10). Diet is of course a vital diacritical feature of people and deities throughout India; but to suggest that meat-eating spirits are malevolent and vegetarian ones benevolent is a gross oversimplification of the Hindu pantheon in general. Only at two of the festivals I witnessed was blood sacrifice omitted; at one of these the worshippers apologised for the lack of a goat, and at the other, the Basavayya-Siva temple, the dangerousness of the deity was explicitly linked with his pure fruit-and-milk diet. I find extremely dubious Dumont's claim that 'the sacrifice of the goat would not be religious if it were not accompanied by a caricature of *puja*.' (1986 [1957]: 460); in other words, in addition to depriving meat-eating spirits of the title 'deity', Dumont suggests that blood sacrifice is not, on its own account, 'religious'. For Irulas, to offer a goat is unequivocally more worthy than offering a coconut, and if you have promised a goat to the goddess, you might shamefacedly offer a coconut as an assurance that a goat will be offered at some later date. In many parts of India, pumpkins and other offerings are stained red and offered in explicit imitation of blood sacrifice (Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1977: 551-2; Östör 1980: 56-7).

There is a further element in the ritual treatment of offerings that we might call a 'caricature.' As we have just seen, home-grown bananas must be re-discovered at the forest shrine before being offered; domestic products, must be undomesticated before being offered. The same is true of goats and cockerels, which must 'jump' or shake as a sign of divine possession before being sacrificed. In this paradigm there is a strong link between possession by the deity and re-appropriation by the forest - i.e. that wildness is being caricatured; like the priest and the deity, the offerings must to some extent abandon their domestication and become creatures of the forest.

We should also be aware of the fact that no festival food offerings are part of normal fare. No Irulas eat coconuts, bananas, *pongäl* rice or goat in profane contexts. Notably alcohol, which is a standard offering to village deities in many

parts of southern India, is not offered by Irulas to their deities, and it may well be due to the fact that they prefer to drink alcohol on normal days too. The importance of recognising this is that we see how inappropriate is the assumption that deities eat whatever the caste worshipping them eats. Thus Srinivas tells us that:

Deities have a tendency to adopt the customs of their devotees. It is natural then for the deity from Malabar to switch over to the Coorg's diet on reaching Beenguur. ...Coorgs explain the dietetic preference of their deities by saying that they 'lost their caste': a certain ambivalence can be detected in this attitude, an ambivalence which presumably prevails towards their own diet. They like non-vegetarian food and liquor, but at the same time consider vegetarianism as more ethical. (1952: 212)

For Irulas, as for many southern Indian 'meat-eating' castes, meat is only ever eaten in a festive context. It would be more to the point to say that they are meat-eaters because their deities are meat-eaters than the other way around. Of course, there are also many Brahmans who would not dream of eating meat in a festive context but who furtively eat meat in 'Military Hotels' in towns. To over-emphasise parallels between human and divine characterisations is to miss the importance of contrast in the framing of divine entities and ritual events.

### 2.5.2. Austerities, submission and other intangible offerings

We will see in the next chapter how much of the séance dialogue portrays spiritual entities competing for attention [3.9]. For the moment, suffice it to say that perhaps the most significant intangible offering is attention, and this is manifested in large numbers of people, in dancing, and above all, in noise. For Irula deities, the food they are given is relatively unimportant compared to the attention they receive - the 'saying of their name,' the people 'following behind' them. It is surely no accident that the most prestigious offering you can make at a temple is a bell, the symbol of calling the faithful to worship, the bell which is rung at all key ritual moments but above all is rung by the priest as he leads the followers up the path.

It may seem that my discussion of transactions has been excessively materialistic, emphasising the 'baser' motives in worship against the more metaphysical. But I want to emphasise first that it is the materialistic motives that are most explicit and clear, and that we can't fully understand the metaphysical level of transaction without first understanding the materialistic level. The phrase most commonly used for offering something in sacrifice is '*togakku maattugee*,' which literally means 'I'm exchanging or bartering it with the deity': this gives a clear indication of the explicitly *transactional* nature of ritual, and also emphasises the *transformative*

potential of metaphoric action (*maattugee* is a transitive verb which means 'to change'). Yet this is just the kind of materialistic interpretation that Leach warned us against when he claimed, with reference to all sacrifices, that

Gods do not need presents from men; they require signs of submission. The material body of the sacrificial victim may well be a serious economic cost to the giver of the sacrifice, but, at the metaphysical level, economics is not the issue. What matters is the act of sacrifice as such, which is indeed a symbol of gift giving, but gift giving as an expression of reciprocal relationship rather than material exchange. (Leach 1976: 83)

This is similar to Fuller's argument, cited earlier, against 'literalistic interpretation' of human-divine relations (1979: 470). I am fully in agreement, as long as we remember that 'materialistic' or 'literalistic' interpretations of relations between humans would be equally misleading *on their own*. Judging from this quotation, Leach implicitly regards 'economics' as concerned with material things rather than metaphysical ideas; but a cursory glance through any introductory text in economic anthropology will show that it is actually one of the defining features of ceremonial gift exchange that the metaphysical importance outweighs the material importance of the exchanges - recipients often don't stand in *material* need of the gifts, even if they pretend that they do. And I am left wondering whether Leach really believes that 'gift-giving' between humans could ever be simply simply a 'material exchange'; if it were, we surely wouldn't call it 'gift giving'.

So I am certainly not suggesting that the metaphysical level of interpreting sacrifice is unimportant; but I would be seriously misrepresenting Irula sacrifice if I suggested that divine-human reciprocity was so unequal that 'gods do not need presents from men.' The metaphysical<sup>1</sup> level of interpretation is important, but submission is *not* enough for Irula deities. They need material offerings too. When we examine the kinds of gifts exchanged, both material and metaphysical, we find that the idiom of exchange is remarkably similar to the idiom of exchange between humans.

I accept from Leach the point that even in apparently materialistic food offerings there is a metaphysical meaning which we should not neglect. But the festival as a whole involves so many other metaphors of metaphysical exchange that Irulas may

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<sup>1</sup>I would also query Leach's terminology here: he sees submission as interpretable at the 'metaphysical level' of exchange, but although submission may have a metaphysical meaning, what could be more *physical* than prostration, or more *down-to-earth* than submission?

be forgiven for underemphasising those involved in food offering, where the material level of interpretation is given so much more emphasis. The most obvious and doubtless the most important of these is submission, most clearly symbolised by the simple act of prostration, which worshippers do before the medium, the *pooja* offerings, the goat, and of course the deity-stones.

Another factor in the bargains that are struck is the asceticism of the priest and the self-mortification of the medium, which I have discussed earlier. Mortification acts as a kind of negative 'gift,' rather like a destructive potlatch, which elevates the sufferer and may be used to shame others into particular actions - as in the pan-Indian phenomenon of women fasting (this was where Gandhi got the idea) to shame men into acceding to their requests. The self-inflicted injury of the medium shames the deity into materialising, and eventually into acceding to the worshippers' requests. The *séance* may be interpreted, then, both as an act of worship and as a sacrifice, with the medium as a kind of scapegoat who suffers on behalf of the rest of the participants in order that they might be healed<sup>1</sup>. The medium frequently screams, grunts, and explicitly accuses worshippers of causing the pain, though it is never clear whether the medium or the deity is suffering on behalf of humanity. And there is another side to the symbolism of self-mortification in Hindu ritual: it is a token of faith in the deity who will protect such worshippers from pain. At the fire-walking ceremonies I witnessed in multi-caste festivals, this event was said to secure future boons for the fire-walkers, as well as being the fulfilment of a vow; the protection from pain involves, like all other divine acceptances of offerings, the possession of the offering - in this case a person.

However carefully we examine the logic of human-divine reciprocity, though, in the end there are so many transactions going on that we can no longer meaningfully talk of calculated transactions. Participants enjoy haggling with the deity as if there were genuinely negotiable bargains being struck, following known rules; but the truth is that the rules of transaction inevitably remain to some extent inscrutable where one party to the transaction is not an agent but a figment of the worshipper's imagination.

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<sup>1</sup>cf Malamoud who says that in Vedic sacrifice, 'the list of quasi-victims necessarily includes man too' (1976: 3).

### 3. Séances

In the previous chapter we saw the ritual setting of the séance as the central event in the Irula village festivals [2.1.5, 2.4.4]. Having seen how Irulas play with visual and physical symbols, we will now find out what they do with verbal metaphors in the séance discussions. The séance is, like all-in wrestling<sup>1</sup>, both a dramatic performance and a competition; some of the most apt metaphors with which to describe the séance discussions derive from the theatre and from sport. We have been looking mainly at the stage, the props, and the patterning of action; now we will learn more about the actors, the audience, directors, rehearsal, alienation effects, catharsis, tragedy and comedy. Since there are also real stakes in this play-acted competition, we also need to look at the rules of the game, teams, referees, and so on.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, attending a séance is not the same thing as visiting the theatre; participants would be unlikely to say that they attend in order to be entertained, but rather in order to worship and to find out about a variety of problems which they

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<sup>1</sup>There are several analogies between the séance and the wrestling match as described by Barthes: the 'spectacle of excess,' the 'abolition of all motives and all consequences,' the 'intelligible representation of moral situations which are usually private,' and above all the 'exhaustion of the content by the form' (1973 [1957]: 15-26).

<sup>2</sup>Fernandez (1986:227) describes the metaphors of play and drama as 'moribund' and heralded a new age in which social scientists would turn to the 'text metaphor' to aid their understanding of social processes. But however familiar and useful the text metaphor may be to text-building academics, it does not seem appropriate to use this metaphor to describe the behaviour of drama-building non-literate peoples. 'Text' would be especially inappropriate as a metaphor for the festival: a text is linear, concentrates mainly on the mind, and ideally should be understood in similar ways by each reader, whereas the festival is a jumble of sensual experiences which is bound to be experienced in radically different ways by different participants. I would, however, suggest that there are close analogies between the Irula séance and the post-modern novel in Carlos Fuentes's sense of 'a privileged arena for the sceptical subversion of orthodoxy' This is a definition of the novel which itself relies on the metaphors of play and drama - so these metaphors are not 'moribund' in literary criticism. In a compendium on the theme of 'cultural performance', another literary scholar has recently contrasted ritual and literature by suggesting that 'it is of the essence of ritual to present itself as Truth, and of the essence of literature to admit that it is illusion' and that 'ritual relies on faith, while literature plays with its own built-in mechanism of the lie. If both take place in the realm of make-believe, the quality of that belief is very different in each case' (Morgan 1984:81-2). It should be clear that I prefer to allow for the play of scepticism in ritual than to suggest that the festive play of the Irulas is not ritual because it involves sceptical subversion of its own make-believe.

would like to solve. The *séance* is a *diagnostic drama* with explicit instrumental intentions of solving the problems that are diagnosed. It will be helpful to look at participants in this drama under the separate headings of *human* participants - those that are tangibly present - and the *spiritual* participants - those that are postulated as existing, but whose identity and even presence can only be guessed at by participants and analyst alike. It could of course be argued that the latter are 'human' too, since they are constructed with anthropomorphic metaphors and some of them are supposed to be humans who have died.

### 3.1. Human participants

The following roles played in the enactment of the *séance* must be distinguished:

- medium (*jaayakaarā*)
- priest (*puujā:ri*)
- interlocutor (*javaap kö:kkavā*)
- client (*jaaya kö:kkavā*)
- musicians (primarily referred to as the oboe-player - *kwä:l puDikkavā*)<sup>1</sup>
- spectators (who also participate vocally, both linguistically and paralinguistically)

As we have seen, the roles of priest and spirit-medium are normally separated, the former being hereditary in the male line and closely connected with village headmanship, and the latter non-hereditary and ideally unconnected with any political roles (the ideal medium being an outsider, preferably an affine, but even an anthropologist). The fact that I myself was so often asked to try acting as medium brought home to me the fact that ideally the medium is only a mouthpiece and not someone who is genetically predisposed to this role. This is in marked contrast to the more usual southern Indian pattern whereby the right to legitimate possession by village deities is acquired by heredity (Good 1978: 219; Reiniche 1979: 180-1). The important point is that although the assertion that it is spiritual beings who are speaking through the medium is accepted as true, no Irulas would deny the possibility that a medium, even while possessed, may slip in ideas of his own and even deliberately manipulate a *séance* to win points over rivals.<sup>2</sup> The medium, like

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<sup>1</sup>Elsewhere in Tamil Nadu, temple music is usually referred to as 'drumming' (*meelam, porai*).

<sup>2</sup>A local plantation manager told me that he didn't believe any Irula *séances* were genuine, because he'd once threatened an Irula medium for pretending that the goddess was asking for higher wages for plantation workers, and the Irula

the poet in the West, is expected to be reticent about his performance and even to deny responsibility for the voices that speak; and just as a bad poet may be accused of not being inspired by the muse, so too does the medium run the risk of being heckled for making non-transcendental utterances in a canonically transcendental context.

The medium becomes the instrument or mouthpiece of whatever spiritual beings choose to make their presence felt. Since he is also the representative of everyone assembled, it is on him that any angry spiritual beings are likely to vent their anger. In the last chapter we saw how the medium whips himself or is whipped by the priest during the séance [2.1.5]; in addition, the medium also frequently alludes verbally to the pain he is suffering. If he screams out a phrase like ‘they are tormenting me!’ (*nānne vaaTTugina!*) this serves as an injunction to concerned parties to hurry up and sort out the dispute so as to put an end to the medium’s suffering. The priest, by contrast, often administers the whipping and generally ought to be seen to be in control of the event; he controls the spirits without becoming their instrument. The medium is treated in several ways analogous to the preparation of the sacrificial offering - like the goats, chickens and *pongāl* pots, he is sprinkled with holy water when brought before the temple, and he becomes ‘heated’ and agitated when possessed by the deity.

When the séance discussion is under way, usually one man will assert himself as the main interlocutor (*javaap kō:kkavā*), who will do most of the arguing with the spiritual beings, and will often represent the party concerned - the client - using the first person. This role is very often played by the priest, and it requires as much linguistic and diplomatic skill as that of the medium. As we will see, the language used by the interlocutor is often as inventive and abnormal as that of the medium. It is also important to bear in mind that the *javaap kō:kkavā* represents and gives encouragement to both the audience and the various spiritual speakers - like the medium, he may switch roles with bewildering speed. His role in the séance corresponds in many ways to that of the stooge or ‘answerer’ who is found in many varieties of public performance in southern India, of whom Ramanujan says that ‘like canned laughter or applause on American TV, he tends to guide or give cues to the audience to respond in certain ways. He helps to include and interiorize the public within the performance’ (1986: 45).

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medium had run away laughing; to the Irulas, such an incident presents no threat to the truth of supernatural beings speaking through mediums.



Common sense, quite apart from ethnographic evidence, tells us that orators - or, as Burling has aptly called them, 'specialists in etiquette' (1970: 158) - are likely to be of great social significance in non-literate societies. We might expect, then, that the key personnel involved in Irula séances would derive some prestige and power from the pivotal role that they play in creating and re-creating Irula sacred tradition, as well as in solving disputes between humans and between humans and spiritual entities.

My aim here is to examine the display of linguistic prowess that takes place in Irula séances and link it to such power relationships as are meaningful in Irula society. It has often been noted that not only literacy, but also prowess in spoken language, are often linked with political clout and prestige.<sup>1</sup> The heteroglossia of political and religious speech-making in Tamil Nadu, for example, is so marked that few listeners can understand more than a fraction of what is being said; but they do understand that the speaker must be a very educated person, and they accord status to speakers of high Tamil by calling it 'beautiful'. It is much more questionable whether Irula mediums acquire prestige by possession of heteroglot skills - not least because it is generally supposed to be the spiritual entities rather than the medium who author the utterances. Although it is the medium who normally conducts the séance by signalling to the musicians to start at the end of a 'verse' and to stop when he wants to speak again, it would be helpful to bear in mind the following possibilities for immediate censorship which restrict the medium's potential abuses of the power:

- Participants can simply ignore a given case of possession if they don't want that person to be given a chance.
- Another person can become possessed and steal the show, ending the trance, or at least the communication, of the first medium.

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<sup>1</sup>Kochmann (cited in Burling 1970) provides us with an extraordinary example of social prestige being tied to linguistic skills, in his analysis of rapping in black ghettos in Chicago. Rapping creates a favourable impression on a person when you first meet them, and is a colourful way of propositioning a woman. He suggests that linguistic skills are at least as important a source of prestige as fighting ability, to which a person only resorts when he is losing the verbal battle - 'It is these same Negro youths whom educators sometimes imagine to be verbally stunted and so inarticulate as to be incapable of expressing themselves clearly in the classroom.'

- Both the spiritual beings and the medium himself may be said to be 'lying' if participants don't want to accept what is said - if a good enough reason for somebody's misfortune is not given, for instance.
- A medium whose speech is too full of stereotyped clichés and standard responses is liable to be ridiculed, with participants anticipating what he is going to say next.
- Musicians will simply interrupt a discussion if it becomes boring or takes an unpleasant turn.
- Meaning is not constructed by the medium alone, but in conjunction with all speaking participants - he cannot force a particular interpretation on the listeners.

By contrast, whoever plays a crucial role as the main interlocutor has the potential to derive prestige and authority from his linguistic competitions and haggling with spiritual beings. It is fitting that this should often be the priest/headman: it is he who, as we saw in the last chapter, 'controls' the deity by controlling the villagers, so it is logical that he, if anyone, should be able to compete effectively with spiritual beings in the linguistic battles of the séance [2.1.5, 2.3.5]. And so it is not surprising that it is he, rather than the medium, who benefits (insofar as anyone benefits) from what psychologists call the 'halo effect' deriving from association by contiguity.

Occasionally the priest will act as medium, although ideally he should be there to control the deity and spirits - verbally, using harsh words, and physically, with a whip or cane, which is an essential item of ritual paraphernalia. Both priest and medium may serve, in the same séance, as *actors*, *directors*, and *authors* of oral scripts in the drama of possession; they act reciprocally as *donors* and *recipients* of linguistic offerings; the linguistic games may be either *competitive* (one participant trying to defeat or subvert the other by ridicule and irony) - or *symbiotic* (mutual assistance in working out meaning and in entertaining the spectators).

In the language of gamesmanship, they may both be *players* and *referees*. This is an important point, for this reversibility of roles contrasts with the radical distinction drawn by Dumont between priests and spirit mediums. He assumes that the former makes offerings *to* the deity, whereas the latter receive offerings (advice, etc.) *from* the deity:

The priest's functions coincide with the ritual of offerings - that is, of gifts to the gods. The functions of the possessed person rest on a reverse movement, so to speak. With the possessed, the god is present and one can question him. The god no longer receives; he gives (oracles, advice, orders). This is why it is possible here to describe the activities of the possessed separately. (1986 [1957]: 375-6)

In the Irula festival it is clear that both priest and spirit medium are givers and receivers of offerings to and from the deity. The priest gives food offerings but also receives these back as *prasaada*. Although there is a sense in which it is through the séance that the deity repays the offerings, there is also a sense in which, as we have seen, the deity owes her existence to the team effort which results in the appearance of the deity. Also, the séance is an occasion for worship - linguistic offerings, albeit mingled with verbal abuse.

### 3.2. Spiritual participants

Tambiah, asserting with commendable honesty the imaginary nature of the posited spiritual participants in ritual, insisted that 'all ritual, whatever the idiom, is addressed to the human participants and uses a technique which attempts to re-structure and integrate the minds and emotions of the actors' (1968: 202). Although I sympathise with the rejection of the reification of spiritual beings in academic analysis, I would point out that the imaginary nature of these does not necessarily make the human participants addressees. If people appear to address their prayers to imaginary beings, we should respect this, and recognise that participants may be both speakers and witnesses, rather than addressees. Similarly, if they are spoken to by spiritual participants through a medium, we must recognise that although the medium may be the speaker, he is unlikely to be thought of as the author of the utterances. Actually, the keynote of the séance is the jumble of ambiguities concerning the communicative event, and we should be grossly misrepresenting this if we simply asserted that the medium was the speaker and the rest the addressees. The voices that speak through the medium, in an often bewildering mixture of direct and reported speech, include the following spiritual entities:

- The main temple deity, individually named, and both addressed and referred to as *taay* ('Mother'), *toga* ('God'), or *dēyva* ('God'), most frequently addressed as *saami* ('Lord')

- Ancestors (rarely identified by name; referred to by the collective echo-term *arumene-gurumene*<sup>1</sup>, which might be translated as ‘stone-house -guru-house’).
- The recently dead (those not yet ‘installed’ in the *koppe*, referred to as *sattavā:ru* - ‘the dead’)
- Forest spirits (more referred to than addressed; addressed as *pü:De* and referred to as *peey* - the latter term being more derogatory; many of these are powerful and dangerous forces believed to be employed [*kōTTu* - ‘tied’] by human sorcerers).

I prefer to avoid using the controversial term ‘non-empirical’ for these beings, since although they are intangible and invisible, they are in a sense ‘empirical’ simply by virtue of being imagined. By employing the term ‘spiritual’ I intend to emphasise their elusiveness. It was not the absence of a ‘real’ protagonist that worried me, as Malinowski found when watching Trobriand mortuary rites (1922: 148-9); instead, there were too many protagonists - Hamlet with *too many* Princes of Denmark. There is always a central focus on the main village deity - usually a goddess; but many people were ignorant of or unconcerned with the name or even the gender of this deity.

When trance begins, there is generally a lack of concern to pin the deity down to any one particular identity. There is here an important contrast with other ethnography of possession at village festivals in southern India, which usually emphasises concern with the legitimation of particular cases of possession - a process which involves ascertaining the legitimacy or auspiciousness of both the divine speaker and the human mouthpiece (Good 1985: 129; Dumont 1986 [1957]: 383). In the séances at Irula village festivals, by contrast, these questions of legitimacy don’t arise - any spirit may speak, and any human is entitled to act as mouthpiece. The possession-event is legitimated, but since this legitimation occurs before the onset of trance, the question of challenging the legitimacy of a particular invading spirit does not arise.

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<sup>1</sup>Echo-words are used frequently in Irula speech, and especially in the séance. Irulas would always insist on the semantic redundancy of the second half of the construction, saying *artta kōDeyaadu* - ‘it has no meaning’; but though in some cases the second half is just a nonsense-word, in many cases the second half does have obvious or implied meaning. In above example, *gurumene* is an appropriate term to describe the abode of the ancestors, who are like ‘gurus’ - spiritual leaders - to their descendants. For fuller discussion of echo-words, see Emeneau (1938), Elwin (1955: 48-9), and Chidanandamurthy (1975).

I can best describe Irula spirit mediumship by analogy - the medium acts like a radio receiver that transmits a bewildering variety of messages from the spirit world, so that at any given moment it may be very unclear what kind of spiritual entity is speaking. The numerous voices that speak through the medium have one thing in common - they all hold heated, angry discussions with worshippers.

This phenomenon of multivocality is best understood in terms of the *encompassment* of lesser spirits by the main temple deity, who in turn is encompassed by divinity at its most abstract level. Messages may come from the recently dead, from ancestors, from sorcerers' spirits and so on, but in a general sense it is always the main localised temple deity who is conversing with participants. There is therefore no reason to assume that for all participants it is the same spiritual entity that is speaking: for the sceptic, it may be the medium himself who is speaking; for the person in need of assistance, the distinction between benevolent deity and malevolent spirits and sorcerers may be crucial; yet for the majority of onlookers it may simply (simple for them, certainly not for the analyst) be the *toga* - which after all means not only 'deity' but 'multitude' - that is speaking.

It should be clear, then, that I do not share Zvelebil's interest in separating out four distinct 'levels' of spirit worshipped by Irulas, from the 'highest' level of 'the Supreme, called Paarvadi-Paramacivä', to the pair of male deities Vishnu and Siva, to local village deities, clan-deities, and family-deities, down to 'tribal worship' of 'semi-divine beings who are usually of vicious nature and have to be propitiated' (he wrongly calls female deities '*pee*' - evil spirits) and of animals and objects, which 'is the most central and most vigorous layer of Irula religion' (1988: 135-6, 139-40). It is worth noting that the informant whom Zvelebil congratulates for bringing 'order' into the 'rather complex religious infrastructure' is a schoolteacher (1982: 156). Zvelebil's approach is that of the butterfly collector; but deities are considerably more elusive than butterflies, and can't be pinned down and classified in the way he would like. To talk of 'semi-divine' creatures or people is to imply, quite erroneously, that divinity is a definite property which can be measured and contrasted with the quality of inferiority or malevolence. On the contrary, these are *relational* and *contextual* qualities which cannot be fixed to occult beings as permanent *attributes*.

### 3.3. Analysing spiritual entities

The way to avoid muddled discussion of the spirits concerned is to avoid trying to pin these down to one character, but to see them as constantly changing sets of metaphors and modes of characterisation. Analysis will then assume no fixed identities for any spiritual entity (in any case, the idea of fixed identity is anathema to the notion of *spirit*), but will instead seek to establish what metaphors are used and to discuss the associations conjured up by those metaphors. My text will follow themes rather than clusters of characterisation types, but it will be helpful to bear in mind the following schematic arrangement of elements of characterisation, used either directly, by implication, or by association:

- *Epithets*: names (*pagavadi*), nouns (virgin, pox, stone, cow, tiger), kinship terms (Mother, Grandmother)
- *Attributes*: adjectival traits attributed to the spirit (feminine, masculine, friendly, calm, angry, jealous, unpredictable)
- *Behaviour*: actions by the spirit (protection or attack of humans), language used (including paralinguistic, prosodic, lexical, aesthetic, semantic), food eaten (fruit and milk, vegetarian cooked food, raw blood, meat curry)
- *Relations*: between spirits, between spirits and humans; spirit's opinions about relations between humans; symmetrical or asymmetrical exchange and power relations; modes of address and reference (pronouns indicating politeness, distance, familiarity, disparagement).

Of course, just as it is impossible to separate content from style, so these analytically distinguishable elements of characterisation are in practice tied inseparably to one another: using the epithet 'grandmother' entails the assumption of certain attributes (harmless, helpless), expectations of action (providing herbal or mystical remedies, complaining) and the assumption of relations (reciprocal familiarity and joking, asymmetrical feeding based on a long-term debt). The goddess is most commonly referred to and addressed as *taay* (Tamil: 'Mother'), and it might be argued that this epithet is not significant in a *substantive* but rather in a *relational* sense; in other words, it is not a known substantive mother that is conjured up, but rather a posited relation - *goddess is (ought to be) to worshippers as mother is to children*. This is why I will be emphasising the style of the séance; as Sperber and Wilson put it, 'it is sometimes said that style is the man. We would rather say that style is the relationship' (1986: 217-8).

There is no such thing as a fixed role for a spiritual entity; roles must be imagined, entailed, and persuaded. It is not fixed characterisations we are looking at, then, but rather *metaphorical movements among epithets, attributes, behaviour, and relations*. Spiritual beings are not created by *particular metaphors* but by *aspects of metaphorical processes*. In other words, they operate dialectically and processually rather than statically. Rather than 'giving' the spirit a certain character, they set in chain processes of identity construction - although 'identity' is an entelechic term for what are always going to be provisional linkages and analogies.

### 3.4. Prelude to the séance

In the previous chapter we saw how, after the necessary preparatory manipulation of ritual symbols, the priest addresses the main deity before she has had a chance to speak through the medium [2.1.2]. Typically, this will begin with a simple injunction to come and speak to the assembly of people who have come to hear her. As people wait for the deity to arrive, these injunctions may become more stern, and bystanders may even begin to shout abuse. At the same time, though, it is not unusual for several people to confess to faults in the hope that this will placate the deity and make her materialise. Already, before the séance proper has begun, we begin to see the ambivalence that characterises human attitudes to the deity - on the one hand there is the humility of those who prostrate themselves and confess to faults, and on the other, the abusive aggression of those, including the priest, who scold her disparagingly for not coming straight away. There is an additional ambivalence which emerges at this stage too: while the priest talks to her rationally, giving reasons why she should come, the majority of those present address her by shouting 'hao! hao! hao!' in unison rather than using words. This anticipates the response of the deity, which as we saw earlier, will oscillate between the linguistic 'verses' and animal-like non-linguistic intervals.

The scene is set, then, for a dramatisation of an identity which cannot be characterised in any straightforward way. There is at this early stage another source of information about the identity of the deity which might be defined paradoxically as the 'content' of the séance: the simple fact that the deity always makes the assembly wait, and that the assembly is always willing to wait, albeit grumblingly, suggests an asymmetry in human-divine relations. As Samuel Beckett poignantly showed in *Waiting for Godot*, any human or deity who can make people wait has demonstrated power over those who wait. Once again, the show of reluctance and

anger on the part of those kept waiting contradicts the humility that is being demonstrated.

As we saw, when the deity finally arrives, her first utterances are non-verbal: the medium announces the deity's arrival with a dramatic display of shaking, hissing, bellowing, stumbling and self-flagellation, followed by dancing which I earlier described as theriomorphic. The animality and fury of the deity is always manifest before the emergence of the anthropomorphic linguistic rationality. The standard theoretical response of the anthropologist would be to see this as a rite of passage which is performed in order to take the human medium through a liminal animal phase before becoming divine. The shape of the séance rite suggests this, but we must not ignore the continuance of the animality through the séance, manifested in sporadic bouts throughout; it would be quite wrong, then, to see the animality as a distinct threshold on the way to the divine - it is constantly encroaching on the divine, so that the animality becomes an ingredient in the character of the divine.

The deity makes one more non-verbal utterance before speech begins - the medium demands silence, especially the sudden silencing of the musicians, by raising his arm. The silence is usually immediate and provides us with another potent indication of the power of the deity over humans.

Before the main linguistic exchange of the séance, then, we have already gathered several implicit characteristics of the deity, in addition to those already portrayed in the festival as a whole. The deity is a being who

- responds to univocal human requests by hypostatizing, but will not do so predictably
- accepts prostration, humility and confession of faults, but can be scolded in a peremptory tone, particularly by the priest
- has the authority to make people wait, but does not command so much respect that people wait without complaining
- is given to bouts of animal-like fury, but can be expected to eventually calm down and talk sense
- induces wild disequilibrium in the chosen human medium, but controls the crowd with arm-signals



### 3.5. A note on transcription

Henceforth any transcriptions from my recordings of the séances will observe the following system of shorthand notation:

#### Speakers

M: medium

P: priest

I: interlocutor (*javaap kö:kkavā* )

MC: male client

FC: female client

MS: male spectator

FS: female spectator

Verbal indicators of person, number, gender and status will be noted only where this is of more than usual significance to the meaning:

person: '1, 2, 3,' for 'first, second, third'

number: 'sg.' for singular or 'pl.' for 'plural'

gender: 'm.' for 'male,' 'f.' for 'female,' or 'imp.' for 'impersonal' (used for animals, small children, and spirits).

status: 'fam.' for 'familiar' or 'hon.' for 'honorific'<sup>1</sup>

'We' inclusive/exclusive of addressee 'incl./excl.' (only available when a verb ending [-ool/-eemu respectively] is supplied, since Irula lacks the Tamil *naam/naangaL* [we incl./excl.] distinction.

So '3pl.imp.' would indicate 'third person plural impersonal,' indicated by the verb ending '-ina' as in the verb *poogina* - 'they go.'

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<sup>1</sup>Honorific pronouns (the same as plurals) and tags (-*amba* added to the end of phrases) are used by adults to address all members of clans with whom your natal clan has a marrying relationship. They are not, as in Tamil, used to address social superiors.

### 3.6. Multivocal dialogue

Let us start by considering the opening sentences of the first séance I recorded, to see what we can learn about the speaker. This took place at the initial invocation outside the priest's house at the Tudikere *pagavadi* festival:

- M: They (3pl.imp.) are tormenting me because a dead man's spirit (*guru sattavā*) has come.  
 P: Which dead man?  
 M: Tell (2sg.fam.) me immediately.<sup>1</sup>  
 MS: What dead man do they (3pl.) say it is?  
 M: Whichever dead man it may be, the ancestors (*arumene gurumene*) are giving me a lot of bother.  
 P: It isn't right that we should neglect them (3pl.imp). We must get all that done, you're right, we must cook the rice and the *sambar* <sup>2</sup>.  
 MS: You haven't installed<sup>3</sup> that dead person.  
 M: You've done it all. You've done it all. Today...  
 P: Today we're the ones who are holding the festival.  
 M: Do it faithfully, *appa*. Do your best. That child<sup>4</sup> has some grievance.  
 MS: What child is that? We don't care whether it has a grievance or not.  
 M: I don't care whether you say I'm lying or whether you say I'm telling the truth.

The scene opens, then, with no announcement which tells us who or what is speaking. Neither can we infer any characteristics from any relational metaphors addressing or referring to this speaker. The spirit has addressed worshippers using the familiar pronoun *nii*, and the Tamil address term *appa* - 'father' - but has not at this stage been allotted any pronouns. But in addition to the speaker, there is also a dead man (also called a 'child') who is said to be complaining that he hasn't been installed as an ancestor; the medium tries to persuade him to speak out. And there is a host of impersonal beings (indicated by the third person plural impersonal ending *-ina*) who torment the medium, and soon turn out to be the ancestors.

Several minutes later, we have still had neither epithet nor pronoun with which to identify the speaker; implicitly, though, we might infer from the tag *-appa* (Tamil: 'father') that the spiritual speaker is to human addressee as father is to child. The

<sup>1</sup> I.e. the dead man's spirit should say who he is.

<sup>2</sup> *Sambar* is vegetable curry, and this phrase is synecdoche for the rice-giving festival which transfers a dead person from the liminal phase into the ancestral *koppe*.

<sup>3</sup> *naDattu* - 'walk (transitive)' or 'do business with'; here it means that they haven't held the ceremony installing a stone representing an ancestor in the *koppe* (ancestral memorial hut).

<sup>4</sup> *puLLe* - 'child' (cf *piLLai* in Tamil): never used in everyday speech, this word is generally used to mean 'person' in séances.

speaker is also someone who has access to dead people's spirits, can make them talk, and addresses them as 'child' - and already we have the striking paradox that living humans are addressed as 'father' while the dead man is referred to as 'child.' Further, the speaker can be tormented by the ancestors, and this is painful to the speaker who cries out in pain. In terms of the schema I outlined earlier, we now have three *relational* characterisations (speaker to living humans, speaker to dead man's spirit, and speaker to ancestors) and one *behavioural* characterisation (mediation between dead and living) of the speaker. But the dialogue has not yet explicitly provided us with either *epithets* or *attributes* by which to identify the invisible speaker.

A while later, we are provided with the attribute of exhaustibility (tiredness) and an implicit pronoun:

- M: That's all. I can't go on any more, *appa*.  
 P: Oh well, if that's all you (2sg. fam.) can do, do whatever you can. I've said all I can say.

Following this, the invisible speaker is addressed in the second singular (familiar) three more times, then one of the same speakers suddenly switches to the second plural:

- MS: That's right: you (2pl.) go and get him and cut him down.

And soon after this another speaker addresses the deity as *pū:De* - 'spirit':

- M: Don't give me any more trouble.  
 MS: Look, spirit, nobody wants to give you (2sg.fam.) any trouble at all, spirit ; if you just tell us this one thing it'll be enough.

This is followed shortly by the term *deevuru* - 'deities':

- P: Some child or other, some ignorant child may unintentionally have done all sorts of things wrong. But as the saying goes 'Deities can forgive a thousand sins.' That's one of our proverbs, isn't it?

There soon follows the information that the spirit is female:

- M: I (fem.) used to sit on the veranda of this house. Where am I to go now?<sup>1</sup>

This, we can presume, is direct speech from the dead woman; but shortly afterwards the speaker is addressed as *taay* (Tamil: 'mother') - a term which in the Irula language is normally used not of mothers but of goddesses:

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<sup>1</sup>I.e. I, the dead woman, don't know where my home is; I'm not allowed to live in the *koppe* until you've installed me.

P: The deities forgive a thousand sins. Whatever kind of goddess you (2sg.fam.) may be,<sup>1</sup> do what you can.

Already in a few minutes, then, the medium has been allotted a variety of relational characterisations - pronouns and epithets which, apart from referring to the medium himself, refer to dead spirits, male ancestor, female ancestor, and goddess. We also have the relational characterisations in the implication that the spiritual entities are in a sense more adult than the worshippers, who are both addressed and referred to as *koLandee* and *puLLe*, both of which mean 'child.' However, this is contradicted by the medium's use of the term *appa* (Tamil: 'father') to address the worshippers; it is common in séances for this contrast to be even more emphatic when the spirits address worshippers ambiguously as *appa-koLandee* (Tamil: 'father-child'<sup>2</sup>). Another indication of diffuse identity of the spirits present comes later in the Tudikere séance when a man suffixes his request with the phrase '[you must help me] whether you're (2.pl.) an ancestor (*gurumene*) or a Mother (*taay*) or a Father (*tande*).'

There is, to summarise, considerable jumbling of spiritual categories and of kinship metaphors going on. The attributes have a similar tendency to be confusing and contradictory; here, the same spirits appear to be both grumpy and willing to forgive. Just how multiplicitous these voices can become will emerge as we proceed with analysis of the séances. Jakobson (1960: 355) employs Bühler's (1937) triadic model of language's three functions - emotive, conative, and referential - and three apexes of the model - the first person of the addresser, the second person of the addressee, and the 'third person,' - someone or something spoken of. In the Irula séance, for most of the time, the identities of all three are uncertain. People are so busy trying to persuade the deity to reveal the identity of, first, the addressee, and second, the referent, that they are rarely bothered about the identity of the deity.

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<sup>1</sup>Or: 'whatever deeds you, Mother, specialise in'; again the verb *naDattu* - 'walk (transitive)' or 'do business' - is used, echoing the earlier use of the same verb with reference human ceremonial activity.

<sup>2</sup>Or perhaps 'fathers and children,' which would convey not only the ambiguity (it is not clear whether an individual or the collectivity is being addressed) but the feeling of cyclical time which, as Eliade (1954 [1949]) amply demonstrates, pervades all ritual.

### 3.7. Understanding divine assistance

A short exchange which occurs shortly after the above quotations from the Tudikere séance illustrates something of the value of bearing in mind the possibility of different levels of interpretation as well as the various functions of oblique language which I have indicated. It is an instance where a man, as I later learned, had three alternative sites in mind for the hut he was planning to build; he made no mention of hut-building, but asked the spirits whether he should opt for plan one, plan two, or plan three:

MC: You (2.pl.) said you were going to give me a number, so give me one, whether you're an ancestor or a Mother or a Father<sup>1</sup>.

M: Go for the middle plan, and then if your flower withers, from today onwards you needn't bother going to that *pagavadi taay* or coming to this *pagavadi taay*, nor worship a single *mā:riyamma*, or a single *bānimakka*, child; don't be afraid, put it there! (*handshake*)

At the *instrumental* level of interpretation, this little bit of dialogue looks simple enough once we know the background - the deity has given clear unambiguous advice about which if the three plans the man should go for.

At the *expressive* level, we notice that even this simple piece of advice isn't given without elaboration. The deity doesn't simply say 'go for the middle plan,' she also adds the bit about flowers withering. The flower-metaphor adds nothing to the instrumental meaning; afterwards, I asked rather naïvely about the meaning of the flower-metaphor and got the shrug-off response that I deserved - *summa sollugudu* - 'She said it.' But we can infer, I assume, that it evokes a variety of possible associations with flowers.

For example, it could evoke the practice of flower-divination; it is with reference to the function of helping humans to make difficult choices that the séance is said to be interchangeable with flower-divination, which is often practiced at temple festivals in addition to (never in practice replacing) the séance. People put little piles of flowers on top of the deity-stone, and silently ask a question which the deity 'replies to' by making the flowers fall in a particular way - falling to the right usually indicates a positive (*nalla*) answer (e.g. your plan is good), and to the left is negative (*kōTTa*) [cf Beck (1969: 554ff) and Daniel (1984: 183-223) on similar flower-divination in neighbouring regions of Tamil Nadu]. Perhaps the flower-

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<sup>1</sup>My capital initials here indicate that the words *taay* and *tande* which are used here are the Tamil, not the Irula, words for 'mother' and 'father' respectively.

metaphor also evokes the idea of the protectiveness of the deity - when people offer flowers to the deity, it is said that *they don't wither* - and this is part of a metaphoric paradigm of protection - bananas buried in the ground a few days before a festival are not eaten by insects, bananas hung a tree before the festival are not eaten by monkeys, coins left in a sacred well don't disappear, and so on. 'If your flower withers' would therefore read 'If I don't protect you.'

More generally, the mention of flowers simply refers to an item of ritual paraphernalia, and this is best interpreted on the *aesthetic* level. An extraordinarily high percentage of séance utterances include a metaphor which refers to ritual paraphernalia and metaphoric actions. These may crop up in an apparently random manner, but are then manipulated so as to impute meaning to symbolic offerings. It is, if you like, an aesthetic rule of séance language, that you must metaphorically refer to the visual symbols of the ritual if you possibly can.

We can assume that it is aesthetically pleasing to worshippers to participate in linking the dialogue with the surrounding ritual paraphernalia; this also constitutes a *metacommunicative* commentary on the rite. But there is also in the above utterances a metalinguistic commentary on the uncertainty of the communicative event. The client makes his straightforward demand, but he also adds, almost as an afterthought, a trailer: 'whether you're an ancestor or a mother or a father.' In other words, the clarity of the request for an answer is qualified by the uncertainty as to who is being conversed with. The deity responds with a clear answer, elaborated by the flower-metaphor, and says that if the clear answer proves unsuccessful, the client shouldn't bother going to that *pagavadi taay* or coming to this *pagavadi taay*, or worship a single *mā:riyamma*, or a single *bānimakka*. The implication is that any one of these goddesses might be the one who is speaking to and assisting the client. Again, an implicit comment is made about the linguistic event. The séance is full of metacommunicative trailers like these, by far the most common being the phrase 'I don't care whether you think I'm lying or telling the truth' - again, simply a comment on the uncertainty of the linguistic event.

All this came out of a simple question about alternative sites for a hut. I should add that this particular discussion went on for a full five minutes of further elaboration and debate. The instrumental value of the site for a hut was of limited importance - it wasn't really a difficult choice, and as a linguistic event it became something of a

shaggy dog story when my friend admitted that he later rejected the goddess's advice anyway, thereby ruling out all possibility of empirical falsification.<sup>1</sup>

But the vast majority of requests made to the deity are not expressed in specific detail; the most common request is simply for well-being in general, and this is phrased in stunningly simple wording, such as 'give us goodness!' or 'I need some strength in my arms and legs.' But if the deity is a benefactor, the more threatening side is never far away:

- M: I'm not one (fem.) to be taken lightly. I'm the one who makes the district prosper, who makes the country prosper, and who cuts the veins, child.  
 M: [...]My name is hallowed throughout the four districts, hallowed throughout the four worlds, if you shit in my face like that...I'm *pagavadi taay*, child, you all know that, the whole district knows that, the whole country knows that, but now you're not behaving according to rules (*saTTa*) or according to the furrow (*sā:l*).<sup>2</sup>

At the *kiiLkuppu mā:riyamma* festival, the ambivalent character of the goddess as both protector and destroyer of people is explicit in these opening words:

- M: I'm here to look after you in the palm of my hand.  
 MC: I'll bring it, whatever you want, next year I'll open your eyes for you<sup>3</sup>.  
 P: If you're going to empty the village<sup>4</sup> then say so today.  
 MS: This year I'm not going to show you, next year I'll show you. I'll open it and give it to you.  
 P: Next year I'll bring a doll<sup>5</sup> and open your eyes. I'll say *mā:riyamma*'s name and open (her eyes). I'll spend three thousand rupees on it. I haven't got a penny.

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<sup>1</sup>I am reminded of this divine function of helping humans to make choices between alternatives every time I open a carton of milk; the symmetrical milk cartons I buy are marked with 'open here' on one side and 'open other side' on the other equally openable side. There is perhaps a universal human uneasiness about having two or more equally viable alternatives. The point to be gleaned here is that the problems a person faces do not need to be life-threatening before they decide to solicit divine assistance.

<sup>2</sup>I.e. 'keeping in line'; should the Irulas be interested in comparing the furrows on tea and coffee estates with those on their own gardens, the latter would look, to borrow a phrase favoured by Scottish army sergeants, 'like a dog pissing in snow.'

<sup>3</sup>The phrase used here is *tarpsi koDukkree*, which would be literally translated as 'I'll get them opened and give them to you,' and this brings to mind the phrase *Dettu targee* which means 'I'll break it (open) and give it to you' - used to refer to human offerings and the divine function of dispute settlement. We saw this earlier, and the same usage occurs a few lines below, emphasising reciprocity.

<sup>4</sup>I.e. let the wild animals take away our livestock, or kill all the occupants of the village

<sup>5</sup>Probably means a statuette of the goddess - which therefore may be said to both represent the goddess and be an offering. As we have seen, the deity accepts all offerings by inhabiting them, so that these offerings may be worshipped.

- MS: If you look after us we'll worship you more grandly, otherwise don't bother.
- P: All the little children must be obedient. My little chicks, my family must be obedient.<sup>1</sup>
- MS: Yes, I'll open your eyes, I'll open them next year, don't listen to these begging dogs. I'll open them.

The contrastable but inseparable roles of trouble-shooter and trouble-maker create a dramatic tension that runs through all séance discussion; on the one hand, the deity is the caretaker of the village who destroys trouble-makers, and as such she must be worshipped and thanked. On the other hand, she must be cursed for unfairly punishing humans. What is striking about many séance discussions is that the deity, although to some extent feared for her destructive power, is not by any means unequivocally respected on that account; asymmetrical though human-divine relations may be, Irulas do not see this as a good reason to fawn before deity the whole time. Consider the following exchange at the *kooyikere mā:riyamma* festival:

- MC: He must roll (the villain must be killed) within eight days.
- M: If I am the thousand-eyed goddess<sup>2</sup>, if I'm the one who makes a thousand districts dance, I'll cut him to ribbons.
- MS: Otherwise there'll be no-one following you, we'll just tell you to bugger off.

In other words, powerful though the deity may be, she depends on its human followers. But if humans can threaten a deity with lack of worshippers, she can also threaten humans with dire punishments for not worshipping. The delicate truce is encapsulated in these excerpts from the *kunjapane paalraayā* festival séance, in which the deity first threatens humans for having neglected him, then promises to punish those who haven't turned up for the festival (and is encouraged to do so by those who have turned up), and then (becoming female) acknowledges that if she fails to punish people, then she doesn't deserve any followers:

- M: In times gone by, the name of *paalraayā* was great, my name was known in all the nine villages. In the time of your great-great-grandparents, of your great-grandparents, how many people, how much milk, how many jugs were brought here. Today, after ten years of famine<sup>3</sup>, only four people give

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<sup>1</sup>This is the headman demanding obedience from the whole village.

<sup>2</sup>This appellation is used for the goddess elsewhere in Tamil Nadu, and Good (1985: 132-3) suggests a linkage between the 'thousand-eye lamp' and the pockmarked faces of small-pox survivors. So the name is already heavily ironic; in addition, the suggestion of all-seeing power in the term 'thousand-eyed goddess' is further undermined by the fact that the goddess is also at least partially reliant on humans who 'open her eyes' at festival time.

<sup>3</sup>The deity is complaining that he has not been fed all those ten years



a damn about *paalraayā*, the villagers don't know *paalraayā*, you just wait and see, if it (the panther) doesn't come from one end to the other, well, you've heard what I've been saying today in front of this *piitta* tree.

M: [...]Just you wait and see, there won't be a single baby chicken left in the village, the wild-cat will have eaten them all, there won't be a single goat left in the village, the wild-cat will have eaten them all, just you wait and see.

MS: Feed a human to it, that'll teach him.

M: [...]And if I don't shove ash in his mouth<sup>1</sup>, then don't bother taking me out on procession<sup>2</sup>, don't even bother thinking that I am *mā:ri taay*, that I am *bānimakka taay*, child, put it there! (*handshake*)

A picture emerges of the deity as controller of the opposed generalities of 'trouble/illness' - *vambu* - and 'strength/health' - *bāla*. The deity also emerges as the controller of nature - of wild animals, of the elements, and of disease - and of course as the giver and taker of life. It will be clear that any attempt to characterise a deity as unambiguously 'benevolent' or 'malevolent,' even in the vague sense of 'benevolent' or 'malevolent' by default, would be misguided. The deities worshipped by Irulas are seen to be both benevolent and malevolent, feared and loved, welcomed and told to keep away.

In addition to the ambiguities of respect and derision, of benevolence and malevolence, of categories of spiritual entity, it should also be noted that the theme of the responsibility of deities for a particular territory likewise demonstrates an ambiguous attitude on the part of Irulas towards the confinability of the deity. On the one hand, there are many claims made by the deity to a wide territory and to large numbers of worshippers, as we saw in an earlier example from the *tudikere pagavadi* séance - 'My name is hallowed throughout the four districts, hallowed throughout the four worlds.' On the other hand, the following excerpt from the *kiiLkuppu mā:riyamma* festival indicates a chauvinistic use of the deity, in which she is presented as the protectress of an Irula village in order to threaten an outsider, a Tamil forest guard:

M: I'm (1sg.) not responsible for what goes on outside your (village) boundaries, only inside that boundary is our (1pl. excl. - nb change from I to we) responsibility, that's what they're saying.

MS: Why don't you report it (*adukku rapparTTu ta*). No-one's allowed inside our boundary (*bavuNDri*).<sup>3</sup> Outside that isn't our responsibility.

<sup>1</sup>1.e. kill him

<sup>2</sup>This is the *uurmeele*, which involves taking the deity round one or several villages before the festival.

<sup>3</sup>The English-loan vocabulary derives from forest regulations, and may well have been directed in a satirical way at the newly-appointed local forest guard who was present.

- M: That's what I'm responsible for, I can't do anything about things that don't concern me, *appa*.
- P: That's o.k., if you put one man in charge of our boundary that'll do.
- FS: Then you've got to sign an agreement<sup>1</sup> for these three offices<sup>2</sup>, you *mā:sani taay* are the one who has to do it. Without you we'll never solve any problems.
- M: I'll tell you what happened, what the man spoke with the goddess, she said, 'I'm not going to help those people, I'll only help those who bring me things,' and when she said that, that man came and said 'No! that village must be destroyed!', and his mind was quite set on it.
- P: Then is he, is the Kongu<sup>3</sup> man the only one who treats you well?
- MS: He's not an Irula. If you want to get rid of him, you can. Then if any Irula makes an offering to you he'll be in big trouble.<sup>4</sup> Watch out!
- M: Even if his mind's set on it, I'll tell you a thing or two about that in a moment.
- P: If he goes there to worship I'll grab the (temple) plate and throw it away. Do you understand? Either the Kongu man has to worship you, *mā:sani taay*, or the Irula.

With respect to the deity's linkage with a particular territory and a particular group of worshippers, we might say that in a Durkheimian sense the deity is the emblem of that territory and that group. (As we saw in the last chapter, the term *toga* etymologically links the deity with the collectivity [2.1.1]). But in saying this we must be careful not to disinter the discredited *god-is-society* legacy for which Durkheim takes the blame. God and society are related in Durkheim's more carefully written passages not by equation but their similar relation to a third term, man: 'in a general way, it is unquestionable that a society has all that is necessary to arouse the sensation of the divine in minds, merely by the power that it has over them; for to its members it is what a god is to his worshipper' (1976 [1915]: 206). Few would deny that the synecdochic association of the divine and the collectivity of worshippers is an important part of the construction of the divine. A deity is *associated* rather than *identified* with a collectivity and a territory.

There are other instances in which this distinction between association and identification might be helpful: *mā:riyamma* is often associated, in folk etymology and in the imagery of the euphemistic 'thousand eyes,' with smallpox; part of her identity derives from association with the disease (like the disease, she is invisible,

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<sup>1</sup>*gürumuNTu* - an English loan-word which is probably a combination of 'agreement' and 'government.'

<sup>2</sup>The implication seems to be that *Mā:sani Taay* is to issue specific orders to the three male deities.

<sup>3</sup>*Kongā* - 'man of Coimbatore District,' is used generally of non-Irulas.

<sup>4</sup>i.e. if you help the outsiders rather than us, we won't let any Irulas worship you.

causes trouble, is hot, has a worrying tendency to punish randomly), but it would be a shameful reduction to *identify* her as the disease (Egnor 1984: 25), since this would overshadow her healing function (the *behavioural* component). Similarly, she is associated, in temple iconography, with the lion or tiger she rides on (like a tiger, she is powerful, beautiful, and a killer); but to see this simply as an epithet identifying her as a tiger would be to miss the behavioural implication of these icons (the goddess controls wild animals).<sup>1</sup>

### 3.8. Ancestors and the dead

In a footnote to my introductory chapter [1.4.3] mentioned that a village drunkard often regaled me with unsolicited pieces of information about Irulas, and that one of his favourite phrases was 'if we keep our peace with our ancestors, we'll succeed at whatever we do/wish.'<sup>2</sup> It seems to me quite plausible that he was using ancestor-worship as a diacritical marker distinguishing Irulas from other Hindu castes who are either less preoccupied with ancestors, or do not regard them as positively as Irulas do. The numerous parallels between the worship of deities and of ancestors - same style of worship, same food offerings, same anointing of stones (although usually deity-stones are rough stones dug up from underground, whereas ancestor-stones are smooth river-stones); when a person dies they are immediately referred to as *toga*, and the music played to honour them is *toga-kwä:l* ('deity-music').

There are other castes in southern India who worship ancestors, but those who emphasise ancestor-worship tend to be groups which are more concerned with intra-caste than with inter-caste relations - either because of relative isolation, such as Coorgs (Srinivas 1952), or because of numerical and politico-economic dominance, such as Kallars (Dumont 1986 [1957]). Srinivas, however, insists on the inauspiciousness of funerals - the drumming at funerals is distinctive, and may not be employed on an auspicious occasion (1952: 97) - whereas this is not the case among Irulas, for whom a funeral, like ancestor-worship, is auspicious. Kallars, like Irulas, mingle ancestor-worship the worship of deities (Dumont 1986

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<sup>1</sup>This interpretation of the meaning of wild deities is missed by Srinivas: 'The main temple to Madeshwara ...was situated in dense jungle, and the association of tiger and cobra with the awe-inspiring deity was only appropriate. But paradoxically the deity who rode a tiger, and whose hair was adorned by a coiling cobra, was also a protector of cattle' (1976: 299).

Srinivas doesn't explain why he thinks this paradoxical, nor does he note that it is as *controller* of dangerous beasts that he deserves worship.

<sup>2</sup>*aruvu guruvu oNNa irundaa, enda kä:riya vettri*

[1957]: 187). If such groups are indeed contrastable on this account to other southern Indian castes, the contrast with the textual (north Indian) deity:ancestor opposition as emphasised by Das is considerably more marked:

The grass strewn for rites to gods is 'cut from the place where the blades diverge from the stalk' while the grass strewn for rites to ancestors is cut from the root. The sacrificial food offered to the gods is known as *agya* while the sacrificial food offered to ancestors is known as *pinda* or *bali*. This series of antithetical pairs, taken together, express an opposition between the two sides of the ultramundane, one relating to the good and benevolent, and the other relating to appeasement of beings that can cause terror and discomfort.' (Das 1982: 100)

Such an opposition is not, of course, in operation in southern India, where as Fuller (1987: 23) has shown, *bali* is offered to deities even in prestigious temples like the Minaksi temple in Madurai.

Ancestors and spirits of the dead crop up regularly in Irula séances, either speaking for themselves through the medium (and ambiguously identified with the deity), or announced by the deity as the cause of trouble. The usual complaint of ancestors is that the *koppe* ancestral hut has been neglected - the ancestors, represented by stones, ought to be offered *puuja* there once a year at the *tai pongäl* festival in January, and on other occasions, notably before going on a hunt. The complaints of spirits of the dead all centre around the fact that they have not yet been converted into ancestors at a special installation ceremony<sup>1</sup>; until that time they roam around the forest, they 'have no home' and may be a source of trouble to the Irulas.

The discussion of the séances indicates close analogies on the one hand between deity and ancestor as installed, worshipped beings, and on the other hand, between the recently dead and forest spirits as unworshipped, troublesome beings; neglected deities and ancestors become, like homeless spirits, sources of trouble too. However, in line with the Irulas' general lack of interest in boundaries between categories, just as deity is not always distinguished from ancestor, so ancestor is not always distinguished from uninstalled dead person. For example, each household ought to leave a plateful of every ordinary secular meal to an ancestor before eating; this is often said to be for ancestors in general, but they say it is especially important to leave food for the recently dead.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix 2

<sup>2</sup> Incidentally, this plateful is often fed afterwards to dogs, since people say it has lost its taste after being 'eaten' by the ancestors; this is an unusually stark instance of 'misplaced concreteness.'

An excerpt from the *tudikere pagavadi* séance highlights both the concern for the installation of the dead and the linkage of the dead with deities:

- M: A dead person is asking. The deity itself (*kaDavulee*) has spoken; answer straight away.  
 P: I'll do that too some day soon; I'll take responsibility even if it means I have to starve. Whatever dead person it may be, whatever deity it may be. Tomorrow I'll be in charge of holding the festival.

Continuing in the same séance, we find that this concern with the installation of ancestors is not unmingled with irreverent irony which at times provokes gales of laughter among the onlookers:

- P: Tomorrow (i.e. soon) I'll bring all the stones and pile them up.  
 I: She's on one side, and we'll pile all the (deceased) widows' stones to one side first.<sup>1</sup>  
 M: A woman is grabbing me!  
 I: I said we'd get all the widows<sup>2</sup> together too! (i.e. install them in their *koppe*).  
 P: I'll install<sup>3</sup> all the widows<sup>4</sup> and all the women (in the *koppe*), the whole lot<sup>5</sup>, Spirit.  
 MS: They're (the people who've come here today) prostrating and promising you they'll take all the dead people, young and old, and install them.  
 MS: That ancestor certainly is very dead. (*laughter*). That's one thing we can be quite sure of!

Ancestors, like deities, are expected to protect and provide for humans, and this is explicitly related to their previous role as parents and caretakers:

- M: How many leaves did we grind for you in the past?<sup>6</sup> We were the ones who took care of those leaves. The village people didn't care, the people of the district, of the country, didn't care, I don't care whether you say I'm lying or whether you think I'm telling the truth.

Humans are expected to reciprocate, so that we find the same haggling that characterises relations between people and deities, as well as the same tension between welcoming and rejection:

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<sup>1</sup> Refers to the practice of burying and installing widows in a separate *koppe* on their own.

<sup>2</sup>*muNDeesi-guNDeesi* - an echo construction with a jokily peremptory tone; the second word of an echo construction is only partially semantically redundant, and this phrase might be translated as 'all the fat widows.'

<sup>3</sup>*oe:rigee* - 'I'll raise,' i.e. take up to the *koppe*.

<sup>4</sup>*muNDeesiyoo muuLiyoo* - another echo construction of which the second half means 'breasts.'

<sup>5</sup> 'ellatte' - third singular neuter, i.e. pejorative.

<sup>6</sup>Refers to the preparation of medicine by grinding medicinal leaves - i.e. we took good care of you.

- P: But you're not the only woman that still has to be installed, there are lots of other people making the same demands.
- MS: But you (sg. fam.) go where you belong, don't come to this family. You old woman, men and women go where you belong, dead people don't belong in this family.
- P: [...]It hasn't taken all that long, has it? You ancestors are clucking away at me and not doing a thing to help me.
- M: Tell me immediately, *appa*.
- P: What the hell can I say? You haven't provided me with enough (money to hold the ancestral installation ceremony).
- P: [...]If you provide us four measures of rice we'll be able to plant two measures of grinding stones.<sup>1</sup> Have you bothered keeping the forest bison away?<sup>2</sup> What a cunt of an ancestor you are! Tell me what you've done. I'll only bring the stones when I can afford it.
- P: [...]If you (2pl) don't keep the goats and cows away, what's the point of having ancestral stones? Do you suppose you're the only ones there should be stones for?

As with human-divine relations, there is a general lack of effective concern with which particular dead person is speaking or causing the trouble, although frequently a pretended desire for particularisation is evidenced in phrases like 'we need (to know) the name' - or in this excerpt from the *tudikere pagavadi* séance:

- M: Either your great-grandmother or your great-grandfather has come butting in here, *appa*.
- P: A great-grandmother or great-grandfather, are we going to be told who it is?
- MS: Everyone in the forest is called a great-grandmother or a great-grandfather.
- MS: [...]Whatever corner the great-grandmother may have gone, whatever corner the great-grandfather may have gone, you tell us, the living, where we must go, and we'll go in a group and catch them. All you need to do is tell us the rules. We don't want you to go to that much trouble. You're not to put yourself out at all. All I ask is a little health for my arms and legs.

Generally it should be clear by now that the expectation of assistance from ancestors is much the same as that expected from deities. The typical request of ancestors, made here at the *Tudikere pagavadi* festival, is one which is asked again and again of deities at all festivals - spirits who are threatening the assembly are told that they ought instead to be threatening some unidentified wrongdoer:

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<sup>1</sup> There are three interesting points to note here: First, the verb *naDu* - 'plant' - implies an association between the ancestral stones and fertility; as the whole utterance implies, the ancestors are expected to provide people with food. Second, the term *kuttu källu* - 'grinding stone,' which refers to the ancestral memorial stone, strengthens the association between ancestors and food-grains, and alludes to the presence of a grinding-stone as an essential item at funerals. Third, this suggests that in the barter between men and ancestors, as in the barter between men and gods, men are expected to give only half as much as they are given; but this neatly inverts what happens with *puuja* offerings, of which exactly half is returned to the worshipper.

<sup>2</sup> Forest bison had recently been causing far more damage to crops than usual.

P: You go and get him and cut him down, don't kill us, the living. You must catch him, tie him up and bring him here, but you're not brave enough. We who are alive, we children, brothers, fathers, we've come begging you on our knees, but you're not listening. Go and catch him, tie him up round the waist like that, and bring him here on all fours.

Trouble-shooting, then, is established as one of the activities of both deities and spirits; in the implicit analogy to goat sacrifice carried by the phrase 'bring him here on all fours' we can safely infer a reciprocal transaction between the living and the ancestors. These, like the deity, are expected to deal with trouble-makers in return for, or in anticipation of, a blood offering.

Proceeding further in the same séance, we find the ancestors alluding to another of their activities, dispute settlement:

M: As soon as a dispute breaks out, we break it apart for you, don't we? We don't want any arguments, any quarrelling or any fuss. Just as you (sg. fam.) break things (for us) we break things up for you (*DeTTu tärgeemu*).

Here, as in the previous instance, the activity of the ancestors is linked by analogy to a ritual offering made by humans; the phrase *DeTTu tärgeemu* - 'we break and give' - metaphorically alludes to the ritual cutting of coconuts, goats, and chickens, and likens this to the solving of problems that people bring to the temple. In case this is lost on the audience, the medium repeats the allusion, transforming the metaphor into a simile by making the human-divine reciprocity explicit in the phrase 'just as you cut open so we cut open.'

### 3.9. Struggles between spiritual participants

Although it is clear that deities are not conceived in the séances as unequivocally benevolent forces, it is also noteworthy that their activities generally involve fighting against harmful forces - variously conceived as *mandrakā:rā* (magician), *pilli* (sorcery, magic), *buuttā* (bad spirit). The adjectival opposition is not merely one of good versus evil; it is also between the power, reality and good sense of divine aid on the one hand, and the frivolity, pretence, and stupidity of magic or sorcery on the other. The deity scoffs at those who resort to sorcerers and magic spells in the hope of ending trouble:

M: You two, did you both come here with magic potions (*pilli*) shoved up your arses?

MC: What have we shoved up our arses? You tell us what we'd want to do that for.

The deity reminds worshippers of her ultimate superiority, implying that she is the only effective means of ending trouble:

M: Whether you're attacked by sorcery (*pilli*) or with a rifle or with a bow and arrow, I'm here to supply the bandages, *appa*.

A more specific illustration comes from the *kooyikere mā:riyamma* séance, where the goddess ridicules a worshipper for having tried to solve his troubles by paying a human magician to use counter-magic; the human magician is portrayed as a charlatan:

M: He scabbled around in the mud<sup>1</sup> making a great pretence<sup>2</sup>.

FC: Yes, that's true, he scabbled around in the mud and tapped his bundle of notes gleefully, *paDapaDapaDa*.

M: Had he put it<sup>3</sup> in his hand? Eh? Had he hidden it in his pocket? Or in his head or in his leg? Did you see it? There is one person called 'saami,' and one person who digs. Will it come out? Where is it? It's still in there. That thing is still there.

MC: If it is, you get it and give it to me.

Notably, in this battle portrayed between good and evil spiritual force the harmful forces are not referred to specifically, even though people ask the deity to name names. The request 'we need (to know) the name' (*anda peer vō:No*) is never literally obliged. Often, in the vague allusions to harmful forces, the nature of the wrongdoing and wrongdoer is concealed by the ambiguous and euphemistic Tamil verb *sey*, which literally means 'to do' but in Irula séances nearly always means 'to do harm' (the corresponding Irula verb for 'do' - *maaDu* - is never used in this sense, since this is the verb used for holding a festival):

M: Is this somebody's doing (i.e. sorcery)? Or isn't it? Has somebody done it on purpose? These thoughts have been running through your worried mind today, child.<sup>4</sup>

Much of the ambiguity of the conceptions of divine assistance derives from the fact that the deity, at the same time as asserting her power against harmful forces, is also asserting her superiority to any others, human or divine, to whom people might turn for mystical assistance:

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<sup>1</sup>Refers to the *mandravadi*'s feigned attempts to find a sorcery object buried near the house of the sufferer.

<sup>2</sup>*meekkappu* - from English 'make-up'

<sup>3</sup>i.e. the charm.

<sup>4</sup>*niya anjuga gevanatti*; the more common phrase '*niya anju panja vanatti*' - 'in your five-famine forest' may be a pun on 'anja' - 'fear.'



- M: You won't sort it out, no matter how many deities you go to, no matter how many dead people you go to, no matter how many whole nights you may spend, you and the diviner, chewing betel and discussing it.
- FC: Why else would you need to spend a whole night chewing betel with a diviner, if you weren't ill?
- M: Did you chew it in the house?
- FC: No, but you have to discuss whether it came from a deity, or from your head, or from a body. If you're ill and you don't discuss it with anyone...
- M: [...]That's just it, you chewed betel in order to catch the criminal, did you find out who the criminal was by rattling and rattling the seeds in the winnowing basket?<sup>1</sup>

The standard human response to this kind of imprecision is to demand clarification from the deity:

MC: That won't do! You must tell that child straight, following the furrow.<sup>2</sup>

This clarification is never forthcoming, and in the end the client will have to be content with a promise that the deity will sort out the trouble, usually in return for a temple offering (which is itself rarely specified). In discussions of séances, either with me or directly with the medium during the event itself, frequent reference is made to *poyyi jaaya* - 'lying *jaaya*' - a concept which constantly reminds participants of the possibility of being deceived either by the medium or by any of the spiritual entities; add to this the drunken parodies of possession, and it is clear that the festival as a whole is pervaded by general tension between illusion and reality [2.4.6, 3.11.8, 4.8]. In a sense, although the theme of good versus evil forces is structured by an opposition of reality (divine assistance) versus illusion (magicians and sorcerers), the deity herself is often seen as a master of illusion as well as a disgraceful liar.

There is a similar qualification to the superiority of divine power over the forces of evil. The power of the deity derives from her superior vision - she is, after all, the *aayira kaNnu taay*, the 'thousand-eyed goddess':

- M: You can't ever fool me. I've got a thousand eyes, and you've only got two.
- MS: Right! Can a two-eyed man answer a thousand-eyed woman? No indeed!

But the powers of illusion of the forces of evil may at times defeat even the goddess:

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<sup>1</sup>Refers to the diviner's practice of shaking seeds in a winnowing basket, then counting them out in even numbers to arrive at a yes/no answer.

<sup>2</sup>I.e., 'according to rules.'

P: The village may have seen it or may not have seen it, he can wait and keep watch. You, the goddess of a thousand eyes, it's beyond even you. Can a human being see into the land of dogs (*nāri looga*) to save his own life? Anyone can come saying your name and taking your hand, *saami*. But none of us knows what kind of song or spell it is.

and the goddess may actually admit to defeat:

M: Child, a deity has done this to me, I'm not to tell you, wherever you may go, I'm not allowed to breathe a word to you. Whatever you may say to me, whether you tell lies or whatever, they've blindfolded me<sup>1</sup>. So you'll have to give up your intended plan, you'll have to wait a bit. They've handcuffed you, *appa*.

Thousand-eyed though she may be, the goddess may still be deceived or blindfolded. Hockings cites a Badaga proverb which indicates, to the contrary, that deities cannot be deceived: 'If you bind the eyes of human beings, who will bind the eyes of God?' (1988: Proverb No.398). When the limitations of the deity's power in the struggle against evil are alluded to in the Irula, the metaphor is usually, as here, one involving the deity being 'bound':

I: Someone's tied the deity up and has told him not to say anything.<sup>2</sup>

FS: That's right, the deity doesn't say anything when someone's tied it (*deity*) (3sg.imp.) up.

I: [...]Have you or haven't you put a stop to whoever's blocking you? Then is it you who's doing the binding or has the other bloke bound a dead person?<sup>3</sup> In that case must this poor ignorant child, who's done nothing wrong, must it die, then? How are we to catch him? If you, the village deity, are incapable, is there anything we can do? Tell us, 'you bring such-and-such an offering within such-and-such a time,' either tell us to do something or tell us not to do something.

The enlistment of spiritual assistance, whether for morally right or morally wrong purposes, involves tying things up:

MC: and when we've given you our offering, tied up our offering to you.

In other words, the symbolic action of binding a spell is echoed in the symbolic action of tying up an offering to the deity; and just as a harmful force may tie up a deity, so a deity ties up a wrongdoer. The often-repeated phrase *nāna nōDee vōTTugina!* - 'they're (3pl.imp.) cutting my knot/waist!' must be interpreted as referring to an attack on a person's link with a deity. The deity mocks at the tying

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<sup>1</sup>*nāna kaNNe kōTTivuTTee irukkā:ru* - brings to mind the phrase *niya kaNnu nā:n tārakee* - 'I'll open your eyes,' which as we saw earlier means 'I'll hold a festival in your honour.'

<sup>2</sup>Someone has used magic against the god; this can be taken as a taunt to encourage the deity to show his/her superior powers.

<sup>3</sup>Has he enlisted the aid of a dead person in the battle against you and us?

up of spells, but accepts tied up offerings; ridicules the illusory tricks of harmful forces, but indulges in illusion herself; is powerful and all-seeing yet at times has to accept blindfolds and defeat. Just as the visual metaphors we examined in the previous chapter were seen to be contradictory [2.4.5], so the verbal metaphors of the séance appear to be involved in a similar game of pulling the rug out from one another. The overall effect is to show participants that any legitimate action may be performed illegitimately or mimicked; I can think of no better way of describing this phenomenon than by calling it *institutionalised scepticism*.

It is not only sorcerers and harmful spirits that the deity struggles against; as this conclusion to a discussion at the *suNDeyuur mä:riyamma* festival shows, the wrongdoer may well have been another deity:

I: Yes, you've told us. That's how those who've come here must find out, those who've come here must listen, as this rock is witness, from that time onwards until this time, if you inhale incense smoke at this place, whatever you see, whatever you hear, whether it's a magician or some mischief-maker or a god-man<sup>1</sup>, we haven't a clue.

In fact, it is not at all unusual for the deity's struggle to be conceived as a demonstration of her superiority over other deities - at least, that is the primary meaning of hyperbolic flattery like this:

I: That's fine, you and us together, we'll sweep this away, can we keep rubbish like that? With a reputation like yours, you could fold up *kaaLi taay* herself.<sup>2</sup>

It should already be apparent that the deity is a thoroughly jealous being who despises other spiritual beings not just for their wrongdoings but for the fact they deflect human attention away from the proper deity. The Irulas' deity is a jealous deity, and one whose own creed might be read as 'give us this day our annual attention!'<sup>3</sup> The discussion continues:

M: *I'm* the one that'll show you. You've been refusing me and going to someone else. Go, then, and get someone else!

MC: If things are like that, why would I go and get anyone else?

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<sup>1</sup>The sufferer, he is saying, is unsure whether this trouble is being caused by black magic or by someone who has invoked divine assistance. This illustrates how close the practices of magic and invoking divine assistance are.

<sup>2</sup>You're more powerful even than *kaaLi*, so it'll be no problem to you to get rid of this mischief-maker.

<sup>3</sup>The phrase is adapted from Gellner(1985: 61), though I can't agree with his extraordinary claim that there is anything peculiarly 'modern' about people craving attention from other people.

- M: You've been refusing me, how many years, thirty, forty, twenty years you've been refusing me. You've been refusing this deity and going to get somebody else (*aDuttavā*).
- MC: Of course I have! Because you've been useless!
- M: I can do it. I said I could do it, I'll cut him to pieces, I'm powerful enough.
- MC: When can you do it? Tell me now. You didn't tell me on that day.
- M: Did you come to your deity on that day? Did you come to me?
- MC: It was either you or your great-grandfather I came to see.<sup>1</sup>
- M: I'll bring him down<sup>2</sup>, just you wait and see. He won't be able to use his arms or legs, I'll bring him down, you'll see.
- MC: Will you show me, God (*dēyva*)? Listen, priest. (i.e. as witness to the promise being made)
- M: Just you wait and see, wait a couple of weeks, then you'll see.
- MC: Will it come true? Everyone, count these two weeks, we'll see if this deity, this *mahagaaLiyamma* has any power behind her promise.

The deity portrayed by the Irula séance is contrastable with Fuller's analysis of worship at the Minaksi temple in Madurai, where 'gods require no attention from human beings' (1979: 470). As well as being a controller of nature and a defeater of demons and sorcerers, the Irula deity demands recognition of her pre-eminence in the divine pantheon. Worshippers are criticised not only for going to consult sorcerers but also for worshipping at other temples:

- M: You may have been to nine places (i.e. lots of temples) taking nine pieces of camphor, you may have taken nine oil-cloths<sup>3</sup> to nine places.
- MC: I've been to a thousand districts (visiting temples to find out the source of my troubles). ...It's true, I've been going to all the nine districts, prostrating and asking about my troubles, all because you have robbed me of my strength. All the nine districts.
- M: From now on don't bother with what I have to say, go and fall at *his* feet.

It is reasonably easy to see this as bad-tempered irony; this 'I couldn't care less' attitude of the deity is also projected by the deity onto the worshippers:

- M: 'The people of *suNDeyuur* have got some kind of a stone<sup>4</sup>' (you've been thinking), you've gone here, there, and everywhere to temples, looking at so many deities with bulging eyes, 'but will this deity take note of my

<sup>1</sup>This is a common phrase in everyday language, and means here 'of course I came.'

<sup>2</sup>*ukkaara vekkree* - 'I'll make him sit down' - this can mean quite the opposite, i.e. 'treat someone with respect,' since to provide someone with a chair is a gesture of extreme respect. Deities and the recently dead alike complain that they have 'nowhere to sit down.'

<sup>3</sup>These are little twists of cloth soaked in oil, which serve as little lamps in temple offerings.

<sup>4</sup>The phrase for this, *källe ennattiyoo källe vettuTTu* - 'having got themselves some stone or other' - i.e. a deity-stone - is intended as a quotation of the thoughts of the worshipper, and is meant to indicate his nonchalant attitude to worship.

problems and tell me, or won't it? They're holding some kind of festival,' that's what a child has been thinking.<sup>1</sup>

In these examples there is a pretended nonchalance on the part of both the deity and the worshippers, each playing hard to get. The effect of this is to emphasise, in a roundabout way, the mutual dependence of humans and deities.

### 3.10. Themes

#### 3.10.1. Reciprocity between humans and deities/ancestors

The paradigm of human-divine relations as an asymmetrical bargain struck between humans and deity has often been noticed in Hinduism. But the emphasis has always been on divine control of the relationship; Wadley, for example, tells us that Hindu deities are believed in because of their capacity to fulfil their part of a transaction - a bargain struck between humans and deity, or what she calls 'the opposition: worship-benefit' (1975: 61). In her analysis, the notion of *kripa* - compassion - is central to the idea of transactions between humans and deities. In return for devotion and service, the deities are motivated by compassion to give boons in return, so that the end-result is 'a transaction of the patron-client variety' (1975: 81).

The conspicuous difference in Irula formulations is that the *dependence is mutual* even though human-divine relations are asymmetrical in terms of power. As one would expect of such a powerful being, the Irula deity demands, and receives, flattery. This is consonant with the other depictions of village deities in southern India, such as Tapper's account of village worship in Andhra Pradesh, where 'villagers act as though it is essential to flatter and pay tribute to deities with threatening or coercive powers. The offering of such tribute is believed to indebted the deity to the worshipper and to obligate her to reciprocate with benevolent actions' (Tapper 1979: 20). But if Irulas flatter the deity because they depend on her aid, the dependence is reciprocal. A deity is worshipped because she acquires a reputation for power, but she in turn needs worshippers in order to be powerful; a major theme in the discussions is the symbiotic relationship of humans and spiritual beings, and at times the deity becomes, in words and in tone, whimperingly pathetic in admitting her dependence on humans. Here, instead of threatening

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<sup>1</sup>i.e. someone from another village, who has been to all kinds of temples about his problem, has thought 'oh, they're holding a festival in SuNDeyuur, I might as well try there too.'

revenge for lack of worshippers, the goddess appeals for the sympathy of those who have reduced her power by neglecting her:

M: Now they're vomiting in my mouth<sup>1</sup>, everyone in the district will be laughing at me, the whole country will spit on me, do you see that?

In textual world religions, the asymmetry of human-divine relations is often based, as in the Book of Job, on the divine right to allegiance regardless of the mysterious ways of the deity; mysterious though the Irula deity often appears, however, she does not generally make such unreasonable demands on the worshipper. Instead, the promises made by the deity are often accompanied by injunctions to humans not to worship the deity any longer if she doesn't do their bidding; Irula worship exemplifies what Weber (1966 [1922]: 32) called a 'survival of the fittest' approach to deities - deities must be seen to perform, otherwise they don't survive. In Christian traditions, God is allowed to put humans severely and contra-rationally to the test, but humans are not allowed to put God to the test; by contrast, Irulas are expected to reject any deity which doesn't pass the test, as the following example illustrates:

M: If you give it to an ancestor it's no use, if you give it to a human it's no use, if you get someone else (*seegavā* - a sorcerer) to do something it won't work, only your mother-goddess will do it. He can do it, so you (sg. fam.), think of the Lord you know, you (pl.) do the right thing and bring the offering, with your (sg. fam.) heart as witness bring it and throw it down. Think of the thing you want, prostrate, and add in a coin as an offering, then go about your business, and if the flower wilts or if the troubles don't recede, if they are reduced go somewhere else, and if they aren't reduced, if there's any mistake at all, you need have no faith in this deity, what fucking use is she to you, whip her and throw her away. Obey the rules. Who is that deity? Who am I? Bastard! I'll show you, child, I'll reveal all, just wait and see.

We saw earlier that symbolic action in the festival portrays the deity as a being created by human effort; this interpretation is supported by the séance discussions. Just as the deity is the giver and taker of human life, so humans are portrayed as the givers and takers of divine life - just as the deity threatens worshippers with death, so humans threaten the deity with throwing her away:

I: Tell us roughly how long it will be (before things get better). That's how brave you are. If you're that deity, then (that's what you have to do) if you want to get a single pot of cold water here next year. Otherwise we won't let anyone come here. We'll beat them up and chase them away (if they try to come to the temple).

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<sup>1</sup>i.e. The people of the district are making fun of me.

Irulas are as aware as any anthropologist that a deity without worshippers is no longer a deity; in order to exist, a deity requires worshippers and a name, and the importance of this latter requisite is evidenced in the frequent use of phrases like 'we'll say your name' (*niya peer sollugeemu*) - and 'saying my name' as metonyms for worshipping in general, or for holding a festival. The séance discussions express an indigenous sociology of the spiral of mutual reinforcement whereby a deity acquires local paramountcy, and of the inevitable turnover of deities. At the *tudikere paalraayā* festival I witnessed what was virtually the death-throes of a deity; a pitiful handful of worshippers turned up, and none succeeded in becoming possessed. The day was later saved by the arrival of some more worshippers including an experienced medium, but this was not before those present abandoned the worship, saying this to the deity who was refusing to manifest:

P: O.k, then if anyone wants to hold your festival next year, let them, and if no-one does, too bad! No-one came, but we weren't even given a reason why no-one came.

Faith, for Irulas, is never meant to be blind faith, but a rational faith based on market forces:

P: You can pester her (the goddess) as much as you like. Ask again. Are you afraid to ask our deity again? We've paid tax (*vāri*) to our deity, we're the ones who're paying for our deity.

This little speech illustrates how close the haggling with the deity comes to an idiom of commercial barter; *vāri* is the house-to-house levy raised to pay for the village festival, and the priest is encouraging worshippers to demand their money's-worth. In general, then, human-divine relations are conceived in the séances as characterised by *measured reciprocity*,<sup>1</sup> with carrots and sticks being offered by both sides. The banality of this conception is compensated by elaborate metaphors for mutual help; the emphasis is on humans and deities enjoying prosperity together by helping one another.

In fact, the emphasis on metaphorical tit for tat, on the exchange of different but metaphorically similar boons and actions, runs through all the séance discussions. We saw earlier the linkage of goat sacrifice with trouble-shooting and of coconut-breaking with dispute settlement. I would not argue that we are thereby provided with a full explanation of these two ritual actions, which in any case are pan-Hindu

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<sup>1</sup>My term 'measured reciprocity' seems more appropriate in this instance than Sahlins's term 'balanced reciprocity' (1974 [1972]: 194ff), since the deity is supposed to give twice as much as humans give.

metaphoric acts whose full meaning can only be seen in its wider historical context; what these spoken metaphors indicate is rather a desire on the part of Irulas to impute meaning to ritual acts, whether or not they are conscious of having borrowed them from the outside world. Every ritual symbol or metaphoric action may be used in this way to emphasise reciprocity, so that at times the deity addressing humans may sound like a human addressing a prayer to a deity:

M: I didn't run you short of anything, *appa*. I'm giving you water as is my duty (*samaakku*). I carry you around on my shoulders and raise you up.

Here, the word *samaakku* (which also means 'equally') indicates *balanced* reciprocity. Just as the ritual act of pouring water means cooling, washing, rain-making, and feeding, so the deity reciprocates by sorting out trouble generally. But this general help is typically described in terms of specific ritual actions:

M: Bring me a jug of water and pour it, I don't need a whole lot of lavish expenditure, whether it's one child or the whole village together, if just one child goes that'll do, but it must be a virgin, she must pour the water, wait here, and if I wash (your troubles) away just as this soil washes away (i.e. when you pour the water), take up this deity, otherwise throw it away.

Deities and humans raise one another up, carry one another on their shoulders, pour water on one another. Once again, however, this apparent symmetry must be qualified, since it is usual for both deities and ancestors to be expected to return twice what they are given:

M: If you behave according to the rules as before, if you put your house and garden in order<sup>1</sup>, if you think of me, saying 'Mother,' if you break a coconut, if you bring a money offering, if you tie up an offering to the ancestors, if you mend your ways, if I don't return two coins for every one...

One purpose of the *séance* is to restore the dynamic equilibrium of the see-saw of reciprocity between humans and spiritual beings. The *séance* usually begins with an argument or with the presentation of a problem; this is often the refusal of the sacrificial offering by the deity, or it may be a simple declaration that normal reciprocity has broken down:

M: 'Will it (that deity) tell me or won't it? Will the deity say who it is?' That's the kind of thought that's been running round the five famine forests of his mind. You've been going to so much trouble, seeing ancestors and spirits, is it a deity of your mother's side, is it a deity of your father's side, or is it your own personal deity? Up till now, just as (*gaNakke*) we pour milk<sup>2</sup>, so

<sup>1</sup> *kuure-gaaDe sudda maaDi* - 'purifying your house and garden.'

<sup>2</sup> Refers to the pouring of milk on the god-stones as an offering; this sentence links it with the gods' and ancestors' duty of looking after humans.



they didn't stop pouring milk, just as we pour water, so they didn't stop pouring water. They (the deities) say they've always kept us in the palm of their hands. You've also asked lots of questions, saying 'if I do this, will I succeed? If I do that, will I get into trouble? Is there some fire in this?'<sup>1</sup> Is there some *agguni* <sup>2</sup> in this? That's the kind of question you've been asking, *appa*. True or false? Has no-one asked this? Has no-one posed this problem to me?

There is an etymological point worth noting here. The conjunctive term here, *gaNakke* - 'just as' - is semantically related to *kaNakku* (measure, account); an interesting phenomenon in the Irula language which the two linguists Diffloth and Zvelebil failed to notice is that there are numerous pairs of words like these, in which distinction between two words in a semantically related pair is marked by the voicing of a plosive in one of the terms - a distinction which is unavailable in Tamil. Another example is *koppelgoppe* - 'ancestral memorial hut/rubbish heap.' The frequent use of the term *gaNakke* to draw analogies between the offerings and spiritual reciprocation is related to the term *kaNakku*; the other term for 'just as' in such contexts - *samaakku* ('equally' or 'according to the measure') - also entails notions of calculation. That ritual symbols should be employed in commentary on human relations with the spirits they worship is hardly surprising; what is especially noteworthy is that the conjunctions of analogy should present such strong indications of the accounting and measuring of reciprocity.

But the simplicity of the expression of human-divine reciprocity should not blind us to the fact that the use of ritual metaphors to express this reciprocity also facilitates the expression of the transformations that are expected to be accomplished by the séance and the encompassing rite. We saw in the last chapter how a way of expressing the festival as a whole was *kuLiccu maaDugudu* - 'it cools things down' - and how by the end of the festival the deity, who arrives in hot anger, is expected to have been cooled down [2.3.1]. Similarly the séance itself is expected to cool tempers; in the above example, worshippers are said to have come with 'fire' in their minds, that is, with burning questions. The séance can be seen as the deity's response of the human cooling action of the encompassing rite - it 'cools down' the burning minds of the worshippers:

M: (*whimpering and crying*) Today, 'is this what troubled my father, is this what troubled my grandfather?' you've got some trouble (*kaangu* - 'root') burning in your body, haven't you? It's burning, is it not?<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 'Is this dangerous?'

<sup>2</sup>*Agni*- the Sanskrit god of fire. Hence, danger.

<sup>3</sup>Illness in general is associated with overheating of the body.

MC: We are burning, that's why we're asking you now.

M: Have I said enough, have your minds cooled down?<sup>1</sup>

Reciprocity, then, is both an explicit theme in the discussions as well as being implicit metaphorically throughout; we saw earlier how the concern for the correct manipulation of symbols was not to be explained in terms of the intrinsic meaning of any particular symbols, but rather in terms of the satisfaction gained from playing with symbols. I emphasised the determination and inventiveness that go into the process of imputing meaning to the chaotic events of rite. We will return to this later when we examine in more detail the processes whereby meaning is created through chaotic dialogue. Here, let us not lose the point that the pairing of ritual metaphoric actions with expectations of divine aid is often carried out in an *ad hoc* manner during the séance, and that this verbal play, like all play, is modelled on previous games and yet is inventive at the same time.

The importance attached to this metaphoric pairing is most evident where there is the least obvious potential analogy between human worship and divine assistance. Let me demonstrate this with the example of how a simple pun can link two actions which can't otherwise be linked. We saw that the phrase *niya peer sollugeemu* - 'we'll say your name' - is used as a metonym for worship, and at first glance this is an odd choice of metonym given that the deity's name is so rarely pronounced. It makes a lot more sense, however, when we observe that the phrase most commonly used for the deity's duty of rounding up wrongdoers is *anda peer vö:No* - 'we need (to know) the name (of the wrongdoer).' Again, this is an odd way of describing divine trouble-shooting, since the deity almost never obliges with a name; but it begins to make sense if we recognise that the emphasis on the exchange of one 'name' for another is not based on the actual *pronouncement of names*, but on a pun (*peer* = name/person/fame) which links human action with that of the deity. The deity needs worshippers to say her name, people need to know the names of trouble-makers; neither party literally receives a name, but for the sake of demonstrating a metaphoric balanced transaction between man and deity they pretend that they do.

To summarise the expression of human-divine reciprocity of the séances, then, we have a collection of paradoxes rather than a collection of congruent idioms:

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<sup>1</sup>Reflects the start of the conversation, which referred to them 'burning' with questions.

- Although often discussed in a kinship metaphor (e.g. mother and children), divine-human reciprocity is dominantly portrayed in an idiom of measured rather than diffuse reciprocity.
- The idiom of exchange is that of the market-place, yet there is a strong moral injunction to help one another.
- The mutual dependence and apparent symmetry of human-divine relations are qualified by occasional insistence on the superiority of the deity.
- The expressed symmetry of exchanges is qualified by the expectation that deities will return twice what they are given. But this is in turn inverted by the fact that worshippers receives exactly half their *puuja* offerings back from the priest.
- Séance discussions are dominated by the concern to demonstrate the metaphorical equivalence of ritual action and divine assistance, but deities are, for all that, radically different from human beings.

### 3.10.2. Verbal transactions

Most of the preceding section concerned fairly explicit statements about the relations between humans and deities. We should not overlook, however, the implicit reciprocity of the séance as a linguistic event. Prayer in general is often rather ethnocentrically discussed as a one-way form of communication - for example Fortes, talking of attempts to communicate with ancestors generally, contends that

Prayer, whatever may be its intent - whether it solicits help, offers thanks, makes apologies, admits guilt, promises reform, or what you will - brings the ancestors into the equivalent of face-to-face confrontation with the worshippers, but it must inevitably be one-sided and inconclusive, since unlike a similar transaction with living superiors there can be no dialogue and no appeal to reality. (1976: 10)

Fortes claims that it is because of this lack of dialogue that sacrifice and libation, feeding the ancestors, and commensality, with the ancestors, are common, since these replace verbal communication. The suggestion that prayer is not dialogue is highly debatable; in a sense, all soliloquies are multivocal discussions between a variety of selves. But in any case, Fortes' claim could not be applied to cases where people can become possessed by ancestors, where the possession is perfectly 'real' and there certainly is a 'dialogue' - or rather, as we have seen, a polylogue. The Irula séance affirms the possibility of communicating with all spiritual beings in a real dialogue. Spiritual beings answer prayers with words as

well as actions. In fact, there are times when it is explicitly acknowledged that communication with words is likely to be more effective than communicating with ritual symbols:

P: If you can't understand what we're saying, do you expect the banana leaves to say it any more clearly?<sup>1</sup>

Unlike the sages of the Academy of Lagado in *Gulliver's Travels*, Irulas do not believe that objects speak louder than words. However, the optimistic expectations of verbal communication are tempered by the fact that séance communication is no ordinary dialogue - if communication is achieved, it certainly isn't easy, and it is far from obvious that messages conveyed to and by deities are understood. As we saw, the deity is invoked with shouts of 'hao! hao! hao!' and announces her arrival by reciprocating with exactly the same shouts. When the verbal exchange begins, the deity talks evasively in parables, riddles, and paradoxes, and people reciprocate by talking in vaguely allusive terms of their troubles. Both parties frequently accuse one another of telling lies:

MC: No-one's to tell me anything, I don't want any deities (*dēyva*), it's all lies! You're just testing me out, why bother? Just tell me what deity has been bringing me down for so long.

M: So am I supposed to humble myself<sup>2</sup> to you only?

MC: Then why did you tell me lies when you came to my veranda?<sup>3</sup>

M: If I was lying then, am I lying again now?

MS: He thinks the whole lot is just lies, so don't bother talking to him. Just give us some answers to our questions<sup>4</sup> and we'll go.

And deities may even taunt worshippers with the fact that what is being said may not be true, using variations of standard phrases like *nā:n sollugadu poyyi' nDā:lu seri nijja' nDā:lu seri* - 'I don't care whether you say I'm lying or whether you say I'm telling the truth' or *uNDoo illiyoo?* - 'does it exist or doesn't it?/true or false?' Commentary on the potential for illusion and lie-telling is an ever-present metacommunicative thread running throughout the séance discussions. Quite apart from these obvious obstacles to effective communication, there are times when participants admit that they don't really want to hold sophisticated conversations

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<sup>1</sup>This is a cunningly ambiguous reference to the two uses of banana leaves in ritual - as the plate on which offerings are made, and as a gag which the priest, during offerings, must keep stuffed in his mouth. The latter use is more obviously being alluded to here.

<sup>2</sup>*nā: kammi aayi naDakkoNomaa?* - lit: 'am I to walk, having been reduced/brought down?'

<sup>3</sup>I.e. when the goddess was brought round from door to door at the start of the festival.

<sup>4</sup>*naamu vū:nda paavöDegakku* - 'to the begging we do as we prostrate ourselves.'

with the deity. As with the manipulation of ritual symbols, it is the *fact* of communication rather than the *content* which is important. A comforting word from the deity may be enough:

- P: That's o.k, that'll do, there's no use debating that. If that's all the deity has to say, that'll do. We were just wondering why you didn't say anything when we tried to get you earlier.<sup>1</sup>  
 MS: That's all, from now on we'll follow the rules. We've said you can go.  
 MS: That's it, we've had a word to send us on our way.

The phrase used here is *vöyyikk'oru muLi kaDakkudu* - a word-by-word translation of which would give us 'there is a word for the path.' A link is established here between the path and the verbal link between humans and ancestors/deities; heredity, incidentally, is *kä:lvöyyi* - which literally means 'footpath.' Just as the festival as a whole re-establishes a link (in the form of a re-blazed trail) with divinity, so the séance establishes a verbal link with the spirit world:

- M: This path down the hill, the path is falling apart.  
 P: Whatever path may be broken, if you show us we'll see to it, Saami.  
 P: [...]Whether the path's broken or whether it isn't broken, show me, and I'll cut the thorns away and look after it, if we four children say we'll look after it, can we break our word?

But in terms of both physical and verbal linkage, the path paradoxically serves to emphasise the tenuousness of the human-divine link, and the ultimate separation of humans from the spirit world. There is always a sense in which the link is illusory, and it is no accident that the alternative channel for human-divine communication is in dreams; individuals who brought an offering to the temple often told me that they had been instructed to do so in a dream rather than in a séance, and it is clear that communication in dreams, elusive though it may be, is not necessarily any less reliable than séance communication:

- M: Bring your piles of offerings, bring lorry-loads, I don't give a damn whether you do or not. That's just what the rules<sup>2</sup> are.  
 MC: You should tell us in dreams what those rules are.  
 M: I'll tell you now. You don't need dreams or any nonsense<sup>3</sup> like that.

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<sup>1</sup>i.e. when they tried and failed to persuade the deity to possess a variety of men.

<sup>2</sup>*sä:l* - 'furrow.' This word also means 'tradition' in general, and it is worth noting the association between following tradition and fertility.

<sup>3</sup>*kanavumu vāaNaa, kattirikaaymu vāaNaa* - *kattirikaay* - 'vegetables' is a semantically redundant echo-word here, which is why I've translated it as 'nonsense.'

During a discussion about the irresponsibility of the Biliyur headman, one participant related a dream about how a white lady had visited the village to hold a council. She was annoyed at the headman's absence, and after some discussion announced that she was going to appoint a new headman. At that point, he said, he was woken up by his baby son urinating on him - 'otherwise I would have known the name.' The white lady is goddess-like and associated with the English woman who runs the local Nilgiri Adivasi Welfare Association, and who, like the goddess, dispenses health and gives incomprehensible speeches (in English). The parallel with the frustrations of the séance are clear - as so often in the séance, a name is required and promised but not actually given.

Like the dream, the séance expresses a paradox: *spiritual beings can be communicated with, but much of this communication may be insincere or incomprehensible, and promises may not come true.* This paradox also indicates the essential ambiguity of the entire rite - it is entertaining and playful; but at the same time it is deadly serious - there are life-and-death issues at stake, and amid all the joking there is serious business to transact:

M: Are you playing games with me?<sup>1</sup> I'll show you here and now, I'll bring witnesses.

MC: Why would I want to play games?

### 3.10.3. The family, kinship and the village.

As we have seen, participants deny the conflict-resolving function of the festival. Similarly, although a great deal of the séance discussion explicitly concerns quarrels within families, between families, within the village, between the village and outsiders, and between affinally related groups, it is often said that such discussions should be kept out of séances - and I have seen mediums and clients being physically prevented from discussing such topics. However, it is quite possible to discuss issues arising out of relations between kin, so long as names are not mentioned.

Discussion usually concerns the root causes of illness or 'trouble,' with the final cause being squabbles and the efficient cause being sorcery or divine action. It should be borne in mind that the main deity with which we are concerned is simultaneously the personal deity of the priest, the deity of the priest's *kula*, and the

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<sup>1</sup>*vaLaaDugiriyoo?* The verb *vaLaaDu* means playing, and etymologically means 'dancing round.'

deity of the village. The culmination of the festival is the communal meal which is prepared by the priest's affines, ideally his sons-in-law. It makes good sense, then, that quarrels between consanguines and between affines should be sorted out in the séance which precedes the communal meal. And it is hardly surprising that metaphors used to allude to quarrels should at times be culinary:

P: If it's the joint family that is meant, they're all the same kind, it's in the same pot that a measure of rice is boiling<sup>1</sup>.

In discussion of quarrels, it is striking that social harmony is described metaphorically as vocal unison:

M: (you should speak with) one voice. See here, one voice, one *kwä:l* (oboe), if you ask me why (all this trouble has come), and keep saying 'come! come!' to this place.

Phrases like 'one voice, one *kwä:l*' are a rather vague and *ad hoc* form of the phenomenon of *parallelism*<sup>2</sup> which has so often been observed to operate in oral narratives. A recent compendium on the theme of parallelism, *To Speak in Pairs* (Fox 1988), provides several Indonesian examples of how oral narrative may be structured by a canonical parallelism whereby one idea or object must be paired with another. He suggests that this 'binary mode' of 'dyadic language' is 'the primary vehicle for the preservation and transmission of cultural knowledge' (*ibid*: 2).

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<sup>1</sup>*veegudu* - this is the same verb which I earlier translated as 'burning,' referring then to 'trouble' in a more vague sense than the family quarrels here being discussed. An implicit link is established here with the commensal meal of the festival, which is supposed to indicate social harmony. The verb *veegu*, which also means 'cook,' links trouble with the remedy; the same can be said of the use of the noun *kaangu* - 'root' - to mean 'trouble' (as we saw earlier), since roots, like leaves, provide the Irulas with many medicinal remedies. The same can be said, of course, of the disease-bringing and disease-curing goddess *mä:ri taay* - 'Pox Mother.'

<sup>2</sup>Parallelism, a common device in poetry and incantation, consists of phrases or sentences or similar construction and meaning placed side by side. *Isaiah IX, 2*, gives us this example: 'The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined.' Jakobson (1973: 21) defines parallelism as 'poetic language [which] consists of an elementary operation: the bringing together of two elements....' He argues that comparison, metamorphosis, and metaphor are all 'semantic variants' of the operation of parallelism. Comparison is 'a particular instance of parallelism'; metamorphosis is 'parallelism projected in time'; metaphor is 'parallelism reduced to a point.' Rhyme, assonance, and alliteration are 'euphonic variants' of the same process of juxtaposition. All these forms occur in Irula séances, although the language is too informal for us to speak of 'canonical parallelism' as Fox (1988) does with reference to ritual language in Indonesia.

In the above example from the *séance*, the dyad provides us with two metaphors taken from the *séance* - voice, and *kwä:l* - which act like two arrows pointing at a hidden object, social harmony. The 'voice' metaphor links social harmony with the united action of the rite which results in the manifestation of the deity; since the deity is brought to the *séance* by shouting in unison, the metaphor links this action with the dispute-settlement of the *séance*. But this in itself is rather flat and circular. The metaphor of the *kwä:l* adds to this the suggestion of the unison of the *kwä:l* (there may be two or three of these playing, but they all play in unison and sound as one, endlessly repeating the same short phrase) which is implicitly opposed to the three kinds of drum, each of which has an independent rhythm.

The metaphor of many voices as one also carries an implicit contrast with the many squabbling voices of the *séance*. The *séance*, with its shouting and its proliferation of obscure phrases and foreign words, becomes itself a metaphor for social discord:

- M: Your family is divided into three parties, you're talking three languages, the three brothers are not in agreement, that's why you in this village...oh!...I've brought you (trouble). If you've anything to say, then say it.
- P: So what if there are three or four divisions in the village, let it be! What is it to you? We just have to pour a jug of water. And then you mustn't put any thorns or stones under our feet (i.e. you mustn't give us any trouble)
- M: If you brothers are talking four languages, what can I do?

In the Christian tradition, when humans try to construct a link (the tower of Babel) with the world of spirits, the result is babble, the breakdown of language. The incomprehensibility of most of the *séance* for most of the participants suggests a similar breakdown in communicability as humans try to approach too close to divinity; but the alternative ritual language - shouting 'hao! hao! hao!' in unison - is not really a language at all. The *séance* is a quarrel of many voices, but it does at least have the potential of solving disputes and, indeed, nearly always produces a handshake or two, often between the priest or a member of his *kula* and an affine - the medium.

The metaphor of the *kwä:l* is appropriate in another sense: when the medium needs a rest between bouts of babble, he shouts 'play a *kwä:l*' and the musicians start playing. I was often told that this musical interlude enables the deity to gather her thoughts in preparation for the next round of advice. Music, which is always played to honour a deity or a person of high social standing such as the Kurumba *modäli*, is linked with the function of advice-giving and dispute-settlement. In the



use of these metaphors, the exegesis of the deity's function as dispute-settler is subtle and implicit. Explicitly, this function is denied by the prohibition on holding a festival if there are unsettled disputes. But an alternative angle on this prohibition is provided by the following excerpt:

- M: Whatever the problem may be, I'll look at it from all points of view, so all you need to do is say the word.  
 I: You must only listen if it's true. Say that's right.  
 M: I'm the one who'll show you, *appa*.  
 P: And what if you don't?  
 MS: You won't see anyone either up or down.<sup>1</sup>  
 M: If you people have any arguments, don't bother coming to this temple next year *appa*.

In this instance, the phrase 'don't bother coming' looks less like a prohibition than an insistence that if the deity fails to solve disputes, humans need not reciprocate by coming for worship.

A major function of the séances, then, is to provide a forum in which private quarrels can be cathartically expressed in public, but in the diffuse language of séance code. If the unity of the *kula* is expressed in common worship of the deity who is always associated with the *kula* of the priest, the unity-cum-opposition of affines is expressed in the quarrelling and handshaking with the medium, who ought to be an affine. This is not just an etic assumption, for Irulas often remind themselves that it is not only deities, but mediums who speak during a séance. In any case, there are many analogies between relations with deities and relations with affines.

This is not unique to Irulas. Reiniche (1979: 34) has pointed out that in Tirunelveli, in each household, divinity is represented by an oil-lamp which the new bride brings with her. The metaphor here suggests that both flame (something shareable between families) and the principle of exchange between affinally related groups are linked with divinity. Perhaps it wouldn't be going too far to suggest that this metaphor is implicit in all Irula village festivals, in which a girl (the goddess) is taken out of the village, and another (the goddess transformed by the rite) is brought back in. This is also supported by the strong emphasis on complementarity and reciprocity of affinally related groups in Irula festivals, and by

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<sup>1</sup>Refers to the upper and the lower temples. i.e. no-one will bother coming to worship the deity.

the treatment of the bride as a goddess. This is also corroborated by Reiniche's ethnography:

The assistance of the affines and their prestations confirm the efficacy of the ritual and bring to it a sociological dimension. As potential wife-givers, and in allowing the youngsters to begin a domestic life, they alone are the ones who give youngsters their social being. ...It has, at least implicitly, to do with the repayment of a debt promised in a vow: that which society (the local group and its affines) makes to itself to perpetuate itself. Alliance, the pivot of the Dravidian kinship system, is at the heart of the matter. In this symbolically superordained [surdeterminé] universe each element of the ritual - the representation (the divinity), the mediators (milk, among others), man and his relation (the *maccuNar*, 'brothers-in-law') - is set against [mis en équivalence] each of the others, in a perfectly enclosed system which unflinchingly repeats itself. (1979: 165-6, my translation)

Among Irulas, there are close parallels between relations of a *kula* to its deity and relations of the *kula* to the wife-giving group - both are conceived of as reciprocal though antagonistic relationships, but relations with another *kula* must be marked by respect, whereas relations with the deity are marked by both familiarity and respect. Perhaps the uneasy mixture of familiarity with and respect for the deity derives from the deity's dual association, on the one hand with the worshipping group and on the other with the affines. It is pertinent to note that both festivity and the maintenance of good relations with affines involve the metaphor of path-clearing; path-clearing is prominent as preparation for the festival and is frequently mentioned in the séance, while the gift of money to a deceased woman's brother at a funeral is explained by the phrase *vöyyi tärakkudu* - 'it keeps the path clear.'

The interdependence of the *kulas* is emphasised in séances not so much as an explicit theme stating that 'cross-relatives must get along with one another,' but rather as an implicit message in the practice of mentioning relatives in dyadic pairs - *aNNā -dambi* (brothers): *maamā -maccā* (cross-relatives) and *aaLu köDe* (husband's side): *pönDu köDe* (wife's side):

- MC: All this is true, but does it (this trouble) come from my wife's side, or if not my wife's side, then has somebody else set a deity against me? Everything you said was right, but does that deity belong to my wife's side or to somebody else.<sup>1</sup>
- M: Look here, that's not good enough, you've been saying one thing to your wife, you've been saying another thing to your own children, and something else again to your cross-relatives, and you've confused me.

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<sup>1</sup>Note how this demonstrates the inseparability of sorcery and enlisting the aid of personal or clan deities, since sorcery here is 'setting a god against somebody.'

In general, then, the *séance* dialogue expresses a variety of uncertainties about personal relationships.<sup>1</sup> This expression ranges from the vague expression of doubt about the goodwill of consanguines and affines, to the thinly veiled public criticism about the anti-social behaviour of a particular relative. We might say of Irula society that its dominant concerns are relations between people rather than people's relations with the natural environment; this matches what Gellner has to say about modern Western society (1985: 61). Lacking the psychobabble in which people in post-1970s Western countries discuss one another's personalities, Irulas strive to articulate personalities and personal relationships in the language of ill-will and occult struggles. When particular quarrels are more than vaguely alluded to - as does happen from time to time - anyone introducing such a topic too blatantly will be interrupted; on two occasions I witnessed a *séance* being stopped when this happened. The good sense of this policy is clear - vague expression of uncertainties can be cathartic, but direct discussion of arguments is likely to lead to more arguments, and arguments, as we have seen, have no legitimate place in the Irula festival.

#### 3.10.4. The just and the unjust

Geertz has suggested a popular quatrain which summarises a major problem which all religions try to tackle:

The rain falls on the just  
 And on the unjust fella;  
 But mainly upon the just,  
 Because the unjust has the just's umbrella.  
 (Geertz 1966: 21)

Here is the familiar philosophical dilemma of how to reconcile the apparent arbitrariness of fortune with beliefs in a benevolent and potent deity - what Weber called the 'problem of theodicy' (1966 [1922]: 139). It is a recurring theme in Irula *séances*; discussion usually takes the form of negotiation with the deity, pleading with the deity not to punish people for simple 'mistakes' - indeed to let people know what these 'mistakes' have been so that they might rectify them - and instead to punish, even to kill, those who have actually 'sinned.' At the Biliyuur Nilagiri Toga festival, the image of the umbrella comments on the vagaries of divine justice in rather a different way to that employed in Geertz's quatrain. The deity has

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<sup>1</sup>Vitebsky (forthcoming: section 2.10) shows that the Soras likewise are always worried by the untrustworthiness of other people - deceit is rife in everyday life; and they express these anxieties almost daily in discussions with ancestors.

threatened to withhold rain as a punishment for a poor turnout at the festival, and the priest-headman upbraids him for such an unjust intention:

P: Look here, they came and fell at your feet, didn't they? Can't you send rain to their gardens only? You show us. ...Get your umbrella and prevent the rain from falling on the gardens of those who didn't come.

In other words, it is acknowledged that generally the rain *fails* (divine punishment falls) on the just and unjust alike, and the séance aims to dissuade the deity from such injustice. There is here a perfect illustration of the danger inherent in two assumptions which have been dominant in the analysis of religion - that ritual acts are 'rational' because the practitioner believes them to be efficacious, and that they thereby give the practitioner confidence. Gombrich, in a passage which also addresses rainmaking, exemplifies the first approach:

If we see a man in an agricultural community oppressed by a drought enter a special building (called, maybe, a church), get on his knees, fold his hands and start muttering, we may assume that he is insane, in which case we can offer no further testable explanation of his conduct, or that he thinks his actions may bring rain. And if that is what he thinks, we must assume that he thinks some entity is capable of giving him rain, and that that entity, which begins to look rather human in its emotions, will be placated by his suppliant posture and humble gesture, and listen to his words. ...A religious action is based on a belief about facts and directed to certain aims ...[we therefore must assume] that the action based on the beliefs and directed to the aims follows the rationality principle. If it does not it is not amenable to systematic study (1971: 12, 15)

This is an extreme form of the argument which insists that religious behaviour follows the same kind of rationality as instrumental behaviour; it must be rejected altogether if we are to understand and avoid ridiculing behaviour which either avoids instrumentality or confronts reality and rationality head-on in an oppositional challenge. Of course it may be quite appropriate to recognise 'misplaced concreteness' when we come across it, but Gombrich closes his mind altogether to the possibility that people perform ritual actions which they simultaneously know to be irrational. To recognise this is neither to call such people 'insane' nor to give up all hope of subjecting their behavior to 'systematic study.' My example above illustrates that Irulas, in the middle of a rain-making festival, are capable of the sceptical subversion of the absurd claims of that same ritual - of course the rain isn't going to fall in a patchwork pattern which matches the shape of people's gardens! Yet according to Gombrich, this scepticism would render my study 'unsystematic' and the Irulas 'insane.'

An assumption closely related to the rationality-assumption is confidence-theory mostly clearly exemplified in Durkheim's claim that: 'every religion is ...a means

enabling men to face the world with greater confidence' (1976 [1915]: 190). Of course people need confidence, but the above example illustrates the possibility that religion may offer devotees the sceptical subversion of naïve confidence rather than an unrealistic confidence in divine assistance. Indeed, the play-element in ritual guarantees this subversion.<sup>1</sup> The Irula festival allows people to compete with deities at playfulness. The deity is portrayed as a capricious being who is likely to punish innocent 'children' unless constantly and forcefully reminded of her vocation as punisher of the unjust. Generally, this theme is expressed in a very straightforward way - the deity should reward worshippers with health and wealth, and should send illness, misfortune, even death to those who fail to come to the festival in order to teach them a lesson. But they are aware that the goddess is likely to go on playing capriciously with humans, so they prefer to try and beat her at her own game.

The idea of divine forgiveness is not foreign to the Irula conception of divinity. The demonstration of humility in the act of prostration manipulates the deity by employing the metaphor of humans as 'innocent children' (*ariyaaTTa puLLe*) in relation to the deity. Yet although the deity ought to forgive those who humble themselves in this way and by doing so effectively turn their ambiguous *tappu* ('sins' or 'mistakes') into *müshTekku* ('mistakes')<sup>2</sup>, those who come to worship are quite unashamed to demand unique access to divine grace. Indeed, the power and popularity of the deity is quite explicitly related to her ability to cause trouble and bring people to heel:

M: O.k., from tomorrow, if today I destroyed your animal pen, 'oh!' they'll say, 'he went and worshipped the deity, what happened to his, they haven't been touched, only mine has been emptied.' Word will get around like that, won't it? So...

Several: That's it! Say that, that's what we want to hear!

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<sup>1</sup>Unlike Handelman, I am not suggesting that it is just the epistemology of everyday life that is subverted in play: 'Given the nature of play, its premises of make-believe and pretense, it is a medium particularly suited to doubt and to question [sic] the routine postulates of other realities. Thus it is this negation of the taken-for-granted exigencies of routine life, and this dissolution of necessity in the means-ends relationships of causal epistemologies, which make those messages that arise in play such acute commentaries on the realities of reference within which the world of play arises' (1982:163). The subversion goes deeper than that, questioning the inverted epistemology of play itself. Nor do I accept his endorsement of the claim made by Moore and Myerhoff that scepticism is a distinguishing feature of play vis-à-vis ritual and ceremony, which 'discourage untrammelled inquiry' (1978:14).

<sup>2</sup>The Irulised English word *müshTekku* may be brought in to emphasise the meaning of accident, as a marked subcategory of the more general term *tappu*, which includes the notions both of sin and accidental error.

- P: I slogged away, scratching my arms and legs to clear the path and come here, I slogged away, look after me and empty his animal-pen, only then will he know better. He'll think, 'if I don't come next year, mine will be emptied in just the same way,' and so he'll come. You're the one who can drag him here, we can't.

At stake in these discussions of the justice or injustice of divine retribution is the relationship of the individual to society. There are no words in the séance discussion which could be translated as 'individual' or 'society,' but there are nevertheless clear messages concerning this dyad. Since some divine punishments (drought, theft of domestic stock by wild animals) fall on the just and the unjust alike, and since these punishments are related to human morality, it is clear that the misdemeanours of individuals are the concern not only of those individuals but of the collectivity. Although superficially the deity may be blamed for treating sinners and the righteous indiscriminately, it is also the fault of the headman if he fails to bring the ungodly to the temple. The séance often begins with a complaint by the deity about poor attendance, and this is countered by a complaint from the headman-priest that it is up to the deity to ensure good attendance:

- M: You've been thinking about this and preparing for a long time, *appa*. Will they come? Will they not come? Have I only got two children? Won't anyone else come?
- P: That's what you have to think if you lack people. Who is there to support us? It'll only work if there's a reasonable number of people. ...So are we to blame you, or blame the villagers? ...Are you going to give a good word or a bad word to those who've come? ...I'm the one who'll control the village. You're the one who must see to that.

There is nothing particularly complicated or surprising in discussions like these. Two questions are expressed and left ambiguous: whether it is up to the deity or the headman to bring people to the temple, and whether the misdemeanours of the individual are the concern of that individual or of the collectivity. In a society which, as I have said, is formally hierarchical and role-centred but informally egalitarian and person-centred, such questions cannot be unambiguously answered. Formally, the headman is responsible for everyone's correct behaviour and temple attendance, and relationships with the deity are mediated through the priest-headman; but informally, it is up to individuals to act as they see fit, and they are therefore directly answerable to the deity. So the issue of temple attendance must simply be expressed as *miasma* of ambiguities and dilemmas. What is portrayed, then, is a qualified version of the individual-oriented morality of more isolated people like Paliyans, among whom 'individuals rather than the group create order' (Gardner 1988 [1972]: 439) or Chenchus, who 'have no belief in collective responsibility, nor do they believe in the polluting effect of deviant behaviour. In

their view every individual is only responsible for his own actions, and a man's misdeed cannot jeopardize the well-being of his kinsmen or neighbours.' and 'divine injunctions do not, on the whole, refer to social relations, deity is appealed to for practical assistance only' (Fürer-Haimendorf 1967: 21, 23).

Irulas acknowledge that though the individual is empirically a free agent, his punishment can still affect others. But the formal headman has no empirical power to bring people to book; neither is there any recourse to beliefs in punishments in other worlds or other lives - the Hindu doctrine of *karma*, which Weber considered to be 'the most complete formal solution to the problem of theodicy' (1966 [1922]: 145), is unknown to most Irulas, as indeed it is unknown to or ignored by many Tamils. It has often been noted that even those who are aware of *karma* as a text-based belief are quite capable of expecting divine punishment to be this-worldly too. For example, Wadley (1975: 85) notices a greater emphasis on the latter kind of retribution in the folktale (*katha*) as opposed to the written text.

But Irulas cannot rely on the justice of divine retribution; the best people can hope for is a tenuous happy ending to the drama of the séance. The deity arrives as an angry and capricious being intent on punishing the *ariyaTTa puLLe*, the ignorant child who never meant any harm; she is a blind creature who fails to recognise the innocent unintentionality of a *müsTekku* (mistake), and who is likely to punish the *vandavā* (he who came) along with the *vāraaTTavā* (absentee from the festival). But there is at least some hope expressed in the handshake at the end. The deity has been converted from an irrational monster into a rational dispenser of justice; she has, as they are fond of saying, 'had her eyes opened.'

But there remains the recognition that deities are liable to play with humans in a relatively random manner. This is a familiar theme in India, that of divine play encapsulated in the concept of *liilaa*. Although Irulas lack this concept, their séances indicate a similar acceptance of the frivolity in the deities' attitude to human life, though I very much doubt whether they would be able to find clear verbal articulation of Biardeau's claim that the 'divine "game" - *liilaa* - [gives] a definitive theological form to the idea that human life has no meaning and needs none' (1989 [1981]: 40). Biardeau doesn't say how this is expressed, what words give form to the idea that life 'has no meaning,' what word, equivalent to 'meaning,' the world is said to lack. In Biardeau's interpretation of Hinduism, 'the idea that is most impressed upon the Hindu mind is that God creates freely and for no reason, as a

form of play' (*ibid*: 143). This idea is more clearly expressed by Good's presentation of views expressed by his Tirunelveli informants: 'To the gods, and those men with the ability to see, the entire cosmos is "play" (*liila*)' (1985: 157). For Irulas, the idea of capricious deities is ever-present, but it is an idea which will always have an ongoing struggle with the contrary idea that divine interventions may be rational and subject to human control.

In other words, we must steer a path between Biardeau's definitively unreasonable deities and Geertz's suggestion that 'if one were to essay a minimal definition of religion today it would ...[be] what Salvador de Madariaga has called "the relatively modest dogma that God is not mad"' (1966: 13). This latter is a shining example of the assumption that theology must of necessity be optimistic, and it is surprising to find it in an article which also criticises Malinowski's 'crude confidence-type theory' and 'theology of optimism' (*ibid*: 18).<sup>1</sup> In Irula séances we find just as much evidence for a wholly contrary point of view: the deity *may be* mad; it is up to humans to try to find meaning in the madness, but there is no guarantee that meaning will be found.

### 3.11. Style, tone, modes of address

The previous section has dealt with the overt messages of the séances, and I turn now to the 'style' - the more implicit messages. It will become apparent that these two are often hard to separate, since style provides much of the thematic 'content' of the séances; the meaning of the séance is in the method, or perhaps I should say, in the medium. Indeed, an important question that should be raised by this discussion is whether the metaphors in which we discuss communication - tending as they do to be dominated by the central idea of packaging and sending a substance<sup>2</sup> - may belittle the importance of style, relegating it to the status of 'container' vis-à-vis the 'substance' contained and transmitted. Likewise, in the 'building' metaphor used in the metalinguistic discussion of ideas (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 106-7), style is relegated to the status of façade and elaboration as opposed to structure and foundation.

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<sup>1</sup>There is also the implicit assumption that science is pessimistic - that it recognises that God *is* mad, i.e. that Chaos exists.

<sup>2</sup>See discussion of the 'conduit metaphor' in 2.2; Sperber and Wilson also rail against the overuse of the semiotic (thought-code-transmission-decoding-understanding) approach to analysing communication.



In fact, given the elaborateness and inventiveness of the style of all speakers at the séance, it might be described as a triumph of style over substance - if I can use that phrase without the derisory snort it might imply in an arts review magazine. Since the séance succeeds in providing raucous, funny, and emotionally charged entertainment despite the fundamental triteness of most of the 'content.' My analysis of the style will, like all analysis of art forms, examine the interplay of *theme* and *variation*: if the *themes* of the séance are trite, grounded in everyday experience (human suffering, the arbitrariness of fortune, quarrels), the *variations* are spectacular and transcendent. It is the variations that the audience is entertained by, and I see no good reason why entertainment should not be regarded as 'content.'

Considerable attention has been paid in recent years to style as a diacritical feature of ritual performance in South Asia. For example, Babb has drawn an analogy between ritual styles and dialects: 'Some ritual styles have more prestige than others; some are regarded as appropriate in some sets of circumstances but not in others. It is vital to keep in mind that stylistic differences in ritual are no more accidental than stylistic variation in speech' (Babb 1975: 27).

And Singer (1959: 146) tells us that the distinction between classical (*marga*) and folk (*desi*) traditions in art styles is explicitly paralleled by the differentiation between linguistic styles of *samskrta* (perfected, refined) and *prakrta* (unrefined, uncivilized) and in the field of customs by the distinction between customs sanctioned by *sruti/smirti* and that sanctioned only by local (*desacara*) usage or family usage (*kuladharmā*). But neither of these looks at ways in which different styles occur and are manipulated within the same rite. In Irula séances, people speak to deities humbly or arrogantly, formally or informally, as they see fit.

I am fully in agreement with Babb's preference for referring to differences of 'ritual style,' 'ritual dialect,' rather than of 'levels'<sup>1</sup>; to speak of religious behaviour as if it were graded in 'levels' would only be appropriate if it reflected an indigenous use of similar altitudinal metaphors, and this is not to my knowledge the case (there is no South Asian term equivalent to either High Church or *Hochdeutsch*). However, I would not go along with his claim that since different styles are 'on a level' the content may remain 'the same' even if styles are different:

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<sup>1</sup>My own use of 'levels,' it will be remembered, refers to analysis and comprehension, not to any status gradations of religious behaviour [2.2].

it is possible to distinguish between the content of a religious tradition and mode or modes of its expression. (...)the concepts expressed in rituals may be the same, while the ritual 'styles' in which they are expressed may be different. Seen from this perspective, the textualized and untextualized forms of ceremonies may be understood, following Dumont and Pocock (1959) as different ways of 'saying the same things.' (Babb 1975: 27)

On the contrary, I would insist that if things are said differently, they are not 'the same things' at all. Style carries meaning, and this applies especially to the construction of the deity; only if we erroneously assumed the deity to be a substantive entity could we imagine that 'the same' deity is addressed in different styles. We must acknowledge that deities are *constituted* by the selection which the worshipper makes from a range of alternative styles of worship; this relativity of divinity is of course indigenously recognised by Hindus, who are aware of the possibility of changing one deity into another simply by behaving differently towards it: Moffatt, for example describes how the low-status goddess Selliyanman, whose leftovers are too impure to be eaten as *prasaada* even by Harijans, is transformed temporarily into the high-status goddess Parvati by being married to Siva for the relevant part of her festival (1979: 233ff). Whereas we can say that 'Pop,' 'Dad,' and 'Father' are synonyms from the point of view of reference despite their semantic difference from the point of view of pragmatics, the same cannot be said of 'synonyms' for a deity, since there is no 'referent' in the normal sense, only meaning. I would in fact, insist that *to address a deity differently is to address a different deity* - indeed there are, in a sense, as many deities as there are moments of worship.

### 3.11.1. Politeness and otherwise

Brown and Levinson's (1987 [1978]) theory of politeness provides a coherent framework for analysing linguistic interaction - for showing how relationships are linguistically constructed and maintained, and for understanding the full social significances of the minutest of linguistic details. Goffman's analysis of 'face-work' (1972 [1967]: 12ff) also points the way towards understanding the linguistic strategies that respond to the need, throughout all everyday interpersonal encounters, to 'save face' (our own and that of others); Goffman sums up the mode of linguistic face-saving strategies as 'a tacit agreement to do business through the language of hint - the language of innuendo, ambiguities, well-placed pauses, carefully worded jokes, and so on' (*ibid*: 30). As Mauss noted, 'face' is more than just the presentational mask: 'to lose one's face is to lose one's spirit ...which is

truly the “face.” ...It is the veritable *persona* which is at stake’ (Mauss 1970 [1925]: 38).

The kinds of cooperation involved in the maintenance of ‘face’ are encapsulated in Brown and Levinson’s all-embracing term ‘politeness’; as a theoretical (rather than normative or descriptive) term, ‘politeness’ theory is concerned with all behaviour related to ‘face’ - and thus includes a great of behaviour which can only be described as ‘impolite.’ Brown and Levinson provide us with two axes with which to analyse politeness strategies - *power* (symmetry-asymmetry of relations) and *distance* (proximity and distance between speaker and hearer). Since deities, insofar as they are social beings, are assumed to have ‘face’ and to act with respect to the ‘face’ of humans, these axes of power and distance are as essential to an analysis of human-divine relations as they are to analysis of relations between people.

I will be looking, then, at the kinds of politeness strategy that characterise Irula relations with deity as presented in the séances. Brown and Levinson assume that the best way to ‘make sense’ of conversation is to assume that participants are ‘rational face-bearing agents’ (1987 [1978]: 58). Grice’s discussion of ‘conversational implicature’ likewise emphasises that assumptions have to be made about rationality and cooperation if conversation is to make sense despite apparent oddities (1975: 43ff). It would be rash to assume *a priori* that Irulas regard their deity as a ‘rational face-bearing agent’; indeed, such an assumption about relations between people seems unwarranted. People frequently choose *not* to assume rationality in other people, especially in a stranger, someone they don’t like, or someone they simply don’t want to understand. Indeed, a major difficulty with the much-lauded Gricean conversational maxims is that it is quite unclear whether there is such a thing as a base-plate of rationality from which utterances might be said to deviate. Grice (1975: 45) evasively assures that his ‘cooperative principle’ is observed ‘*ceteris paribus*’; he thus side-steps altogether the question of whether other things ever are equal - whether, that is, there is some baseline vantage-point of normal conversational cooperation from which people come to understand conversational deviance. At any rate, all of the maxims which go together to form the cooperative principle - those of ‘quality’ (speak the truth, be sincere), of ‘quantity’ (neither less nor more than is required), of ‘relevance’ and of ‘manner’ (be perspicuous; avoid ambiguity and obscurity) - all these maxims are flouted repeatedly throughout the Irula séance.

What we *can* assume, though, is that since the deity is at least in part an anthropomorphic construction, then any models which are useful for looking at linguistic interaction between humans will also be useful for the analysis of linguistic interaction between humans and deities. This approach in no way precludes the possibility that the deity is assumed to be irrational or that communication is mainly designed to baffle rather than to pass straightforward messages. The more *distinctive* (marked, non-casual) language becomes, the more it tends to become *destructive* (or incomprehensible); to mark an utterance, to make it non-casual by means of elaboration, ellipsis, abnormal vocabulary or whatever, is to engage in metacommunicative discourse on comprehensibility. The following passage is a clear warning about just how unreliable and self-contradictory the goddess can be:

- M: If trouble comes to some village, to some priest, to the little chickens in the village, you're not to bother me about it.  
 P: What are we to say? The reason they're asking is so that you, Saami, will tell them what they don't know. What can the children say, what can the elders say?  
 M: Whether you're attacked by witchcraft or with a rifle or with a bow and arrow, I'm here to supply the bandages, *appa*.

It is hard to know how to deal with a goddess who contradicts herself in two consecutive utterances like this. Worshipers respond with contradictory attitudes, now respectful, now derisive. It will already be apparent that the tone of exchanges between humans and deities ranges from that of a bitter argument to that of a formal compromise, and from that of social proximity to formal social distance.

There are astoundingly few accounts of verbal interaction between mediums and bystanders in South Asia, and those we have tell us about the style of exchange only in vague terms. Gell tells us that Muria mediums become calm between bouts of violent dancing, and may be questioned, but that 'these question-and-answer sessions are lacking in symbolic and mythopoeic elements and revolve around the technicalities of Man/God relations (sacrifices, offerings, etc.). They are conducted in a frequently acrimonious fashion, not unlike that seen in mundane commercial or exchange transactions' (Gell 1980: 235). The acrimony and commercial idiom are similar to the tone and idiom of Irula séances (the reader will remember from the previous chapter the man shouting at a fellow worshipper, 'you can pester her (the goddess) as much as you like ... We've paid tax to our deity' [3.10.1] Since we are not provided with any of the text of the discussions which Gell witnessed, we are

in no position to judge what he means by an absence of symbolic and mythopoeic elements.<sup>1</sup> Certainly, an absence of these would be in striking contrast to Irula séances; but it is hard to imagine how the deity's conversation and the metaphors involved in possession could be anything other than 'symbolic and mythopoeic.' The 'acrimonious fashion' and market-place idiom in which Murias talk to their deities are both in evidence in Irula séances. Evans-Pritchard was likewise 'astonished' by the 'downright way' in which Nuer haggled with spirits, and was most insistent that they would not address *kwoth* - Spirit at the highest level - in this way (1956: 283). But if we acknowledge the *creativity* of forms of address, we note his circular reasoning here - as soon as they address a spirit in this way, it no longer *kwoth*. There is a wide range of forms of addressing and approaching Hindu deities, and these create and maintain contrastable deities; but to attempt a similar separation of Irula spiritual entities would be to rob the séances of the ambiguity which is essential to the character of divine-human relations.

In analysing the style of the séance, we are faced with a major puzzle - namely the odd combination of formal deference and familiar disrespect shown by humans to their deity. This often seems to operate like a see-saw; when people flatter the deity, the deity responds with derision:

MC: You just wait till next year, I'll really open your eyes then. I don't care if I have to spend a thousand rupees.

M: Bring your piles of offerings, bring lorry-loads, I don't give a damn whether you do or not.

But if the goddess bombastically vaunts her own prowess, there will sooner or later be a deflating response:

M: *I'm* the thousand-eyed goddess, *I'm* the one in charge of a thousand districts, *I'll* cut the wrongdoer to ribbons.

MC: Well, if you don't, there'll be no-one following you, we'll just tell you to bugger off!

This kind of remark is rife throughout all discussions with the deity, despite the frequent formal prostrations and confessions - 'Lord, I have sinned' (*saami*,

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<sup>1</sup>It is odd that Elwin, who does provide us with transcripts of Saora séances, nevertheless emphasises the supreme importance of material objects used in worship 'where people are so inarticulate, where there is no written deposit of doctrine for our study, where many customs and traditions have come down from antiquity with their meaning forgotten' (1955: 172). The language of gods and spirits is evidently central to their daily lives, and where he quotes passages of their séances they seem far from inarticulate; the fact that Elwin can deny its importance is indicative of the degree to which informal spoken ritual can be unfairly devalued in analysis.

*tappu*). Prostration, the kinesic display of deference, is quite sincere despite the fact that, as we will see, much of the verbal deference is undermined by irony.

Brown and Levinson have noted the universally spectacular products - linguistic and kinesic - of the desire to show deference, which in all cultures produces enactments of linguistic and bodily incompetence (Brown and Levinson 1987 [1978]: 185-6). The enactment, which might be called a display of unlearning - 'falling' in worship, 'crawling' to high officials, and so on - is itself a vital form of cultural competence. Kinesically, deference may also be formalised into a slow, controlled prostration; as we saw earlier, the dislocated deity-dance - which could well be interpreted as a less formal demonstration of deference towards deity - is performed by the (usually) male medium and often by several women. Throughout India, as elsewhere, dramatic displays of bodily dissociation and talking in tongues are a form of worship. We saw earlier that all offerings are expected to be possessed or inhabited by the deity at the moment of being offered; and this is why people prostrate themselves to all offerings, including the possessed medium. But showing deference to a deity is an act of offering; despite the apparent social distance indicated by deference, we must acknowledge that *the worshipper becomes divine in the act of worshipping*. The possessed medium is more clearly divinised than other worshippers of course, and for that reason he is prostrated to.

Such deference as is shown is grand and formal, and there is a notable lack of any display of child-like deference in Irula worship; an important message of the séances seems to be the assertion of an ability to compete linguistically with the deity on equal terms. Even if this assertion is formally denied by prostrations and formal phrases like 'what power have we got compared with you? We've just got the two eyes, you're the thousand-eyed goddess,' I can only assure the reader that behind such statements there always lurks the threat of subversive irony. As we saw earlier, thousand-eyed though the goddess may be, she is not immune to being blindfolded; and though worshippers announce their intention to 'open the goddess's eyes,' in practice they seem to put more effort into pulling fast ones behind her back - that is, making fun of her and getting away with it, like wicked children at school.

The use of euphemistic flattery as a mode of addressing dangerous deities has often been noted in India - Babb, for instance, observes this aspect of the name given to the smallpox goddess - Shitla, which means 'the cool one' (Babb 1975). There is

an obvious irony in calling a 'hot,' disease-bringing deity 'cool,' but we would need to observe context and tone if we were to assess whether this name was used as an ironic insult; equally plausibly, we could describe this name as a *performative euphemism*,<sup>1</sup> expressing a desire that she remain cool - a hope that will always be contradicted by the reality of disease victims, who need to be 'cooled down.' Malevolent deities may be addressed sweetly in euphemistic politeness, much in the manner that a political opponent or dictatorial landlord may be addressed using kin terms in the hope that they will behave appropriately. Of course, euphemistic talk is often heavily tinged with irony; among Saoras, 'in dealing with the gods, one must apply flattery with a trowel,' but when Elwin quotes a Saora prayer: 'We salute you; we touch your feet, we eat your excreta' (1955: 463), we can surely detect an undermining irony. Similarly if less colourfully, when a despised politician from the opposing party is referred to in the House of Commons as 'the honourable gentleman,' we can be quite sure that the speaker holds out little hope that this mode of address will result in the addressee behaving honourably. In other words, if the *face-value of an epithet or mode of address is overtly inflated or inappropriate, the perlocutionary force is an ironic undermining of the locution*. If we drew a continuum from the optimism of a performative euphemism to the pessimism of euphemistic irony, then we could place the euphemisms used to address the goddess in India along the whole range of this continuum.

If we can say, then, that the deity's character is in part constructed by mode of address, we should always beware of drawing over-hasty conclusions about beloved 'mother' goddesses. Tapper draws an analogy between the way in which, in Andhra Pradesh, the suffix *-amma* ('Mother') is used manipulatively among males when making requests which are both pleading and affectionate, and its similar usage in addressing the goddess. The mother-child relationship is alluded to in the hope that this perlocution will move the addressee to motherliness:

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<sup>1</sup>The Greeks likewise called the notoriously dangerous Black Sea the Euxine - 'Hospitable One' - and addressed the Furies as Euminides - 'Good-humoured Ladies.' The notion of performative euphemism might also help us understand the erstwhile use of the familiar pronoun 'Thou' to address God (for the Christian a surely distant and awe-inspiring being) in English prayers. The use of a familiar pronoun with a capital T indicates the ambiguity of the address; paradoxically, now that 'thou' is no longer a familiar pronoun in English and is only used in ecclesiastical contexts, it has more of an air of formality and distance to it than 'you'; it comes as no surprise, then, that modern populist Christian movements try to replace this with 'you' and with a chatty tone of address.

It is with this manipulative sense in mind that we should interpret the use of the ending *-amma* in the names of disease-causing village deities. While a *grama devata* is explicitly referred to as a mother, her motherly qualities are not always readily apparent. Rather, such qualities are wishfully hoped for. The use of *amma* to address a *grama devata* is, in fact, a kind of euphemism, a form of manipulative understatement. (1979: 18)

As I have said, Irulas do not characterise the goddess as 'motherly' in any straightforward way; and just as Irulas call the goddess *taay* (Tamil: 'Mother') or *amma* (Tamil: 'Mother') but never *ōggwe* (Irula: 'Mother'), so too the standard Tamil suffix is only equivocally suggestive of motherliness - the masculinised suffix *-ammaṅ*<sup>1</sup> being used rather than the feminine *-ammaa(L)*. Similarly, any flattery that goes on is only one side of a coin, the other side being unrestricted ridicule, using language which no-one would ever think of addressing their real mother with.

So what does the jocular, even abusive style of séances tell us about how Irulas characterise their deities? It is clear that the deity is someone who is close enough to people to share a joke with them, and on equal enough terms to be poked fun at. Compared with this, the humility which people demonstrate before deities in other Hindu contexts, the peripheral, non-speaking possession that is common in village festivals, may be interpreted as metaphoric self-abasement before a deity. This kind of peripheral possession is virtually absent at Irula séances (except occasionally and briefly, almost always by women); instead, Irulas compete with the deity on equal terms, and are concerned to demonstrate linguistic competence rather than the kind of bumbings that would be expected of inferiors.

There is, of course, a vital ambivalence in acts of jocular irreverence: to test someone out with a bit of cheek is to force that person either to cross the threshold into the in-group or stay with the out-group, those who can't be joked with. To insult can be a form of friendliness; as Brown and Levinson put it,

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<sup>1</sup>Incidentally, in the Irula language *ammā* means 'father' and *amma* means 'boy' or 'bloke.' Dumont likewise recognises that the goddess is not unequivocally honoured as a 'mother,' but still insists that the term *maariyammaN* (his transcription fails to distinguish retroflex /N/ from /ṅ/) 'is very like *ammaa(L)* which in kinship terminology designates, among others, the mother,' as well as to women and girls in general (1970 [1953]: 23-4). This misses the crucial point that however similar the term might be, it is nevertheless *opposed* to the ordinary female version, since it is masculinised by the added *ṅ*. In this regard, Ramanujan has helpfully pointed out that the goddess in South Indian myth is denied the status of ordinary motherhood in whatever form she takes (1986: 57).



a speaker can minimize the face-threatening aspects of an act by assuring the addressee that [the speaker] considers himself to be 'of the same kind,' that he likes him and wants his wants. Thus a criticism, with the assertion of mutual friendship, may lose much of its sting - indeed, in the assumption of a friendly context it often becomes a game (1987 [1978]: 71-2)

We have seen how the euphemistic flattery paradoxically insults the deity with its ironic hyperbole; but we can also invert this and say that the ritual invective of Irula séances paradoxically flatters the deity by portraying her as an in-group member. This is reinforced by the fact that honorifics are never used between deities and humans, yet are consistently used in conversation between members of the opposite moiety. Srinivas (1976: 322) makes a similar point when he says that in Karnataka, devotees angry with deities would think nothing of cursing; Siva is sometimes addressed as '*makkaLu tindukondavane*' - 'you killer of children' [sic: it literally means 'killer and eater of children'], Rama as 'you who lost your wife.' Approaching deity through opposition is institutionalised, and is called '*virodha bhakti*' - it is 'regarded as a closer relationship than that of love.' However, he goes on to say that this is rare: 'While most devotees chose the path of love and adoration, a few, very few, chose the path of opposition' (*ibid*: 322). As he presents it here, devotees have to choose one or the other. But if we draw on this analogy of friendship and enmity between humans, we surely can acknowledge the possibility of a relationship, even the same encounter, involving both. Actually, he acknowledges the coexistence of friendship with and a kind of opposition to a deity at the end of the chapter:

Abusing and taunting one's favourite deity was again understandable because it was common among people bound together by close ties and interests such as relatives, friends, masters and servants, and patrons and clients. A man who did not give a thing when he was asked might part with it when he was taunted, and taunting implied the pre-existence of close ties. The villagers' relations with deities paralleled in some ways their relations with patrons. (*ibid*: 328)

The dominant Irula mode of addressing deities is, I am suggesting, a mode which puts the divine addressee firmly in the familiar we-group at the same time as subverting the normal superiority of the deity by using irony, rhetoric, and the deliberate manipulation of ambiguity. In religious dialogue it is generally deities (or mediums who speak for them) and religious leaders who are allowed to use the ambiguous and abstruse language of parables; devotees and disciples are not expected to reciprocate in a style other than the straightforward confession of faith. In Irula séances, the deity uses complex metaphors whose meaning the hearer has to work out; this would be consistent with an assumption that the deity is superior to, more powerful than, the worshippers. But this is subverted by the almost

continual use of heavy irony on the part of those addressing the deity; people are constantly trying to outmanipulate the deity in the game of forcing implicatures. This implies that it is in fact humans that are more powerful, for they can get away with using irony.

In terms of Brown and Levinson's theory of the performance of 'face-threatening acts,' we can see the act of getting possessed as a linguistic strategy which allows the medium to publicly criticise the headman or anyone else in the village while at the same time saving face by making the goddess do the criticising. Since mediumship is not a hereditary role, and since it is usually not the priest-headman who acts as medium, the *séance* is itself potentially a subversive act. Should anyone want to make public criticisms without seeming to do so, this is obviously the way to do it. I have seen occasions when people became possessed as a political manoeuvre; but when this is done too blatantly, either the *séance* will simply be stopped, or its content will be dismissed as 'lies' (*poyyi jaaya*) - as, for instance, when an Irula man used the local goddess festival on the tea estate as an opportunity to demand higher wages.

It is important to note that joking during the rite is not simply there as a prelude to a return to seriousness and humility. Often, the goddess may be sent on her way with a parting insult. On one occasion, the medium ended a *séance* with the grandiose statement: 'I must go and join all my people.' and this was responded to with merciless derision: 'Yes, it's about time too. We humans are all bored stiff.' Someone else joined in with a comment on how little had been achieved by the *séance*:

MS: 'Just put up with whatever storm comes your way,' that's all they said; what big rules they talked about, what a shit-awful *séance*.

The medium was comatose by that stage, and evidently beyond giving any more responses. All the priest could do was try to have the last word by saying

P: Saami, if you've any other grudges, then say so, otherwise get up, what's the point in boring us with the same old stuff?

Eager though I am to offset the portrayal of reverential worship with a contrary emphasis on subversion, I do not want to portray Irulas as non-reverential. What the irreverence does is to add depth to, or balance, the reverence they definitely feel towards their deity. Bakhtin has shown how ambivalence is the keynote of the

festive idiom of European medieval billingsgate<sup>1</sup>, in which ‘praise and abuse are, so to speak, the two sides of the same coin. ...The praise ...is ironic and ambivalent. It is on the brink of abuse; the one leads to the other, and it is impossible to draw the line between them’ (1968 [1965]: 165)’. While this is not an idiom of expression that is common in the worship of upper castes and at major Hindu temples, it dominates the Irula festival. And the words Bakhtin uses to describe the billingsgate idiom could well have been written about the idiom of the Irula festival:

it is based on the conception of the world as eternally unfinished: a world dying and being born at the same time, possessing as it were two bodies. The dual image combining praise and abuse seeks to grasp the very moment of this change, the transfer from the old to the new, from death to life. Such an image crowns and uncrowns at the same moment. (1968 [1965]: 166)

### 3.11.2. Iconoclastic language

The term ‘iconoclastic’ conjures up images of revolutionary rhetoric and countercultural antagonism; nevertheless the word can profitably be used as a hyperbolic metaphor to describe the more subtle subversion that runs through Irula festival séances. Iconoclasm means ‘icon-breaking’; icons are illusions - symbols which stand for something else - and if the subversive irony, the exaggerated flattery, and the outright obscenities hurled at the deity do not actually smash the illusions that are created by reverential worship, they certainly remind participants of the value of questioning the icons they worship. That is to say, if the formal shell of the festival as a whole and the formal flattery of the séance build up a picture of powerful, venerated deities, the irreverence that permeates the séance undermines this reverence. For example, while a major festival event is the veneration of the deity with a blood offering, the deity’s non-vegetarian diet may nevertheless be used as ammunition for goddess-baiting:

P: There’s a good girl, make lots of revelations in front of everyone.

MC: Otherwise you won’t be biting into any chicken-throats next year!

But we draw only half of the picture if we only show humans insulting the deity. Crucially, the insults are reciprocal, and just as people destroy illusions of grandeur that may have been built up around the deity, so the deity ridicules human pretence at reverential worship:

M: How many years have you been telling me lies like that? What’s this? Only when someone’s cow stops producing milk, only then do you come with

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<sup>1</sup>The term is derived from the notorious invective of the fish-sellers at Billingsgate market in London.

your coconuts and your bananas. Bastard! And if one of your goats goes missing tomorrow you'll come with your coin and your milk, and it'll be only because of your goat, and you won't even prostrate seven times, you asshole.

Iconoclasm is nowhere more apparent than in the scatological language used by both medium and others, which is the antithesis of the kind of reverential language one would expect in, say, a Christian Church or a major Hindu temple. It is even true to say that the profanities uttered are so obscene that they may only be uttered in a sacred context.

No anthropologist brought up on a diet of ritual inversion will find anything surprising in this. In place of the more usual ritual inversion of the secular moral order, what we have here is a ritualistic profanation of a sacred object. What Firth has to say about desecration of the national flag also holds good for this linguistic desecration of the deity: 'The sacred representation is not just contaminated by careless contact with non-sacred things; it is actively treated in symbolic fashion as a counter-instrument to what it represents' (Firth 1973: 366). If the deity of the formal rite is a distant, infinitely superior being, this image is ritualistically smashed by the invective of the séance. It is significant that the scatological language in which this is done typically involves images which invert or distort normal bodily processes:

- M: Did you come here just to have a shit? Why are you asking for health when you've shoved shit up your own arse?
- MC: That's not true. I'll eat shit, then, I haven't behaved like you said, I stopped that behaviour last year, this year there's nothing for you to bother about. This is between last year's medium (*jaayakā:rā*) and me. Are you now going to bring up what last year's medium said?
- M: Last year's medium eats a whole lot of shit, are you going to carry on like him? Did you both come here with magic potions shoved up your arses?
- MC: What have we shoved up our arses? You tell us why we needed to shove potions up our arses?

We can observe two arguments here. One is a metacommunicative commentary on the unreliability of bargains struck through different mediums at different festivals. The other concerns the reverence or irreverence of worship - the phrase, 'did you come here just to have a shit?' (which I heard similarly used on several occasions), even the act of worship itself, the sacred food-giving act of *puuja*, is inverted and re-presented as excretion. (We saw earlier how disrespect itself is referred to in a metaphor of bodily inversion: when the goddess complains about the disrespect people are showing her she says 'now everyone in the district is vomiting in my mouth'.) Here, the reference to the normal everyday practice of defecating in the

forest serves not just to cast doubt on the reverence of worship but to subvert the sacredness of the forest itself, reminding participants that the forest is not just the venue for worship but also the venue for profane and unclean behaviour.

I will finish my discussion of iconoclastic language by quoting an utterance which combines the inversion of scatology with the confusion of multivocality: the goddess quotes the thoughts of one of the worshippers who has come to the temple:

M: You have come saying 'oh, I suppose I'd better go and give something to the woman who gave birth to me, who shat me out.'

It has become very fashionable in postmodern anthropology, as it has in the postmodern novel, to play around with multivocality, to use so many 'voices' that the audience is left quite unsure who is the author of statements and whether those statements should be trusted. Irula séances likewise rely on the ambiguities of many voices talking at the same time, and it would be quite wrong to say that it was unambiguously either the goddess, the medium, or the worshipper, who is being earthy and rude here. I don't want to gloat over these phrases as scatological trophies, but it is hard to resist pointing out that this particular image of cloacal maternity - *the woman who ...shat me out* - would doubtless raise an eyebrow or two among the psychoanalytically-minded. Freud did, after all, assume a universal association of faeces and death, but not of faeces and birth<sup>1</sup>. In fact, just as a cacophony of voices is jumbled together in any one utterance in the séance, so any one statement is likely to subsume a plurality of often contradictory images and ideas - frivolity and seriousness, play and worship, irreverence and respect or, here, birth and death.

I do feel justified in calling the language of the séance 'iconoclastic,' but this should not be taken to mean that we can say straightforwardly which icons, ideas, or illusions are being desecrated; this last example shows, if the reader will bear with me, the medium impersonating the goddess impersonating the worshipper desecrating the goddess with disrespectful thoughts. It seems apt to quote here a passage from Needham's *Belief, Language, and Experience*, which vividly portrays the difficulties encountered in trying to relate the language of religion to the experience of the believer:

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<sup>1</sup>Birth is more obviously suggestive of defecation, although the smell of faeces perhaps automatically suggests death and decay.

There is a type of problem so extreme in character that to work on it is accompanied, as Wittgenstein remarked, by 'a slight dizziness' ...and Waismann has also reported that anyone who broods on such a matter 'will soon be overcome by a kind of giddiness...as though a bottomless abyss opened before him.' ...Something of this vertiginous affliction is probably inseparable from any serious attempt to think radically about the connections between language and experience. (Needham 1972: 11)

No doubt, the dizziness of trance expresses a similar response to attempts to simultaneously bring to life, haggle with, and make sense of, the plethora of ideas associated with divinity. And this dizziness is catching; even when separated from the trance-event by gulfs of time and distance, it is quite impossible to reduce the ideas of the séance to clinically separable components. Difficult though all this may seem, there are some simple points which we can extract from the apparent confusion. The overall message coming from the iconoclastic language is straightforward: 'Things may be other than they seem.' The voice you think is that of the goddess may be that of some other malignant spirit or that of the medium or even your own thoughts quoted back at you. The fearsome deity you came to flatter is, after all, someone you can joke with and even insult. The point is not that there is no respect and no sense in the séance, but that there is so much iconoclasm going on that the worshipper is able to select meaning at will from a miasma of alternatives. There is, as in a good pantomime [see 4.1], something here for everyone.

### 3.11.3. Ambiguity and contradiction

In an influential article on ritual language, Tambiah made the broad statement that 'in ritual, language appears to be used in ways that violate the communication function' (1968: 179). In itself, this is incontestable; what might be added, though, is that a scrutiny of almost any everyday utterance will reveal that in some respects it flouts conversational maxims insofar as it does not convey meaning as economically and unambiguously as possible. Austin, who provided the main source of inspiration for Tambiah's analysis of ritual language, has himself been criticised by Bauman for his 'failure ...to recognise that the notion of strictly referential, "literal" meaning has little, if any, relevance to the use of spoken language in social life' (1984 [1977]: 50).

There are degrees of elaboration and obscurity, though, and in the Irula séance, the language, while never disintegrating into the paralinguistic babble that we associate with 'talking in tongues,' comes fairly close to the logical limits of anti-communication. Later I will be discussing a variety of ways in which it does so -

its vagueness, elaboration and *ad hoc* use of metaphor. I turn now to the exploitation of various ambiguities, aspects of séance language which violate the communication function by casting doubt on the identities of speaker and hearer and on the relations between them.

The séance dialogue would be of little interest to the analyst or, as I suggested earlier, to the participant, were it not full of puzzling ambiguities and thought-provoking contradictions in the presentation of the character of the divine. We have seen that Irula rites are riddled with ambiguities of various sorts - the gender ambiguity of the priest's assistant's attire, the human-animal ambiguity of the priest himself and the medium, the ambiguity of the visual symbols, the distance-proximity ambiguities of the deity, the symmetrical-asymmetrical ambiguities of divine-human relations, and the public-private ambiguities of the séance.

As we saw earlier, the deity is precisely *not* a single coherent person, but a multiplicity of metaphors or, to use the language of postmodern literature, a multiplicity of *voices*. These voices are ambiguous and often mutually contradictory; this makes the analysis of the séance in terms of discourse strategies very complex indeed, since to do this requires an assessment of the identities of both the speaker and the addressee. In a séance the identities of both are ambiguous: when the medium speaks, the speaker may be interpreted as the man playing the part of the spirit-medium (and this is often alluded to by Irulas themselves), and may also be the main deity, a spirit, ancestors, or any of these speaking for or even imitating the others; the addressee may be any of the above posited spiritual beings, or an individual 'client,' or the assembled multitude. When the priest addresses a spiritual being, then the addressee may be the medium, the spiritual being, and the assembled multitude. It is not accurate to say that those present are simply witnesses of the speech act, since they are both witnesses and addressees simultaneously.

The divine or human identity of the medium is never unambiguously established; as we saw earlier, the pretend trance of the drunkards is an essential component in the construction of the reality of divinely-inspired trance. I also claimed that since 'metaphors leak,' the deity becomes 'tainted with the metaphor of inebriation' [2.4.6]. Likewise, if the parody of possession by the drunkards is obviously play-acting, then although this may help to construct the 'reality' or 'legitimacy' of the

divine possession of the medium, it also reminds participants that this, too, may be suspect.

Drunkards in particular, but many sober members of the audience too, also enjoy doing linguistic parodies of divine speech. The deity's voice is mimicked, and her stereotyped phrases are pre-emptively anticipated. Again, it is an open question whether it is the deity or the medium who is being parodied - and of course the answer is that both are parodied. Throughout the séances, there are frequent reassertions that either the goddess may be telling lies, or the medium may be speaking his own thoughts rather than divinely inspired words. To these ambiguities we must add the fact that the *javaap kō:kkavā* - the asker - may use the first person when speaking for someone else, and the deity will also use the first person to 'quote' the thoughts of the person asking via the *javaap kō:kkavā*. That is to say, the normal form of indirect speech - the quotative particles *nDu* or *nDuTTu* followed by a verb of saying, speaking, asking, and so on - is omitted.

Considered as a game, the séance consists in the competitive manipulation of ambiguous identity - it is always an open question who is being addressed and who is speaking. The elusiveness of the deity's identity comes not just from the multiplicity of voices that come from the medium, but also from the multiplicity of voices in which the spirit world is addressed.

As in all poetry (Empson 1930), the language of ritual thrives on ambiguity, and it is perhaps the ambiguities of ritual language that make it, in Tambiah's phrase, 'violate the communication function.' Until recent years anthropological writing, like linguistics before the advent of pragmatics, consistently failed to give due cognizance to the social role of ambiguity. Most notable in this regard is Turner's analysis of symbols as if they were 'parsimonious' devices to contain as much meaning as possible - 'a symbol is always the best possible expression of a relatively unknown fact' (1967: 26). Sperber (1975: 16) has criticised this 'cryptological' view of symbolism, and Strecker points out that Turner-style analysis studies signs rather than symbols. In such a view, ambiguity of meaning is assumed to be undesirable, and in Turner's analysis 'people are always separated from the meaning of the symbols which they are using, and they are forever longing for the revelation which would terminate the separation. People are thus not the masters but the slaves of their symbols' (Strecker 1988: 24). Or, one might add, they implicitly depend on an indigenous semiotic expert like Muchona the



Hornet who will decode their own symbols for them. Similarly, Douglas makes insufficiently qualified claims for the human antagonism towards ambiguity; in spoken language, she claims,

Expressions which are ambiguous or which deviate from the norm are less effective in communication, and speakers experience a direct feedback encouraging conformity. Language has more loosely and more strictly patterned domains in which ambiguity has either more or less serious repercussions on effective communication. Thus there are certain domains in which ambiguity can be better tolerated than in others. (Douglas 1975: 52)

Without her vague disclaimer, the first part of this claim would be preposterous, denying as it does a communicative role to the conscious or unconscious exploitation of ambiguity - a phenomenon which can be detected to some extent in virtually every utterance. Douglas proceeds on the assumption that ambiguity is something universally disapproved of unless exceptional circumstances dictate otherwise, and that the avoidance of ambiguity operates not only in language, but also 'at the higher level of cultural structure' (*ibid.*: 53).

By contrast, Irula séances push the power of speech to the limits of its capabilities and even beyond - into the unknown territory where nonsense and innovation merge. Participants celebrate the powers and the enjoyment of speech by exaggerating its formal properties - psittacistic repetition, echo-words, elaborate metaphors, and so on. But this is more than satisfied celebration: there is also considerable experimentation in the potentialities of speech. Like academic discourse, it has a tendency to collapse into meaninglessness as it approaches the limits of communicability and comprehensibility. The animal noises between each verse serve both as a contrast to highlight the essentially human ability to reach new meaning via metaphor, and as welcome breaks from the taxing process of metaphorisation. In other words, the optimistic and ambitious attempts at metaphoric innovation in the 'verses' are countered by the pessimism of the grunts and bellows of the interludes.

It would not be extravagant to suggest that these animal noises perform a metacommunicative function: they actually poke fun at the metaphoric utterances, as if to say, 'what a load of rubbish you've been listening to! It would be just as meaningful if I were to growl and grunt at you.' If the 'verses' are reminiscent of Surrealism and the Theatre of the Absurd, where considerable amounts of meaning emerge from the superficial attacks on meaning, the interludes could be likened to

the ironic excesses of Abstract Expressionism, where the main message to emerge is the metacommunicative attack on meaning in art.

Perhaps the most important lesson I learned during many months of trying to extract exegesis of séance discussions from Irulas was that for the most part, the idea of *post hoc* interpretation seemed pointless to them. They were certainly keen to help me acquire a feel for the kind of topic that might be discussed with deities, but an abstruse metaphor was not something that could be explained in other terms; it was to be interpreted *ad hoc* or not at all. This was not the reluctance of a magician to divulge the secrets of his trade, but the reluctance of the poet to critically assess his own poems. Poems are, after all, transcendent and inspired; they are therefore so much more than the sum of their parts that to try and break them down to constituents is pointless. As Frye puts it, 'a poet's intention ...is directed towards putting words together, not towards aligning words with meanings. ...What the poet meant to say, then, is, literally, the poem itself' (1957: 86-7).

#### 3.11.4. Banality: script and improvisation

Indeed, *ad hoc* inventiveness is the hallmark of a good séance, and this emphasis on improvisation is important; it leads me to a critique of the assumption which is often made about the *repetitiveness* of ritual - the assumption, that is, that rites follow a model set down by tradition and are not meant to deviate from this model. This kind of assumption is exemplified by Eliade's *The Myth of Eternal Return*:

all religious acts are held to have been founded by gods, civilizing heroes, or mythical ancestors. It may be mentioned in passing that, among primitives, not only do rituals have their mythical model but any human act whatever acquires effectiveness to the extent to which it exactly *repeats* an act performed at the beginning of time by a god, a hero, or an ancestor. (1954 [1949]: 22)

Tambiah's discussion of ritual language likewise assumes archaism to be the hallmark of ritual language:

as long as religion both in literate or pre-literate societies harks back to a period of revelation and insists on the authority of properly transmitted true texts either orally or in written form, its sacred language will contain an archaic component, whether this is represented by a totally different language or older elements of the same language. (Tambiah 1968: 182)

For Bloch, formalised language, if not the dead language of dead eras, is certainly 'arthritic' - and 'if communication in religion begins at the same point where communication of traditional authority ends, religion carries on the process of

formalisation and all it implies very much further' (1974: 54, 65). Parkin has responded to this polemical view with the suggestion that 'it is the *idea* of fixity rather than its practice that most typifies oratory among most peoples. ...There is often a *belief* by a people that a form of oratory is formalized and predictable. ...We are dealing with the *appearance*, say for ceremonial purposes, of such oratory' (1984: 351) - an interpretation which could be applied to much of the ritualism of Irula festivals, as we have seen. Similar claims have often been made of play or recreation - just as children's play is often aimed at the *re-creation* of the observed behaviour of adults, so too is much of ritual aimed at re-creating time and the putative behaviour of the ancestors, at the same time as re-creating order through temporary sallies into the world of chaos. The acting out of a rite is the re-creation, or repetition, of a familiar script; it is not surprising, then, that repetition occurs within the rite itself, as within songs and children's play. Repetition is action which is rewarding in itself, just as the repetition of the seasons, the phases of the moon, etc, are sources of pleasure and occasions for celebration in most societies of the world.

Certainly repetition occurs within and between Irula festivals - as we saw, there is earnest discussion throughout the day about the correct way of doing things, and this indicates a preference for, or at least an outer shell of, formal ritualism. Participants talk as if they are trying to exactly re-enact previous rites - as if, for example, the date of the festival were cosmically fixed for all eternity when in fact it tends to happen in a remarkably *ad hoc* manner. Within the séance, too, there is repetition, and many of the utterances are virtually *verbatim* repetitions of divine utterances from previous séances.

However, the point I want to stress is that *the medium who adheres too obviously to a repetitive script will be ridiculed* - and this implies that improvisation within the séance operates as a counter-tendency to the overall repetitiousness of the festival. For example, one of the favourite games of bystanders, particularly the drunkards, is to poke fun at the scripted, formulaic utterances of the medium by parodying them and often deflating divine bombast by anticipating utterances with uncanny accuracy. On one occasion, the deity's empty promises about looking after people by returning their offerings in double measure were parodied in the following way:

M: Come to this place a week today, child, come and pour a pot of water, and...

MS: Yes, 'and if I don't look after you perfectly, if I don't give you *half* as much as you give me, if I don't return at least *one* rupee for every *two* you give me, then I'm not the product of my father's penis.'

While on the one hand this is part of the general mockery of the deity it has a metacommunicative function too, in that it appears to poke fun not just at the goddess but at the triteness of the séance itself. For example, the goddess often opens a discussion with a vague feeler aimed at finding out who wants to be the next client. She will say something like

M: Am I going to go on suffering pain in my chest? Will it continue or won't it? That's what some child has been asking, *appa*, true or false?

To which an ironic response might be

MS: Hm! I wonder who that might be? Oh yes, I've been thinking along those lines, but I'm not quite sure if I'm the one who's meant.

Or an angry, sarcastic response would be

MS: Come off it! Everyone in the world's got problems like that. Would we bother coming here if we didn't? It's up to you to grab the person you mean.

It is precisely this kind of ridiculing of scripted or mechanical, non-adaptable behaviour that forms the basis of Bergson's famous theory of laughter: 'The laughable element ...consists of a certain *mechanical inelasticity*, just where one would expect to find the wideawake adaptability and the living pliability of a human being' (1980 [1900]: 67). The essence of the comic is that it points to '*something mechanical encrusted on the living*' (*ibid*: 84, emphasis in original); throughout his essay, he emphasises the opposition of 'life' or 'elasticity' as opposed to 'mechanics' or 'inelasticity.' 'The originality of a comic artist is ...expressed in the special kind of life he imparts to a mere puppet' (*ibid*: 80).

Likewise, the deity, or the medium, must not be seen to be a mere puppet of ritualism. The outer shell of the Irula festival emphasises formulaic repetition, and this attends to the need for ordering the group of worshippers into actions which re-enact as precisely as possible the ways of the ancestors; the séance to some extent constitutes an inversion of this preference - divine utterances must be flexible enough to attend to the needs of the individual and of the present unique circumstances:

M: If what I say matches your thoughts just as if you were striking a match and the grass catches fire<sup>1</sup>, what will you give me next year?

The séance is precisely *not* expected to be repetitive and predictable, for its value lies in its power to surprise, in its power to invent new and especially entertaining ways of looking at depressingly familiar problems. Performance is expected to be non-formulaic, so that when formulae become too overt they are exposed to ridicule by sceptical observers. I am not qualified to discuss in detail the psychosomatic or sociosomatic healing processes involved, but I have a strong hunch that those who come to be healed need a diagnosis that is *both* predictable *and* unpredictable. The goddess should provide a diagnosis of the patient's illness, and this should link the illness within a familiar framework of causes which have, in the past, caused other people trouble and have proved curable by ritual or magical means. But I have emphasised that Irula society is in practice loosely structured and person-centred, with the person more significant than the role; in such a society, the individual can't be cured by any purely repetitious formula, there must be uncertainty and unpredictability in the diagnosis and in the prescriptions for recovery.

The selection of 'patients' is not predictable either. In the Irula séance there is no queue of patients who are dealt with one by one in formulaic manner; many of the patients are simply bystanders who haven't acknowledged that they came to be healed. The medium must first single out an individual (or occasionally a couple), either physically singling him out from the crowd or saying something which 'matches' (*pattugudu*) his thoughts; the diagnosis must include elements which are unique to that individual's experience and match his private thoughts. The process of diagnosis and cure prescription is one of negotiation between the spirit world and the patient and, to a variable extent, the other bystanders who volunteer their opinions too.

In Irula séances, part of the message is in the wilful obscurantism of the parables and metaphors; but there is also the contradictory allusion to the sheer banality of the discussions, the predictability of what the medium is about to say next - here the Irulas seem to be saying something remarkably close to Sperber's point, that 'if symbols mean, what they mean is almost always banal' (1975: 6). In the outer shell of the festival there is at the jural level, and even at the level of explicit *preference*, a strong emphasis on formality and scripted ritualism, even to the extent

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<sup>1</sup>There is a pun here on the verb *pattu*, which means both 'to match' (as in thoughts matching what the medium says) and to catch fire.

of denying a place to the *séance* in the formal structure; at the level of *practice*, however, it is informality that is emphasised, even to the extent of poking fun at the use of scripted formulas in the *séance*. The jural formality and preference for group unity and clear role definition go with a formulaic, distant, and respectful approach to divinity; the Irula practices of informality, group fragmentation, and role confusion go hand in hand with an improvised, familiar, and disrespectful or subversive approach.

The important point to note is that the effect of the threat of parody forces the medium from banal theme to improvised variation. To borrow the terms coined by Bernstein to distinguish between off-the-peg and improvised language (1964 [1961]: 252), we could say that the medium is forced into moving from 'highly-coded' to 'now-coding' utterances.<sup>1</sup> Bernstein emphasises the inherent 'passivity' of the speaker of the 'public' language which is characterised by highly-coded utterances (*ibid*: 256), and in my interpretation of the Irula *séance* the movement towards 'now-coding' utterances is a movement away from passivity towards the active engagement of the patient in the process of healing with words.

Themes are banal - common to all - and are not creative or transformative; improvisations are individual and creative. In order to retain credibility as speakers of creative, transformative language, we must not appear to use 'highly-coded' utterances even if that is what we are doing<sup>2</sup>; our *intention* or *meaning* shouldn't be fully formulated in advance of our *performance*. The creativity of performance was recognised long ago by Robertson Smith who asserted that 'it may be affirmed with confidence that in almost every case the myth was derived from the ritual and not the ritual from the myth' (1889). Similarly, Vygotsky tells us that 'a small child draws first, then decides what it is that he has drawn; at a slightly older age, he

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<sup>1</sup> For Bernstein, 'A now-coding utterance is one in which speech is specially and often newly created to fit a particular referent. A highly-coded utterance consists of attaching ready-made terms or phrases as well-organized sequences to designate a referent (e.g., comments about the weather; the opening gambit at a cocktail party). Now-coding utterances are individuated' (1964 [1961]: 252).

<sup>2</sup>It is Bloch's contention that 'in ritualized-formalized language, however, the potential for recombination, the *creativity* of language, is impaired to such an extent that the use of language and indeed all communication in ritual becomes as much a matter of repeating as of creating' (1980: 93-4). This one-sided analysis of formulaic language misses entirely the possibilities that creativity and subversion hide behind ritualistic formulae and that, conversely, what he would call 'arthritic' language masquerades as creative.

names his drawing when it is half-done; and finally he decides beforehand what he will draw' (Vygotsky 1986: 31). I was reminded of this progression from theme to variation when I heard recently of an American senator who, needled by an over-zealous interviewer demanding that he should clarify exactly what he meant, responded angrily by saying, 'how do I know what I mean until I hear what I'm going to say?'<sup>1</sup>

Like Vygotsky's small child and the senator, the Irula medium, encouraged and assisted by participants, constructs meaning as he goes along, without having any clear advance idea of what it will mean. Messages from the world of spirits are therefore constructed in a participatory way, often with the client playing a prominent role. The initial address is very often a simple banality about trouble, sometimes not even disguised in a metaphor:

M: A child has come to ask me about his terrible suffering, *appa*.

MC: (*A bystander evidently keen to be selected as a client*) Yes, that's true.

MS: If we weren't in trouble would we bother asking you?

This may then be metaphorically embellished, though the meaning will remain banal:

M: Where did this thing sprout from, where did the creeper climb, where is this plant? That's what you've been asking, isn't it, child? But, when the creeper climbed, we looked after the entrails, otherwise the tree itself would have died, true or false?

In jazz improvisation, the variations on a theme become all-important, swamping the original banal tune. Repeatedly throughout the performance, however, a familiar tune re-emerges out of a torrent of ragged improvisation, 'grounding' the performance of chaos in a known banality - a banality which is excused by the ironic smile of the performer who returns to a trite melody. Out of improvisation, however, new tunes emerge - one player picks up a short figure which another has chanced on, and through repetition this itself becomes a theme to be improvised on. Similarly, in the Irula séance, an apparently meaningless statement takes on meaning through repetition and discussion; if a phrase is simply chanced on when first uttered, it may acquire obvious meaning through repetition - as we have seen,

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<sup>1</sup> Schechner discusses the importance of observing 'rehearsal procedures' in theater, in everyday life, and in animal behaviour. 'The essential ritual action of theater takes place during rehearsals ...One must fold each work back in on itself, comparing its completed state to the process of inventing it, to its own internal procedures during that time when it was not yet ready for showing. Although all arts have this phase, only performance requires it to be public, that is, acted out among the performers as rehearsal' (1988 [1977]: 179ff).

conversations with the deity inevitably end up imputing meaning to ritual paraphernalia, even though some of these items may have been borrowed in an arbitrary manner from the rites of plainspeople. In this excerpt, the client becomes identified with the temple tree:

M: But if it hadn't been for us, for all of us making the young shoots wither, the tree itself would have died.

MC: Yes, there you are making me wither, and here am I slaving away digging the bloody soil. I've dug this much (gesturing with his arms)

Reisman describes a similar tendency for obscure language in everyday conversation in Antigua to acquire meaning through repetition:

To have something to say that is worth hearing and also repeatable implies that it is fairly short, and as a result, there is a process of condensation and allusion at work all the time. One is expected in many contexts to 'catch' the meaning. And conversely there is a feeling that undue explicitness implies a dull person. (1974: 122)

He describes how the word 'knuckle' came arbitrarily to acquire, for a period of only four months, the meaning of 'adultery.' Words are attributed meaning simply by being picked up and repeated. But like Turner (1969: 15) and Freud (1976 [1900]: 383ff), Reisman emphasises the 'process of condensation' while ignoring the fact that while one isolated word may be said to 'condense' meaning and be, in Turner's terminology, 'parsimonious,' the overall proliferation of such words constitutes the opposite process, *extravagance*: it seems to be a universal phenomenon that people continually strive to make their language more elaborate and inventive than it need be.

One obvious reason is elaboration for the sake of entertainment; where inter-group relations are concerned, however, the elaboration may be intended to reinforce group solidarity in the form of a shared secret code. Burling (1970: 135) describes how most American children at some time learn a linguistic game called 'pig Latin' which is easily learned but is incomprehensible to the uninitiated; similar phonological devices are employed by children all over the world to 'disguise' their own language as a kind of game. All involve adding some sounds systematically to confuse the uninitiated eavesdropper. This may give us some insight into the role of the abnormal language and the general proliferation of metaphors in Irula séances; at least part of the 'meaning' is simply to create for the participants a sense of belonging. Many of the metaphors may be 'meaningless' in that no participants find referents for them; but this very meaninglessness is itself part of the meaning.



### 3.11.5. Private and public meaning

Irulas converse with the spirit pantheon in public. I never witnessed a séance held in private, and although they said it was theoretically possible for someone to arrange for a séance at home, this would in any case be outside the home with any spectators that cared to take part. But by conversing in obscure language, they are able to keep the meaning of a public discussion at least partially private; often, when I asked for an interpretation of the meaning of a particular utterance or discussion, I would be given an acceptable explanation. Sometimes, the gist of the discussion would be plainly understood by everyone present - Raamā's son had been ill and he was to bring a goat to next year's festival as a reward to the goddess for making him recover; Siirā was looking for a wife and wanted a divine endorsement of his plan to look in a particular village; Mā:rā was worried about whether his collusion with sandalwood poachers was going to land him in jail, and so on.

Here is typical opening of a new topic at a séance:

- M: Oh, but someone has gone to their own Mother (*taay*) asking whether it will be sorted out, whether it won't be sorted out, and a child has come with this request, saying 'I have thought of this matter, and if it is sorted out I'll give you such and such a thing that I have in my head'; so saying, that child has prostrated, *appa*, am I right or not?
- P: Who's that?
- MS: Is there any child among you who's been thinking along those lines?
- M: If it's true, say so: if I'm lying, say so.
- MS: You're not just to say 'Yes, yes it's true.'
- MS: Don't say 'yes' just for the sake of peace of mind.
- MC: [to his father's younger brother] This concerns us, VöLLee, we'll only sort it out if we listen to the parable.<sup>1</sup> Whatever the parable is, we must listen to it if we want to sort things out.

Here, the client is self-selected rather than dragged in by the medium; he chooses to make public a private quarrel involving his father's younger brother. In the séance, private matters are cathartically given a public airing, but kept partially private by the use of obscurantism, whispering, and silent communication. A typical séance discussion amounts to a public confessional in code. In Brahmanic Hindu temples, Fuller tells us, temple worship is divided into *pararthapuja* - public worship 'for the well-being of the world' and *arccana* performed by or for an individual for his own benefit (1984: 10). Similarly, the séance has a public aspect (it is beneficial to the collectivity to encourage individuals to pour out their troubles in a ritually controlled context) and a private aspect (a trouble shared is a trouble halved, but like the offering in a Hindu temple, the trouble is only partially shared with the collectivity;

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<sup>1</sup> *televâlee* - 'parable, example, illustration.'

at least partially or metaphorically kept private). Similarly, Claus has noted that in a given case of spirit-possession, there may be both a *private* side - unconscious reaction to stress, illness - and a *public* side - where the patient's illness becomes a matter for public concern, and the whole of society may be in sense blamed for the possession; it should at any rate not be assumed that these are in contradiction to one another (1984: 70).

In June 1988, Jaayaraamā and Paalā, two comparatively well-off and influential Biliyuur men, persuaded most of the villagers to accompany them to Vaagapanai to offer two goats to the goddess - five hours' walk over rugged forested hillsides. Neither man would disclose the nature of the vow-requests they'd made to the goddess, in fulfilment of which they'd brought the goats to the goddess; they also said they were told in dreams, rather than at public séances, to bring goats to the goddess in return for the requested favours. This was, then, a major public celebration of two people's success or recovery, but nobody else knew what was really being celebrated.

In cases like this, the reason for not making public the reason for thanksgiving was said to be modesty: 'You mustn't go around saying "Look how well I'm doing".' Another good reason for not making your thoughts entirely public is that you may suspect somebody of sorcery - and that that somebody might well be at the festival. Even the various terms for sorcery are often replaced by the euphemistic verb *see* - 'do' or the noun *veele* - 'work, job':

M: Is this somebody's 'doing'? Or isn't it? Has somebody done it on purpose? These thoughts have been running through your worried mind today, child.<sup>1</sup>

In many dialogues between a client and the deity, although the gist of the meaning is available to the public, the idiom is that of a private conversation in code:

M: Before you'd even put the stone in the catapult, I made the little bird over there fall, before your very eyes, did I or didn't I make the bird fall, child? Did I or didn't I?

MC: Yes, you made it fall.

M: Before you even put the stone in the catapult, I brought down the birds that were eating his berries.

MC: Yes, but not for a year now.

M: I looked after you and felled it.

MC: And (what's happened to) the catapult in the last year? It snapped.

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<sup>1</sup> *idu seedadaa? seeyaaTTa'vaa? oruTTā seedudā vuTTukkā:naa?* - lit: 'Was this done? Wasn't it done? Did somebody indeed do it?'

- M: You dropped that cloth and threw it away.<sup>1</sup>  
 MC: That was before, but there's a vulture that needs to be brought down now.  
 I: But the bird that you brought down with the catapult, I brought it to you a week later, don't say I didn't.  
 M: That cloth of mine, that little cloth, you left it in Kariā cave.  
 MC: If I did drop it, I prostrated to you, saying your name in seven and seven makes fourteen places.

At other times, the client may be more insistent that the deity should avoid procrusteanisms and make more effort to attending properly to his private thoughts. The formulae by which the problems of individuals are formulated are of necessity prefabricated and repetitive; but out of the séance emerges a clearly expressed preference for do-it-yourself, unique constructions of meaning from the jig-saw pieces thrown out by the medium. Here is a good example of this negotiation of meaning:

- MC: That's not what I asked, Saami, I just want to know whether the work I'm doing is good or bad, should I do it or shouldn't I?  
 M: That's just what I'm saying, it doesn't matter what work you're doing, what direction you go in, whether you go for a shit or for a piss, it'll go wrong, it says it's got you bound up.  
 MC: So far as I know I didn't speak to the deity like that.  
 MS: For goodness sake, it's all about your work.  
 MS: If it doesn't match your thoughts then be patient, there are others with questions to ask.  
 MC: Well that's not my *jaaya* then.  
 M: It is yours. You go and consult an astrologer [*laughter*].  
 MC: We're saying that the deity's lying. What I asked was different.

This is a good example of how the wilder conceits thrown out by the medium are picked up by the addressee who, pretending to understand them as a private code, clings on to them as to islands of personal space in the public arena. Between them, the medium and the client perform an illusion of shared knowledge by conversing in language so elliptical that it excludes all bystanders. Similarly, Brown and Levinson note that 'because of the reliance on shared mutual knowledge to make ellipsis comprehensible, there is an inevitable association between the use of ellipsis and the existence of in-group shared knowledge' (1987 [1978]: 111).

Although the more obscure of the deity's utterances are assumed to specifically match the thoughts of a client, most are sufficiently vague to make some kind of

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<sup>1</sup>The reference to a cloth was said to be 'secret' - i.e. private knowledge; in the absence of a volunteered interpretation, I tentatively inquired whether this was a dead man's cloth that was being alluded to - i.e. the cloth that a cross-relative must bring to a dead person's funeral - and this suggestion was not refuted. There is also a more rarely performed custom of placing a cloth filled with *kanji* (boiled rice residue) in the river and floating it downstream.

connection with any worshipper's thoughts. The deity is persuaded to attend more specifically to the special needs of a particular client, but instead of producing greater precision, the result is greater elaboration of metaphor; paradoxically, the more obscure the language and abstruse the metaphors, the more likely it is that an individual will find evidence that the deity has connected with his special needs. The above example shows how astrology is ridiculed as an alternative form of divination; but in fact there may be close parallels in the ways in which elaborate obscurity in both divination systems creates the possibility for the client of finding that his own special needs are being attended to. The astrologer finds a unique pattern in the firmament for his client, and the spirit-medium spouts abstruse metaphors until the client picks out those that suit his individual needs.

Yet there is a major difference between astrology as a belief system and the Irula belief in divine consultation. In astrology, the information given by the stars and planets is infallible, while the interpretation given by the astrologer may be fallible or even deliberately distorted; but divine pronouncements, unlike stars and planets, may tell lies. The difference is one between unmotivated stars and motivated deities - the stars don't lie, deities do, and both channels of communication are complicated by fallible human interpretation. There are constant reminders that what is being said may be untrue, or, as in the above example, that the goddess has failed to connect with the individual - 'that's not my *jaaya* then.'

In terms of linguistic transaction, the client 'gives' to the public a confession of guilt, an expression of disgruntlement which has been perhaps bottled up, and so on. What is given with one hand is, as it were, taken away with the other, since these confessionals are performed in a code which emphasises the disjunction between the individual and the collectivity. There is an essential ambivalence in this encoding, however, in that the encoding which demonstrates exclusive collusion between the individual client and the deity may become too abstruse for the client to understand; the individual then shares with the collectivity their inability to understand the deity's code. Like over-privatised capital, hoarded meaning becomes sterile. As Paine has pointed out, there are many situations in which codification, instead of being supportive of communication, is 'expressive of systemic *disjunctions* in social life' (1976: 76-7). As in the analysis of the festival as a whole, in the *séance* the communication with divine forces is tempered by contrary reminders of disjunction, of the limits to communication.

### 3.11.6. Semantic anarchy

I have emphasised that elaborate obscurantism means that there is something in the séance discussions for everyone; often, divine utterances are simply vague references to bad times and good times and to the divine influence on both:

- M: If you say I must tell you why things have gone down (i.e. badly), and how this has happened, I've pulled a string up quite a lot, and since I've pulled it up, next year you must come here...(three or four utterances later) wait some small distance from here, one string (i.e. one kind of trouble) is a little bit better, child, but there's another hardship too, child.

At other times people will carry out a pretence of eliciting more precise statements from the deity through negotiation:

- M: He's<sup>1</sup> about ten paces away in that direction.  
 MC: How are we to know whether he's ten paces away or thirteen miles away, Saami. Am I a bear that I can go and catch him for us with my hands? Can I bite him? We won't hear any of that, if you give us strength, then next year if you've given these chickens strength, if you've put an end to any diseases that may have come our way, there'll be a pot of water here, otherwise there won't, that's all.

But there never can be a precise diagnosis, a precise piece of information given concerning the source of trouble; at times, it seems that people are fobbed off with ridiculously vague responses:

- MC: Does this trouble come from my wife's side, or if not my wife's side, then has somebody else set a deity against me? Everything you said was right, but does that deity belong to my wife's side or to somebody else? ...I'm still confused over what you're saying. [*Medium says something inaudible*] That's right, make us scratch around here and there.<sup>2</sup> Is the deity that's come to her a pain-causing deity, or is it her parents' deity? I only want to know if it's that kind of deity.  
 M: It's that kind of deity.  
 MC: Right, that'll do fine, whatever water I have in my hand, I'll pour you a jug of it. Don't you worry about that. Saami, that's enough for me, I don't need any more *jaaya*.

Sometimes, the deity gives very specific advice, a set of ritual injunctions to be followed, yet still promises only further information rather than a direct solution to the person's troubles:

- M: As for that order, from now on, on Sunday morning, think of that goddess, think of this goddess, that *mā:sani taay* and this *kaali taay*, have a wash, go to the river and pour a jug of water, take a coin and put it in the river water,

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<sup>1</sup>The standard elusive *avā* - 'he,' i.e. an unidentified the trouble-maker.

<sup>2</sup>Keep us guessing; scratching around brings to mind the search for sorcery items buried in the ground near somebody's house - attempts to sort out trouble in this way are often derided by the deity during séances.

throw seven kinds of flower into the river, and when you get home, you must fast for us for half an hour, then I'll tell you the solution (to your troubles), after you've fasted. At that minute, at that time, at twelve o'clock, that goddess will come and wake you and recite the mantra over you, she says. Until you've done that *bakti* (fasting) you won't get the mantra, but when you've done the *bakti* she'll come and wake you up, and I'll take a pen to your chest (to inform you) what code, what kind of behaviour you must follow, and you must act according to what is written down.

There are, of course, no rules written down which dictate how people should conduct themselves, ritually or otherwise. It is interesting to note how often allusions are made to writing, even though this is an oral culture; village functionaries are *paDittavā:ru* - 'those who have studied' - as are elders and ancestors generally. This is paradoxical, as I never came across a priest or any village functionary who could boast more than the most rudimentary semi-literacy. Indeed, the ailing priest of the Biliyuur *mā:riyamma* temple insisted that the son who was to succeed him should give up his studies, as these would be incompatible with priestly duties. In the above example, the 'code' of behaviour required by the goddess is discussed as if it were a written code, specifically written on the worshipper's chest by the goddess.

Similarly, on one occasion, a worshipper berated the goddess for her failure to provide the actual name of the person to blame for some family problems, saying 'we'll only get the work done if we have the check-roll (*sekrooLu*).' The Irulised English noun *sekrooLu* obviously derives from its use in local plantation bureaucracy; its use here suggests that the goddess ought to provide what she never actually provides - a definite name, clear written rules, or, to put it more generally, certainty. Vagueness, in fact, becomes a standard joke throughout séance discussions:

- M: Is this somebody's doing (i.e. sorcery)? Or isn't it? Has somebody done it on purpose? These thoughts have been running through your worried mind today, child.  
 P: That won't do! You must tell that child obediently according to the rules.  
 M: I've told you precisely, I've told you, with one stroke I've cut it down the middle<sup>1</sup>. ...I'll tell you straight as a forehead mark. Don't put me to the test.

Vagueness fills the séance discussions with an ever-present tone of dramatic irony, an ongoing contradiction between the overt expectation of certainty and the unavoidable reality of uncertainty. The worshippers themselves are just as evasive

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<sup>1</sup>Perhaps drawing an image from the breaking of the coconut.

in the promises they make to the goddess or, as in the following example, to the ancestors:

- P: I told you, I'm the one who'll bring all the stones and throw them down in a heap.  
 M: [Ancestor] Yes, but when?  
 MC: When I can afford it.  
 M: This many days?

There is a particular kind of conversational vagueness which can be described as 'hedging' - which is commonly found in the séances in denial that a major request is being made. This strategy is used both by the deity and by the worshippers. Worshippers will try to make their request sound as modest as possible:

- P: Somebody, give us goodness, give us badness or something.

And likewise, the deity's injunction to worshippers will be the epitome of modesty:

- M: And when you've come to an agreement, then next year on an auspicious day you'll put [it] on your head and come here, you four children and another eight children with you, you'll come next year to this place and give a certain amount of incense smoke to that goddess, or else don't even bother with any incense smoke.

Compare this with the bombast of the promises of offerings at next year's festival:

- Next year I'll bring a doll and open your eyes. I'll say Mā:riyamma's name and open (her eyes). I'll spend three thousand rupees on it. I haven't got a penny.

The linguistic strategy is not hard to understand: minimise requests, maximise promises. Requests, that is, are at least partially *off record*, while promises are *on record*, in an exaggerated form. According to Brown and Levinson, by going *on record*, speakers may gain public support, credit for honesty or outspokenness, and avoidance of misunderstanding. By going *off record*, on the other hand, speakers can get credit for being tactful and non-coercive, avoid being gossiped about, and avoid face-damaging interpretation; they can also fish for compliments (explicit or implicit) by soliciting assistance only indirectly, as for example when we say 'It's hot in here,' tactfully inviting the generous response 'oh, I'll open the window then!' (1987 [1978]: 71).

Of course, the phrase 'or else don't bother' which the goddess so often appends to her request could be interpreted not as modesty, but as an ironic challenge, as if to say 'that's the least you can do!' Once again, we are left with a deliberate ambivalence on the part of both the goddess and the worshipper; but even if we recognise the irony in the false modesty, it is nevertheless striking that a goddess

who wants several goats and chickens and hundreds of worshippers requests these only indirectly by asking for ‘four’ or ‘one or two’ worshippers, a ‘jug of water’ or ‘a stick of incense’ ...‘or else don’t bother.’ It is as if the goddess, for all her antagonism, really wanted to give the worshipper credit for bringing more than was requested, for being generous rather than just obedient.

Indeed, were we to follow the definition provided by Durkheim, we would have to conclude that the Irulas’ attitude to their deity is not one of ‘respect’: ‘We say that an object, whether individual or collective, inspires respect when the representation expressing it in the mind is gifted with such a force that it automatically causes or inhibits actions, *without regard for any consideration relative to their useful or injurious effects*’ (1976 [1912]: 207). Durkheim’s discussion ought to have gone further still, recognising that the religious command is often more than just an exaggerated form of the secular command; the latter simply ignores the rational reasons for a command, while the former often deliberately flouts rationality, specifically selecting as items of creed the kinds of belief which normal rationality would forbid us to do or believe in. By contrast, Irulas receive no clear or direct commands from their deity. Whatever they are asked to do is hedged around with subjunctives, uncertainties, and politeness.

We saw earlier how the Irulas’ attitude to the goddess was an incongruous mixture of exaggerated respect and extreme rudeness; to this we now have to add the incongruous mixture of self-effacingly hedged requests and self-aggrandizing promises on the part of both the people and their deity. One of the earliest séances I witnessed was the *tudikere pagavadi* séance; I was struck by the extremely aggressive tone in which the priest and other bystanders addressed the goddess before she had even arrived - that is, before the medium had begun shaking. But when I came to transcribe what they had actually said, it came to look considerably more modest than their tone had implied:

- P: We’re not asking for much, we just came in search of something good or something bad.  
 MS: We’re not compelling you to come.

### 3.11.7. Metaphors and linguistic play

We have seen already how participants in the séance delight in alluding to items of ritual paraphernalia in ways which imbue meaning to them. These allusions are often simultaneously metaphors and puns - the ‘name’ (*peer*) of the deity and the name of the wrongdoer, the ‘cutting’ of the coconut and the ‘cutting’ of trouble, the



'flowing away' of ritual pourings and the 'flowing away' of troubles, and so on. These puns alert the keen listener to the possibility of imputing non-literal meanings to the metaphors of the rite; as Apte notes in his discussion of the prevalence of punning in children's verbal play, 'punning emphasizes differences between literal and metaphorical, or denotative and connotative, meanings' (1985: 86). This activity would be described by Lévi-Strauss (1966 [1962] *passim*) as 'bricolage' - constructing meaning from an *ad hoc* jumble of materials which are readily to hand. This is the verbal counterpart of the encompassing festival rites, in which participants play with symbols for the sake of playing rather than in obedience to any particular coherent system.

We have seen that the séance relies on a variety of formulae with which the deity somehow tunes in to the special needs of a client; and we have seen that the medium or deity is liable to be ridiculed if the use of these formulae becomes too procrustean. The way to avoid procrusteanisms is to play with metaphors until the client finds a metaphor to latch on to; at the same time, the bystanders will allow the dialogue to proceed if it sounds sufficiently novel - they are entertained by wordplays and abstruse metaphors even if they don't understand them. Whereas the deity is mocked for blatantly trying to accommodate a client's needs to a special formula, she is applauded for using metaphors which at least give the illusion of having been tailored to suit individual needs. Sometimes, it seems as if the deity simply bombards the listeners with metaphors which do not necessarily fit the message or coherently fit together, but are there simply to impress as poetic, metaphorical language. Listening to this torrent of rich language, it is virtually impossible to unravel each metaphor, but equally impossible not to be impressed by the richness of potential meaning it contains:

*Appa*, this isn't *diipavaLi* rain, this isn't *kaattige* rain, this is *vaagaasi* rain, do you hear? However many troubles you may have suffered in the past, however much suffering you may have had, however many hundreds of rupees you may have spent (i.e. in offerings at temples), however much to-ing and fro-ing you may have done from place to place, however many districts you may have travelled, it's your neck that the twine has come round, you're the one that knows about it, don't you? True or false? If what I say isn't true, keep on asking me, keep on pestering me. However many (deities') feet, however many hands and chests you may have placed things at<sup>1</sup>; but you're the one, the only one whose eyes I've opened. True or false? There's still a lot of trouble to come, this is the time of the big needle<sup>2</sup>, you're the one who knows, you're

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<sup>1</sup>i.e. however many deities you may have been to about this problem

<sup>2</sup>*romba dabaLe vuDuga neer'ella* - *romba* is 'much,' *dabaLe* is 'big needle,' *-ella* is a redundant tag, and *vuDuga neer(a)* means either dawn, or 'the time for

the one who heard, what's done is done, don't repeat your faults, your elder brother won't help you, your younger brother won't help you, your relatives won't help you, your cross-relatives won't help you, you must cook it, you only must eat it, true or false? ...Otherwise before the central partition in your house broke, the water-jug shelf would have broken, child. True or false? There's a big needle there.<sup>1</sup>

When it is delivered at this speed, with so many ideas and allusions being thrown at the listener, it is clear that the elaborateness and the psittacistic repetition are impressive. There are lots of metaphors in here that could be picked out and analysed, but I suspect that for the listener, even though they may ring bells and evoke fleeting images, they don't in themselves pass on important messages; taken together, they constitute an impressive display of divine speech whose elaborateness in itself is pleasurable. Far from being baffled into silence by this extraordinary display of jumbled metaphors, the client picks out a metaphor and begins to construct meaning relevant to his needs:

MC: Will you be sticking the needle in next year?

To which the deity responds:

M: If my life is on the up, in the same way I'll see to it that you have a moustache a span long to twist round the back of your ears.<sup>2</sup>

The client, picking up on the metaphor of the curly moustache, says

MC: Yes, we want to do that kind of twisting too.

which might be translated as 'yes, we're prepared, for our part, to give you a curly moustache too.' Not that a goddess would necessarily be grateful for a curly moustache, but it's the thought that counts, or rather, what counts is to play around with metaphors. A singleton playing alone with an image like this would be described as a madman; but when two people play, the image takes on meaning through repetition.

In *Religion of an Indian Tribe*, Elwin quotes a Saora shamaness who describes her dream in which her spirit-familiar first visited her - 'he took me up in a whirlwind and carried me away to a very high tree, where he made me sit on a fragile branch. There he began to sing and as he sang he swung me to and fro' (Elwin 1955: 153).

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taking out.' Irula people were also puzzled by this phrase, but agreed that it probably meant 'your troubles have only just begun.'

<sup>1</sup>An elaborate way of saying that the client would have been in big trouble without divine assistance.

<sup>2</sup>An elaborate way of saying 'you look after me and I'll look after you.'

Although the Irula medium is supposed to be possessed rather than going on spiritual travels, I recorded several instances of a remarkably similar image in which the goddess represents herself as somebody who 'raises' people up:

M: I placed you at the top of a high cliff, right at the top, child, right at the top of the highest branch I had sat you on a leaf, child, true or false? Had I or hadn't I sat you there?

There are several other instances of this top-of-the-tree metaphor, and considerably more other metaphors involving a vertical axis where upward movement represents improvements in welfare, and downward movements represent illness and troubles. The above example shows how the mind-numbingly simple message of the séances (people say 'we're down, you've got to raise us up,' and the goddess says 'if you raise me up, I'll raise you up too') is elaborated in order to make it more entertaining and hence more acceptable. However banal the theme of negotiation may be, it must not be discussed in banal language; brought up as we are to decipher complex messages from literary texts, our western response to elaboration is to find more meaning in complex ritual statements than is actually there. I would suggest that the following exchange has nothing more difficult to say than 'things might get better, but in the end we all die':

M: Though you may end up with twine round your throat, until then you'll be on top of the jack tree.

MC: What else can I say to you? Why should I climb that ladder?

It should be noted that it is not only the medium who uses elaborate metaphors; the *kiiLkuppu* priest, for example, threatened the goddess with these words:

P: If you sort out my moustache I'll open your eyes, if my moustache droops, I'll abandon you. I won't ask lots of people; I'll bring you whatever you like, you must keep my village in order. We must eat and be merry.<sup>1</sup>

Elaboration, like repetition, does not contribute to communication in any straightforward way. As I have been insisting throughout, Turner's notion of the 'parsimony' of symbols must be complemented by recognition of their *extravagance*. Similarly, Nagashima's distinction between the logical/scientific 'Maximum Message Communication' and the instinctive/subjective 'Minimum Message Communication' runs the risk of assuming the latter to operate only on the principle of parsimony, saying less than is meant:

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<sup>1</sup>*vaLaaDiyonDee tingoNō* - lit: 'we must play and eat.' The phrase *vaLaaDiyonDee tingā:ru* - 'they play and eat' - is used with reference to the idle rich, in particular to anyone who earns large amounts of money by corrupt means.

The sender [in Minimum Message Communication] first abstracts the essential feature of the information and expresses it in a few selected words. The message must be charged with highly evocative power, so that it leads to, as it were, an explosion of the total information in the mind of the receiver. (1973: 95)

In terms of directness of message, the style of the Irula séance is far closer to Nagashima's Minimum Message Communication; but it would be more helpful to contrast directness of style with *ellipsis*, since this term can cover both poles of indirect language, that of *parsimonious condensation* and that of *extravagant elaboration*. We should then be able to recognise the implicit messages about relations between humans and occult beings carried by the style of dialogue. In Maximum Message Communication, the message

should be as exact, clear, and logically consistent as possible ... The success of communication depends almost entirely upon the sender's ability to compose a logically consistent message, the receiver being only required to understand the language used. The relationship between the sender and the receiver can, therefore, be distant and impersonal. Objective kinds of information are suitable for this type of communication, but even information of a very subjective nature attains objectivity, in that the receiver has little to guess. (1973: 94)

The elliptical, poetic language of the Irula séance is contrastable with this direct, prosaic style, and it implies intimate collusion with the occult beings that are being conversed with. But it is also contrastable with the elliptical rhetoric of political speeches given in literary Tamil, which Shanmugham Pillai (1960: 28) describes as 'characterized by long sentences, complicated syntax and certain characteristic intonation patterns.' This is a style which distances the audience and emphasises the superiority of the speaker. The ellipsis of the séance includes both condensation and elaboration of meaning, and in different ways implies collusion between the deity and the collectivity or between the deity and an individual client, though reminding everyone, in moments of obscurity, of the gap between humans and occult beings. Acknowledgement of the pragmatics, the social implications of elliptical language leads us to a better understanding of the true functions of redundancy. In his discussion of the language of magical rites, Tambiah seems to be assuming that redundancy contributes in a direct and quantitative way to the amount of meaning construed and remembered:

Frequently the various parts or constituent units of the recipient of the magic, whether it be a canoe or a human being, are enumerated and the magical transfer made to each of them. Thus we get a realistic picture of the whole built up from the parts, and this metonymic technique has several implications for lending realism to the rite, for transmitting a message through redundancy, for storing vital technological knowledge in an oral culture, and for the construction of the spell itself as a lengthy verbal form. (1968: 190)

He follows here the 'general expectation in all languages that 'more of form is more of content' (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 127); this may be maxim followed by everyday language, but surely the maxim is flouted by ritualistic repetitions, of which we might rather say either that 'more of form is *undermining* of content' (as when a statement becomes ironic through repetition), or that 'more of form means a *radical change* in content.' Redundancy adds resonances to an utterance which alter the meaning *qualitatively* rather than *quantitatively*. In other words, it radically alters the required interpretation of an utterance or performance by changing a straightforward proposition into an elliptical suggestion. In Austin's terms, it may change a simple *locution* into an *illocution* (1962: 99). Or it may introduce a resonance which forces the addressee to seek entirely new avenues of interpretation. Sperber and Wilson suggest that where repetition is not used to add quantity or exaggerate degree, it 'should yield an increase in contextual effects by encouraging the hearer to extend the context and thereby add further implicatures' (1986: 221). Thus in a phrase like 'my childhood days are gone, gone,' the second 'gone' does nothing to add *quantitatively* to the goneness of the childhood days, but rather adds *resonance* (my word not theirs) to the utterance. The hearer is 'encouraged to be imaginative' (*ibid*: 222). The function of redundancy in ritual is implicit metacommunication, that is, communication about the message. Meaning is added (and some, perhaps, subtracted), and this is done by resonance rather than by reasoning. Metacommunication also tells us something about the speaker and the addressee; one aspect of the above example that Sperber and Wilson don't consider is that a statement about privilege is being made: the addressee is forced to use his imagination to infer the kinds of memory indicated by the repetition of 'gone,' but at the same time the addressee is also being reminded that there are so many implicatures that he can't possibly grasp the full import of the utterance.

In order to understand the separate and complementary functions of resonance and reasoning, we should note that resonant as opposed to reasoned language is not peculiar to poetry and ritual. If I ask a friend, 'where are you going for your holidays this year?,' his reply is 'Albania,' and I then respond with the question 'Albania?,' I have not reasoned out a need to repeat the word 'Albania.' My echoing of his answer serves various purposes not connected with *factual* information: while pretending to be metacommunicative, querying the correct operation of the communicative channel or simply acknowledging his reply, it announces my *evaluation* of his chosen holiday venue; and it is also a *politeness*

*strategy*, the verbal equivalent of raised eyebrow requesting elaboration without seeming to do so.

In ritual language, resonance is given precedence over reasoning. The keynote of the extravagant linguistic play of the séances is resonance which is largely achieved by redundancy: nothing is added quantitatively to the basic banal messages about healing and dispute settlement, but each individual is able to come to his or her own qualitatively different understanding of these messages through the tangle of abstruse metaphors. Paradoxically, despite their insistence on elaboration of the séance dialogue beyond the level of banal utterances, Irulas often describe the desired response of the deity as *naaya* - a word which in one sense corresponds to our term 'reason.' In its everyday usage this word means 'talk,' 'discussion,' 'argument,' 'justice' or 'truth.' When villagers assemble in profane contexts to discuss an argument, this is described in the verbal phrase '*naaya maNikkā:ru*' - 'they are talking it over.' But the séance is not *naaya*, it is *jaaya*; so when they say to the deity or spirit, as they often do, '*adu naaya*,' they are perhaps deliberately leaving an aura of ambiguity. Reason (*naaya*) and resonance (*jaaya*) are complementary aspects of all dialogue, rather than radically opposed modes of discourse. Theories which present poetic or ritual language as a kind of 'deviation' from the norm are putting forward a kind of linguistic centrism, which like all other varieties of centrism present the world from the perspective of one centre from which all deviations radiate. In such a formulation, ritual language is relegated to satellite status, becoming 'parasitic on' normal language.

### 3.11.8. Metalanguage

In the previous chapter we saw several kinds of symbolic actions which required interpretation as messages about messages, or commentaries on the communicative acts of the rite. In this chapter we have seen several examples of both implicitly and explicitly metacommunicative utterances - those that more or less directly draw attention to themselves or to aspects of communication. This metalinguistic aspect of verbal art is what Jakobson called 'the POETIC function of language' - 'the set (*Einstellung*) towards the MESSAGE as such, focus on the message for its own sake':

Poetic function is not the sole function of verbal art but only its dominant, determining function, whereas in all other verbal activities it acts as a subsidiary, accessory constituent. This function, by promoting the palpability of signs, deepens the fundamental dichotomy of signs and objects. Hence, when dealing with poetic function, linguistics cannot limit itself to the field of poetry. (1960: 356)

Why, one might ask, would people want to highlight the ‘palpability of signs’? The answer is surely that the function of all ritual is to act as an objectification of everyday reality; just as regular indulgence in the physical and social abnormalities of ritual enhances understanding of everyday physics and social relationships, so too the use of ‘poetic’ language in the séance enhances everyday linguistic abilities.

Bergson’s theory of verbal humour encapsulates this metacommunicative commentary on the functions of language:

Whereas an illuminating comparison and a striking image always seem to reveal the close harmony that exists between language and nature, regarded as two parallel forms of life, the play upon words makes us think somehow of a negligence on the part of language, which, for the time being, seems to have forgotten its real function and now claims to accommodate things to itself instead of accommodating itself to things. And so the play upon words always betrays a momentary *lapse of attention* in language, and it is precisely on that account that it is amusing. (1980 [1900]: 139)

In other words, the play upon words exaggerates the attention required to make up for deficiencies in the lexicon. In the séance, whenever the linguistic formulae fail to accommodate to a client’s needs but seem rather to be trying to accommodate the client’s needs to themselves, the deity will be ridiculed. Word-play, however, seems to have a more positive side to it than simply indicating deficiencies in language. As we have seen, word-plays point out the endless potentials for imputing meaning to ritual paraphernalia. Much of this paraphernalia has doubtless been borrowed *ad hoc* from the traditions of neighbouring peoples with little systematic understanding of its metaphoric meaning; the wordplay of the séance enables participants to establish links between this paraphernalia and their own instrumental aims. In other words, the word-plays are metalinguistic commentaries on the code used in the encompassing rite to establish lines of communication between humans and occult beings. *Playing with metaphors is the means by which Irulas, individually and collectively, appropriate the spoils of their cultural foraging.*

When we consider that this encompassing rite is ideally rigid and invariant, the importance of the séance emerges as an ideally flexible commentary which breathes life and uniqueness into the static ritual. I have already presented my arguments against the simplistic assumptions about the ‘archaism’ of ritual; these assumptions go hand in hand with the assumption that ritual is essentially rigid. Nadel, for instance, is of the opinion that

When we speak of 'ritual' we have in mind first of all actions exhibiting a striking or incongruous rigidity, that is, some conspicuous regularity not accounted for by the professed aims of the actions. Any type of behaviour may thus be said to turn into a 'ritual' when it is stylized or formalized, and made repetitive in that form. (1954: 99)

By this definition, the Irula séance would not be a rite, since it ought ideally to be unpredictable, and the divine entities who speak ought not to use rigid formulas. Analysis of the Irula séance shows that such emphasis on backward-looking language is not necessarily universal in ritual; what is common to all ritual language is that it is sanctified by *displacement*. This often means that ideally or empirically it will be fixed, especially in literate cultures; but ritual language may equally well be displaced by virtue of its innovativeness and experimental nature - the language of Irula séances includes references to the politics of the outside world (including a reference to the assassination of Indira Gandhi) and linguistic borrowings from recently contacted neighbours, including numerous English borrowings from British planters and from the language of bureaucracy. Of course, saying that the language of the séance is not rigid is not the same thing as saying that it is not stylised - the enjoyment of the séance is derived from the familiarity of the unique style in which discussions are carried out. But although the observer who records and analyses the séances may be in a stronger position than participants to recognise stylised and repetitive formulae in the séance, we should respect their own metalinguistic commentary which insists that procrustean formulae have no legitimate place in the séance. This is one ritual, or one part of a rite, which ought to be flexible and non-repetitive.

I hope that I have provided enough evidence for the main contention of my analysis of the aesthetics of the Irula séance - namely, that it represents a triumph of style over substance. I have argued against Bloch's assumption that such language is non-creative; but there is also a very different argument which claims that we can contrast the experimental style of those in power with the non-experimental style of the powerless. According to Bourdieu, the aesthetic of the powerful is an experimental style which is, in his definition, not characteristic of 'popular' culture:

It is as if the 'popular aesthetic' ...were based on the affirmation of the continuity between art and life, which implies the subordination of form to function. This is seen clearly in the case of the novel and especially the theatre, where the working-class audience refuses any sort of formal experimentation and all effects which, by introducing a distance from the accepted conventions (as regards scenery, plot, etc.), tend to distance the spectator, preventing him from getting involved and fully identifying with the characters. (1984: 4)



At stake here is the question of whether entelechy, which excludes rehearsal from performance, is more eagerly adhered to by the powerless than by the powerful, who are less ashamed to publicly perform unfinished or unpolished cultural products.<sup>1</sup> It is not my intention to enter here into debates about what constitutes 'popular' culture; but I do feel it is worth taking issue with any suggestion that experimentation in art forms is the preserve of powerful, educated élites. There is an implicit evolutionism in Bourdieu's argument, which portrays primitives and members of the working class as if they were tied to their conservative demands for facile meaning and happy endings in ritual and literature, and portrays moderns and members of aristocracies as freer, more individualistic and experimental, and above all more prepared to tolerate chaos in their art and rites. In defiance of such assumptions, the Irula festival as a whole has a high tolerance of chaos, has its own built-in Brechtian alienation effects, and provides participants with no facile 'happy endings.' Analysis of the Irula séance shows that far from betraying the 'subordination of form to function' which Bourdieu finds in popular cultures, it revels in just the kind of formal experimentation and denial of function that Bourdieu assumes to be the preserve of the powerful elite. Indeed, whenever function - the simple gratifying promise of future well-being through divine assistance - becomes too overtly manifest, the audience demands that this be submerged beneath a miasma of formal intricacy.

The style of séance discourse fluctuates between the banal and the inventive, the known and the unknown, the obvious and the abstruse, and between script and improvisation; phrased in the altitudinal metaphor that has become standard in academic discourse - and most notably in the discussion of metaphor, as we saw earlier - the talk of the séance vacillates between the 'grounded' and the 'transcendental.' Sperber has called the process of symbolisation a process of 'putting in quotes a defective conceptual representation' (1975: 70); the language of the Irula séance is framed in a bewildering variety of quotes and subquotes, and I hope my discussion of the metalinguistic features has shown how the text of the séance is constantly reminding participants of the quotation marks which stake out the play arena. The séance is, for the interpreter, a minefield of quotation marks which allude to, and play with, the polyglossic nature of the religious imagination.

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<sup>1</sup>Bernstein's suggests that 'highly-coded' utterances are more common in working-class families and 'now-coding' utterances more common in upper class families (1964 [1961]: 256), and this seems to support Bourdieu's assumption; Bakhtin's discussion of the 'eternally unfinished' and subversive worldview of the Billingsgate idiom contradicts it {1968 [1965]: 166}.

But should we call the séance a 'defective conceptual representation?' At the instrumental level of interpretation, perhaps; here what symbols mean certainly is, in Sperber's phrase, 'almost always banal' - banal, that is, in the sense that the instrumental meanings are common to all participants. But at the other levels of interpretation, surely, it is direct language which would be 'defective' - and only oblique linguistic strategies have any hope of achieving the desired results. At these more complex levels, the meaning of symbols isn't banal because it isn't common to all participants; it must be worked out or evoked by each participant individually. Conversely, Turner's *dominant symbols* are banal by definition, because their meaning is common to all (or at least to all men and all women, respectively), and is the very fabric of Ndembu society.

In the séance, as in the encompassing rite, entertainment does not require 'happy endings,' friendly discussions, or easy meaning but rather unresolved antagonism, verbal competition and abuse; it also involves heroic attempts not only to find meaning in chaos, but to take metaphor and language beyond the platitudes of everyday, readily graspable, meaning. To honour a deity is, for Irulas, not in any straightforward way to display skill at flattery and euphemism nor simply to abase the self, but rather to simultaneously compete and collude with the deity in games where points are scored by skilful invective and invention of metaphors. A skilful performance requires a delicate balance between reaching an agreement while keeping intact the essential human-divine antagonism; it also requires, on both sides, the linguistic trickery of seeming to make promises without actually committing oneself to a particular course of action.

### 3.11.9. Heteroglossia: straight and crooked talk

Parables, metaphors, and elaborate or obscure ritual language are great fun for the anthropologist to unravel (and sometimes, as the example of Turner's Muchona the Hornet illustrates, highly entertaining for the informant too); but whether we assume that the aim is to communicate with the spirit world or to communicate with people and above all to resolve arguments, the same question must be answered - *why do Irulas not discuss things in a more straightforward manner?* I hope that my analysis of the séances will have demonstrated that each of the following reasons is valid:

1. *Elaboration as entertainment*: linguistic elaboration is indulged in for the sake of entertainment; the séance could thus be seen as the linguistic corollary of the deliberate construction of obstacles and adversaries which we so often find in

play and ritual. Since a major aim of the festival is to entertain rather than to solve problems, the central debate over human misfortune and divine assistance is elaborated in linguistic play. As a sub-category of elaboration I have considered the role of repetition, which itself is a paradoxical kind of obliqueness. In my analysis of séance discussions, I have always tried to remain alert to the possibility that many words and phrases in Irula séances are parrot-like (psittacistic) - that they are used without reference, but are uttered simply for the sake of the utterance, for the pure pleasure of making the appropriate noises.

2. *Heuristic device*: 'by indirections find directions out' (*Hamlet*). Discussion in parables is an heuristic device which makes the content of the discussion, once unravelled and understood, more memorable (this was the explanation Christ gave for his own use of parables). The obscurity of the language involves the audience as participants in the construction of meaning.
3. *Mnemonic device*: typical of oral tradition (parallelism). The use of semi-scripted abnormal speech is a mnemonic device which enables the rules of how to communicate with non-human beings to be passed down intact through the generations. This has often been noted with reference to oral literature, where rhyme, rhythm, parallelism of ideas and conventional metaphors all serve as devices for minimising alteration as myths, epics, poems and songs are passed on orally. In *The Singer of Tales*, Lord also observes that this style is in part a function of the instability and variability of the audience, and the performer's need to keep their attention while not losing a grip himself (1968 [1960]: 16); this explanation would certainly fit for the constantly fluctuating group of Irulas who listen to the medium.
4. *Indirectness is a politeness strategy*: used by both deities and humans alike, aimed at saving the face of both hearers and speakers.
5. *Privacy*: discussion in obscure language keeps the meaning of a public discussion at least partially private; the full meaning is only available to the person discussing with the medium. Like jokes, parables function to include and to collude with the in-group (those able and willing to participate in the unravelling process), and to exclude the out-group (those unable and/or unwilling to unravel meaning from the utterances).

6. *Polyvalency*: communication in parables and in difficult language allows for a variety of interpretations not all of which will suit the requirements of the hearer. It encourages the audience to participate in the construction of meaning rather than passively accepting meaning which is forced on them.
7. *Multivocality*: communication in parables produces a multivocality which gives evidence of the multiple authors of the séance (the goddess, spirits, the medium, the headman, the players whose complaints are being voiced) and addresses the multiple listeners simultaneously (the client, the interested listeners, the relatively disinterested witnesses, the anthropologist).
8. *Medium as message*: obscurity is the verbal corollary of the difficulties and dangers of the path to the temple; it conveys the message that the human-divine link is a difficult one to forge, but makes the forging of the link all the more satisfying once this is achieved. The séance would thus be seen as a linguistic version of the universal play phenomenon of tension and resolution. The heteroglossia of the séance conveys the elusiveness of the deity by the bewildering variety of frames in which communication takes place. It is possible to identify both direct and reported speech as well as unacknowledged mimicry (presence and absence of quotation marks), metaphor and simile, a variety of dialects (Irula, Tamil, English, BaDaga, Okkaliga, and so on), seriousness, joking, anger, friendship, proximity and distance. The linguistic foraging of the séance matches the cultural foraging of everyday life.<sup>1</sup>
9. *Medium as metacommunication*: The most important aim is not to communicate meaning at all, but to express the fact of difficult communication, which ought to be elaborate in order to convey to onlookers the difficulty of communicating with spirits (this interpretation would attribute to the Irula séance a congruence with the political monologue of Tamil Nadu, whose meaning escapes the majority of the audience who don't understand literary Tamil).

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<sup>1</sup>Sundkler has likewise noted that the language of Zulu prophets in trance has a liberal sprinkling of English words intermingled with gibberish - e.g. 'Hhayi hhay hhayi hhayi sorry Jesu sorry Jesu sorry Jesu spy spy spy spy spy, naughty boy naughty boy hhayi hhayi hhayi, Hallelujah, Hallelujah. Amen' (1961: 249). It is worth pointing out that this phenomenon of linguistic borrowing for the sake of demonstrating symbolic control of a language which is not understood or ill-understood is not confined to the linguistic performance of trance. Children do it all the time, and students (including postgraduates!) do it in their essays when they are struggling to master the alien jargon of a difficult new subject. And we can extend the analogy to the *ad hoc* borrowing of ritual paraphernalia from alien cultures.

## 4. Departures

### 4.1. Pantomime and promiscuity

Irula rites may be divided into semi-calendrical seasonal festivities which are licentious and village-focused, and take place mainly outside the village, and rites of passage which are family-focused and formal, and take place within the village. But this does not amount to a straightforward dichotomy, since the festival is all-embracing, including the highly effervescent, improvised clowning, the semi-improvised but formulaic séance, and the highly formulaic and ideally formal *puuja*. The rites of passage, on the other hand, are in general formulaic with very little improvised clowning and either no séances at all or very restricted séances. The festival is formally structured around a script which is ideally performed *verbatim* as handed down by the ancestors - or, to use the Irulas' own agricultural metaphor, *sā:l'ooDe* - 'with the furrow'. I have emphasised that the boisterous exuberance of the festival all but hides this formal structure. I am reminded here of the popular psychologist Berne's analysis of contemporary American ritual in *Games People Play*:

a ritual is a stereotyped series of simple complementary transactions programmed by external social forces. ...The form of a ritual is parentally determined by tradition. ...Some formal rituals of special historical or anthropological interest have two phases: (1) a phase in which transactions are carried on under rigid parental strictures, (2) a phase of parental license in which the child is allowed more or less complete transactional freedom, resulting in an orgy (1964: 36ff)

In other words, though play and ritual merge, it may be possible analytically to distinguish formally ritualistic and informally playful aspects of one and the same event. I have chosen to concentrate this thesis on festivals not because these are obviously of greater social importance to Irulas than rites of passage, but because in the ethnography of ritual in general I have not found adequate analysis of the more effervescent, *ad hoc*, playful aspects of ritual. I hope that my analysis of festivity will contribute to our understanding of the more untidy aspects of formulaic, non-casual behaviour.

The ethnography of ritual itself needs some justifying. Those who have tried to justify paying attention to the more dramatic and exotic aspects of human behaviour have usually done so by asserting that ritual somehow tells us more about people than their everyday profane behaviour does. Thus Monica Wilson asserts that

rituals reveal values at their deepest level. Men express in ritual what moves them most, and since the form of expression is conventionalized and obligatory, it is the values of the group that are revealed. I see in the study of rituals the key to an understanding of the essential constitution of human society. (1954: 241)

I have various quarrels with a formulation such as this. First, it is quite unclear what is intended by this use of an altitudinal metaphor with reference to values - the same metaphor which Geertz uses in his essay title 'Deep Play' (1973) and one which, I presume, studiously contradicts the equally misleading Marxian notion of 'Überbau' ('superstructure'). If ritual reveals the 'deepest level' of values, what are the more 'superficial' levels? If 'depth' is meant in a Freudian sense (referring, perhaps, to the 'unconscious' or the 'pre-conscious' levels of the psyche), we would expect to find participants in rites to be wearing their psyches on their sleeves, and this would surely contradict her insistence that ritual concerns the 'values of the group.'

This brings me to my second criticism: although it is a truism that any group activity will indicate and create the values of the group, we seriously misinterpret the collective representations of ritual if we ignore the simultaneous expression of individual differences in ritual. I hope my analysis of the Irula festival has revealed that the individual's autonomy and privacy is given considerable attention in the festival; the festival does not seek to suppress the fact that what Wilson calls 'the essential constitution of human society' is not just group values but individual negotiation and interpretation of those values [see below, this section, for a discussion of pantomime, festive performances that cater for all needs].

Third, Wilson's analysis is too static and functionalist; it ignores the possibility of what I have called 'cultural foraging' - some aspects of ritual merely taken on *ad hoc* from neighbouring societies. We must recognize the element of chance in the formation of traditions; the ritual activities and ritual paraphernalia of Irula festivals are shared with millions of other Hindus, so it would be quite wrong to expect them to correspond neatly with specifically Irula values or social structure. Fourth, it is not clear *who* the 'values of the group' are supposed to be revealed *to*; the 'deep' meaning of rites may not be available to the participants at any level of their consciousness - for most participants, things are done in ritual 'because they're done,' and not necessarily for their metaphoric significance.

A more honest appraisal of the ethnographer's penchant for writing about ritual is provided by Strecker, who makes the more straightforward observation that in the fieldwork situation it often presents itself as the easiest kind of behaviour to observe. But he warns that since ritual is 'ideology in action,' then

any anthropological description which does not take this into account and uncritically bases its generalizations on observations from the realms of ritual is bound to present not the true but the ideological form of society. ...This ideological view will tend to be static and harmonic [sic] and the less developed the theory of ritual is with which the anthropologist operates, the more static and harmonic it will be. (1988: 13-14)

With its potent portrayals of movement, discord and instability, the Irula festival would fall into Strecker's category of 'exceptions.' In other words, I need not worry about being hoodwinked by Irula festivals into assuming their social order to be static, harmonious, and in a state of equilibrium. Yet any analyst who chose to present the festival as a celebration of fixed traditions, harmony and equilibrium would have no shortage of evidence to back up such a view - and this is true of native exegesis (the festival mustn't be held if there are any quarrels), of the ritual actions (ideally rigid formulae, handshakes), and of the séance discussions (assertions of friendly relations with occult beings and with one another).

In my discussion of the language of the séance, I emphasised the *resonance* of the language, showing how its elaborations and condensations of meaning evoke a variety of different meanings which we can assume are perceived differently by each individual. I assume that the visual, aural and olfactory messages of the festival likewise resonate differently in each participant. To pursue the metaphor, resonance can be seen as the product of tensions between often contradictory potential messages. At the level of values, too, we can talk of resonances between the formal performance of duty and the exuberant indulgence in fun. Where Schechner has described the performance of festivity as 'the pleasure principle institutionalized' (1988 [1977]: 11), I would insist that this gives us only part of the picture. People at play don't just indulge in pleasure for its own sake; just as children at play deliberately create obstacles for themselves, so adults at play mingle pain and even asceticism into their pleasures; there may be bright new clothes and feasting, but there is also prescriptive bare-footedness and fasting.

I have drawn analogies between aspects of the festival and pantomime, and this term seems especially apt in its emphasis on the multifaceted nature of the festival (Greek *panto* = 'all'); the festival is *not* a rite of passage focused on one individual

or one family or one event - it concerns the whole village and so must cater for *all* needs. And this is why it does not bludgeon home monolithic messages to all participants; it is essentially promiscuous, mixing certainty with doubt, faith with scepticism, argument with reconciliation, blood sacrifice with pure vegetarian offerings, village with forest, and so on, all of which is encompassed in the ultimate mixing of deities and humans.

If I have not demonstrated in this thesis that Irula rites reveal not just in the transgression of semantic categories, but the transgression of the principle of opposition itself, then I have failed. In other words, it is not just the *content* of their cognitive system that Irulas question in a ritual context, but its *form* and its *logic*. The bulk of interpretation of Hindu ritual and Hindu thought is based on the assumption that the principle of opposition in ritual is the same as it is in sacred text, and that the important oppositions - *purity:pollution, transcendent:immanent, renunciatory:worldly, red:white, male:female, active:passive* - are consistently applied. There is of course ample opportunity in the kaleidoscope of Hindu ritual to feed the pattern-hungry with apparent consistencies; but the kaleidoscope is so rich that nothing which appears to be affirmed and repeatedly confirmed escapes disconfirmation elsewhere. This is how the impurity of animal sacrifice becomes a purificatory act in which blood, like milk, purifies the deity-stone (Shulman 1980: 93ff). This is how the principle of non-violence is ridiculed by universal acceptance of the purity of silk, which owes its existence to the mass destruction of life. This is how in a culture which repeatedly reaffirms the defiling nature of bodily products, the ultimate purifying agent is excrement. And this is how, in a festival which focuses on the honouring of a beloved and feared village deity, the worship of this deity inevitably involved considerable hurling of verbal excrement.

Just as in the Hindu pantheon the oppositions which guide people through their daily lives are both highlighted and transcended (ultra-pure deities are opposed to ultra-impure demons, but deities also indulge in impure activities), so in the Irula festival the oppositions *village:forest, harmony:conflict, divine:human, etc.*, are highlighted and transcended. It has not been hard in my analysis of Irula ritual to find what Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi calls the 'scenic opposite routes' (1987: 69) which lead us to contradictory or paradoxical uses of metaphor which the 'highways' of monolithic interpretation systematically conceal from us.



#### 4.2. Discord and contradiction

There are two senses in which ritual is said to be 'harmonious' or to promote 'harmony': this word refers to concordance between the participants in the rite (human and divine), and to concordance between the metaphoric messages of the rite. Beals's description of Karnataka village festivals provides a standard endorsement of claims made by participants that the festival expresses harmony among humans and between humans and deities:

In view of the parallels between the order of gods and the order of men, and the basic, harmonious oneness of the universe, it follows that the harmonious congregation of men in ceremonial activities is a precondition for the harmonious functioning of the universe. Ceremonies express harmony among villages, harmony among relatives, harmony among friends and neighbors, and harmony within the family. Without such harmony, there can be no ceremony. Without a ceremony, there can be no divine support of human endeavor. (1966 [1962]: 54)

I have no wish to challenge claims that these two harmonies are expressed, but I do feel that greater recognition needs to be given to the expression of discord; Irula festivals appear to be considerably less harmonious than most rites as they are portrayed by anthropologists. I suggest that we should also look more closely at what we mean by 'harmony' and 'discord' - as any ethnomusicologist will affirm, these are culture-related phenomena, but anthropologists tend to write about social 'harmony' as if it were an absolute. If the music of another culture sounds discordant to our unaccustomed ears, can we not be equally wrong about what is harmonious and what discordant about social relations? It may be that in trying to demonstrate the consistency of other peoples' metaphoric systems, we are imposing the harmonies of Western logic on cultures whose harmonic systems are quite different.

I hope it is evident by now that insofar as we can infer meaning in the metaphor of Irula festivals, the meaning soon becomes inconsistent under scrutiny. The traditions in the interpretation of puzzles, from Freudian dream-interpretation through functionalism to structuralist domestication of the savage mind and post-structuralist de-mystification, all have the aim of imposing neatness on apparent tangles. What I want to emphasise here is that although we should recognise coherence where we find it, we should be prepared to understand incoherence too: in the Irula festival and in the dialogues of the séance, *contradiction and dissonance are inherent in the metaphors that are put into play*. Here, wherever we find

apparent consistencies in the meaning we can also find contradictions of the meaning inferred.

Irulas make two very broad but mutually contradictory statements about their relationship with the divine. On the one hand, deities who don't look after them don't deserve worship, without which they lose their power and may even be 'thrown away.' On the other hand, worship is not always thanksgiving, for people claim or admit that they only go to the temple if they have problems - problems for which, regardless of the imputed human or non-human agent, the deity is ultimately responsible. As structuralists have shown, the human mind seems to work in a manner closely analogous to the muscles of the body: just as one muscle can only work if it has an opposed muscle to work against, so ideas can only work if they have opposite ideas to pit themselves against. In terms of cognition, then, ritual can best be described as a *cognitive isometric exercise*, in which the basic ideas are flexed against their opposites - order against disorder, village against forest, good against bad, private against public, and so on. A sign or symbol only acquires meaning when it is discriminated from some other contrary sign or symbol' (Leach 1976: 49); so in order to portray divine benevolence, for example, there has to be a certain amount of free play given to divine malevolence.

Most interpretations of ritual get this far, but assert that ritual will always go on to resolve the conflict, so that order will triumph over disorder, good over bad, and so on: it may be possible, however, to counter this all too tempting view by saying that while this fiction may be indulged in, the rite would fail if this pyrrhic victory were to be won, since ideas like benevolence and order would simply waste away without being threatened by their opposites. However, discrimination in meaning may not be in a contrasted pair of symbols, but within the symbol itself; Turner refers to this ability of symbols to have logically opposite referents as 'the principle of the economy (or parsimony) of symbolic reference' (Turner 1967: 99). Parsimony seems to me rather a negative way of referring to what is actually an essential feature of symbols-in-use (i.e. metaphors), rather than just a convenient shorthand. Metaphors indicate the paired oppositions which dynamise symbols and enable cognitive processes to go ahead. Thus giddiness in Irula festivals may be the miraculous transformation brought about by divine incarnation, or the disrespectful parody of this by the drunkards. As Turner puts it, 'discrepancy between significata is a quintessential property of the great symbolic dominants in all religions' (1967: 43).

He also admits that these symbols condense so much meaning that they 'come in the process of time to absorb into their meaning-content most of the major aspects of human social life, so that, in a sense, they come to represent "human society" itself' (1967: 44). Under analytic scrutiny, then, a symbol can become so all-embracing as to be effectively meaningless, though Turner doesn't quite admit this. In this regard it is worth noting Douglas's awkward attempt to contrast 'condensed' symbols - as exemplified by the Ndembu use of the *mudyi* tree (Turner 1968) - and 'diffuse' symbols - exemplified by the Mbuti pygmies' word for 'joy' (Turnbull 1961). But she contradicts her own condense:diffuse axis by acknowledging that this Mbuti word 'is the major *focussing* element of their whole system of values,' (1970: 11, emphasis supplied), - which makes 'joy' look remarkably like Turner's 'condensed' symbols. The problem, of course, is that the more meaning that is 'condensed' into a symbol, the more 'diffuse' the meaning of that symbol will be when we analyse it.

This is precisely why the idea of symbols as containers is so misleading. A much more helpful metaphor for understanding symbols is *resonance*, because we can readily understand how a dominant symbol evokes a variety of resonances, a proliferation of tones of meaning, emotional chords, tunes in the memory. And it is not hard to see that these are liable - especially in *analysis* rather than in *use* - to drown one another out; in analysis, metaphorical resonance becomes a bewildering orchestral score, whereas in use there is simply the experience.

To recognise contradictions in ritual meaning is not to expose imperfections of metaphorical logic. A symbol *in use* does not 'stand for' anything, it is used to *move* meaning between poles. This is why I have throughout this thesis used the term 'metaphor' more frequently than 'symbol,' the former term alluding more readily to the cognitive movement involved in the use of symbols. Thinking about the path 'moves' the thoughts of the worshipper from the idea of separation to the idea of unification and back again. The path provides, if you like, the tension thanks to which the symbolic play of the festival resonates with contradictions.

The body metaphors of the *séance* itself will serve to illustrate my point about the resonance of metaphoric contradictions. As I have said, the medium's body becomes the arena for struggles of various kinds, and these include personal struggles with disease-bringing spirits and the more general struggle of society with

disorder. Paradoxically, while the medium achieves incorporation of the spirit as a result of deliberately inducing *disequilibrium*, society as a whole is said to facilitate this achievement by being *controlled*, *cohesive*, and *obedient*. The shaking of the medium comes *before* trance as part of the process of conscious trance-inducement, and this is discussed in a very practical, concrete sense. More abstractly, the trance is not expected to be successful unless people are obedient to the headman, who as I have said should also be the priest.

An easy interpretation would follow Beck's (1969: 553) lead and assert that this is a portrayal of dangerous but fertile forces being ritually circumscribed by social control: the bodily chaos of trance is circumscribed by the control of the circle of onlookers. But if, unlike Beck, we are not predisposed to find coherent schemas in operation, we will acknowledge that we have here a highlighting of the opposition of chaos and control, but no straightforward patterning of these in an absolutist sense. The medium, who revels in bodily disequilibrium, must also exercise control over his own body - in a supreme physical effort - in order to achieve this state of disequilibrium; the collectivity, whose portrayal of a semblance of unity is said to help the medium achieve trance, also induces disequilibrium in a sense by leaving the ordered world of the village and entering the chaos of the jungle.

The centrality of self-contradiction as a theme can also be seen in the structure of the séances. The séance oscillates between, in Firth's categorisation (1969), the communicative 'spirit mediumship' of the verbal dialogues, and the frenzied non-communicative (although expressive) 'possession' of the interludes. Some might interpret these interludes as simply a convenient way for the medium to collect his thoughts, to compose himself for the next verse. But I suggest that there is an illocution expressed here too, which amounts to a taunt levelled at those who are busy trying to work out the meaning of the preceding dialogue.

#### **4.3. Ritual and trance, order and disorder**

My analysis of Irula séances has contrasted the apparent anti-ritualism of the séance with the pretended rigidity of the encompassing rite. To this extent, the ordered and formal rites, ideally expressing the continuity of ancestral lore, define an ordered world of humans vis-à-vis a chaotic world of deities and animality. And superficially, the former would seem to encompass the latter, bringing to mind Biardeau's suggestion that in Vedic times 'it is the capacity to perform rites - and its

corollary, the capacity for liberation from rites - that distinguishes man both from the animals and from the Vedic gods' (1989 [1981]: 35).

But I have also acknowledged that such a contrast is more apparent than real, since the rite never in practice follows prescribed formulae, and the improvisations of the séance dialogue are based on formulaic patterns. This analysis strongly argues for a rethinking of the usual assumption that ritual is intended to impart order to the chaotic realities of everyday life. Thibau, for example, has suggested that the real opposite of the sacred is not the profane, but the absurd, the insignificant (1975: 87). The arch-proponent of the interpretation of ritual as entelechy is undoubtedly Geertz, according to whom 'sacred symbols function to synthesize a people's ethos - the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood - and their world-view - the picture they have of the way things in sheer actuality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order' (1966: 3). The arch-enemies of this symbolic ordering are things like 'the *strange opacity* of certain empirical events, the *dumb senselessness* of intense or inexorable pain, and the enigmatic *unaccountability* of gross iniquity' (*ibid*: 23, my emphases). In this account, ritual should provide (respecting the order of each word I have italicised) *familiarity, enlightenment, eloquence, sense, and explanation*; the ultimate aim of ritual is to establish order, and any puzzles are only heuristic stepping-stones on the way to making sense of the world. I don't deny that ritual does this, but I want to make a plea for due recognition of the other function of ritual, which is to make *nonsense* of the world - to point up and even to exaggerate rather than to deny the world's absurdities.

The reader may have noticed how my insistence on the bi-directionality of ritual - on the complementary processes that make sense of nonsense and make nonsense of sense - matches my insistence on the bi-directionality of centripetal and centrifugal forces of metaphor. Once again, we find in the literature a general assumption that rites, like metaphor generally, are concerned with ordering rather than disordering. In Fernandez's terminology, the metaphors of ritual concretise the inchoate: 'As for the inchoate condition of the subjects themselves, Bwiti regularly, fulfilling its role as a religion, predicates a more concrete and manageable identity upon the believers' (1986: 183). Throughout his work, he assumes that 'in general, the semantic movement accomplished by metaphor is from the abstract, and inchoate in the subject to the more concrete, ostensive and easily graspable in the metaphoric predicate' (1977: 104).

Perhaps his emphasis on centripetal predication derives from the experience of the Fang Bwiti cult, which has the specific function of uniting disparate people in a bewilderingly changing world, aiming at 'a coherent worldview' which demonstrates 'the integrity of being' and 'the coherence of experience' (1982: 570). But I am left with a suspicion that it is the encoding of chaotic data into an ethnographic text which demands integrity and coherence, and that the end-result is entelechic misrepresentation. Such accounts become more instructive when political motivation is invoked; for example, Brandes interprets the Andalusian carnival as a 'sop' provided by cunning politicians to keep working class people in their place:

The parade is a metaphoric statement of the potential social chaos, of the threat both to the individual and to society if the forces of order and control are not permitted to prevail. Paradoxically, by institutionalizing an annual occasion like this, during which disorder reigns, the people of San Blas demonstrate to themselves the advantages of predictability in social life and some of the ways in which predictability can be attained. (1980: 90)

Marriott provides a similar interpretation of festivals in northern India, which 'express and support the proper structures of patriarchy and gerontocracy in the family, of elaborately stratified relations among the castes, and of dominance by the landowners in villages generally' (1966: 206). The *holi* festival provides an opportunity for women to get their revenge on men for one day in the year, and for all lower castes to openly express their defiance of higher castes. He interprets this 'negative expression' of chaos and of break-down in the social order as a prelude to the re-establishment of order with new clean clothes and a truce; however, as he describes it the dye-throwing comes *after* the putting on of new clothes, which would suggest that disorder is not as rigidly circumscribed as he portrays it.

Be that as it may, there is no such political conspiracy in Irula society, and in any case it is hard to imagine them being seduced by the idea of total predictability. There are of course suggestions of coherence in the Irula festival, and of a desire to return to a whole - emphatically so in the relation of human unity to the appearance of the deity. But I have made it clear that to seek out the coherent world-views presented by the festival is to tell only half the story, the other half of which is that the festival presents and even exaggerates the incoherencies of everyday life. And in terms of metaphoric movement, the narrative metaphor of an Irula festival isn't only *centripetal*, concretising society by bringing people together and familiarising the abstract notion of divinity by personifying it and making it conversible with -

even, quite literally, graspable; it also operates *centrifugally*, etherealising or abstracting a present and graspable collectivity, reflecting it in a bewildering spiritual entity, a deity who is both here and not-here, both comprehensible and incomprehensible, both just and scandalously unjust. This is not surprising if we recognise that ritual does not only and inevitably make everyday life seem less puzzling, but that it also takes everyday life apart, making it seem much more puzzling and problematic than it is usually perceived to be. In Fernandez's analysis, 'metaphors provide organizing images which ritual action puts into effect' (1977: 101); while not denying the validity of this statement, what I am putting forward is a modest plea for the recognition of the *disorganising* function of ritual metaphors. Indeed, some measure of disorganisation is implicit in the term metaphor itself (*meta* = change, *phora* = motion). If rituals may be described as 'solutions to ontological, existential problems' (Morgan 1984: 96), it is equally important to recognise that they also function as *dissolutions* of ontological, existential *assumptions*.

Langer was undoubtedly right to see symbol-using as indicative of the human 'need' for encapsulating chaotic experiences:

[Man] can adapt himself somehow to anything his imagination can cope with; but he cannot deal with Chaos. Because his characteristic function and highest asset is conception, his greatest fright is to meet what he cannot construe - the 'uncanny,' as it is popularly called. (Langer 1951 [1942]: 287)

Probably the most basic contradiction which every individual mind and every society must somehow come to terms with is the problem of the need for order and the fact of disorder, as exemplified by Weber's 'problem of theodicy' (1966 [1922]: 139); this contradiction has been formulated by many cosmologists (e.g. Eliade 1954 [1949]) as the opposition *cosmos: chaos* - a puzzling idea, since it is hard to imagine a cosmography with such optimistic emphasis on order that no place within it was allotted to chaos. At any rate, there is widespread agreement now that these binary oppositions, like the variations on the theme of the *nature:culture* opposition, are not defined in the same manner in every society. There is also agreement that neither of these matches the *sacred:profane* opposition, or at least not in every society.

These issues of *definition* have by now been dealt with reasonably efficiently; but there is a further issue of *evaluation* which still needs clarification. Most writers have by now recognised that it would be ridiculous to expect societies to

unambiguously equate *nature:culture* or *sacred:profane* with *good:bad*; but there seems to be implicit or explicit assumption, in many cosmological debates, that the opposition *cosmos:chaos* is universally evaluated as *good:bad*. If chaos has a place in ritual, the assumption is that it is there to be exorcised, ridiculed, exposed as 'unreal,' or simply domesticated and brought under control. Of all the grandiose yet trite philosophies expressed in rites, this would be the most grandiose and trite.

Although chaos is by definition undefinable, there are several conceptualisations in the Irula festival which point towards chaos; and the pointing finger is not necessarily one of terror or disapproval. Instead of affirming that the ultimate good is order as opposed to chaos, Irula rites strongly suggest that the ultimate good is the imagination, which relies on metaphor. One side to this is the process of making the unknown knowable, and this is what motivates the fear of a deity who refuses to manifest. The complementary process of metaphor is that of *reformulating the known, the too-familiar, in a new and often extravagant, even chaotic light*. Thus the domestic deity who lives in the centre of the village and is 'kept' or 'controlled' (*aanDa*) by the priest-headman, is rendered wild and problematic in the festival. More abstractly, there is no pretence, in these festivals, that metaphor is unproblematic or makes order out of chaos.

In apparent contradiction of the ritual-as-entelechy school, Douglas has acknowledged that there are some societies which positively embrace the chaotic event of bodily dissociation in trance (1970: 14); however, she is sufficiently hide-bound by the association of ritual with rigidity to describe trance-loving societies as 'anti-ritualistic'. Taking first the question of ritualism, we have seen that Irulas thoroughly enjoy symbolic performance of supposedly systematic rites, but that in practice these performances are chaotic and often unsystematic. We also seen that the séance is highly ritualistic (or formulaic), but that it is meant on the contrary to be non-formulaic and unpredictable. As for trance, Douglas predicts that bodily control is valued in 'ritualistic' societies which emphasise bodily and other cosmographic boundaries because they emphasise group boundaries; Irulas, who are relatively unconcerned with group boundaries, confirm her prediction that we will find here 'the sacralisation of states of trance and bodily dissociation' (*ibid*: 14).

But Douglas's theory can't cope with a society which doesn't unequivocally or unambiguously match their evaluation of bodily control and ritualism with an



inverse evaluation of dissociation and internal states. The Irulas' scepticism about the connection between worship and rain-making would seem to support Douglas's prediction that a society lacking 'tight communal bonds' would be relatively unconvinced of the efficacy of ritual; yet my analysis of the festival shows that Irulas set a great deal of store by symbolic performance. And although I have given the impression that they positively valued trance, even this is not unambiguous; it is usually ridiculed by the drunkards, and on many occasions people told me and announced publicly during the festival that séances were not essential to the festival. And how would Douglas react when confronted by Irula ritual which emphasises and expresses both outward form and inner states, both script and improvisation? She has tried to distinguish whole societies according to their 'informality' and 'formality' (*ibid*: 75), yet there is a constant oscillation in the Irula festival between extreme formality and extreme informality, and in the séance itself between formal and informal modes of addressing the deity.

Douglas's theory trips over the possibility of contextual inconsistencies within societies or even, as here, within the same event. Anyone keen to confirm the theory could simply select at random from events or from explicitly-stated preferences which confirm her theory; her own analysis of the London Irish, for example, selects ritualism from the level of preference and ignores the practice of getting wildly drunk on Friday nights, a practice which could well be described as ritualistic bodily dissociation occurring collectively, regularly, canonically even, in contexts set apart from everyday life.<sup>1</sup>

The use of the trance-metaphor in Irula rites indicates that Douglas's coupling of trance with disorder is in any case invalid. Not only is the trance achieved in a controlled setting, but it is also achieved as a result of humans acting in concert; and once the state of dissociation is achieved and the realm of chaos entered, the formlessness is found to be, for all its paradoxes, parables and puzzles, full of familiar and friendly turns of phrase, scripted motifs - in short, full of form. There is meaning in this madness.

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<sup>1</sup>A colourful example of the contradictory evaluation of bodily dissociation is to be found in Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (p.420), where we are told that the ancient Goths of Germany 'had all of them a wise custom of debating every thing of importance to their state, twice: that is - once drunk, and once sober: drunk - that their councils might not want vigour; and sober - that they might not want discretion.'

Had she associated the Irula fondness for bodily dissociation with their general lack of clear social boundaries and role, Douglas might well have used them, just as she used the !Kung, as an example of the 'positive cult of trance as such' (Douglas 1970: 75). Yet if we examine Lorna Marshall's analysis, which Douglas used, we find that far from being associated with disorder, the trance was a focus for social cohesion, just as it appears to be in Irula festivals: 'the curing dance draws people of a Bushman band together into concerted action as nothing else does. They stamp and clap and sing with such precision that they become like an organic being (Marshall 1961: 236). If this is what Douglas would call the bodily expression of disorder, then the process of metaphorisation has gone seriously astray in this case. I am not suggesting that bodily dissociation in Irula rites isn't metaphorically linked with disorder; but it is essential to note that it is tempered with metaphors of order, so that the trance event as a whole embraces both order and disorder. Chaos, then, is evaluated neither positively nor negatively in Irula rites; further, the association of obedient concerted action and the achievement of the state of dissociation seems to deny that there is such a thing as a valid opposition of chaos and cosmos.

We will find further evidence of the contradictory evaluation of chaos in Irula rites if we examine briefly the metaphoric role of pain in the *séance*. The linkage of pain with chaos is, I think, justifiable on the grounds that pain is everywhere a feature of what Geertz (1966: 14) has called the 'bafflement' which every individual feels with respect to chaos. Several interpretations of the role of pain in rites involving trance suggest themselves on logical grounds alone. As we saw earlier (2.5.2), self-mortification by the medium is to be interpreted as a part of a deal struck with the deity, as is the case with many other Hindu mortificatory institutions which usually also involve trance. Second, an entelechist would be quite justified in interpreting the role of pain in trance as the metaphorical mastering of chaos; since many of the bafflements of chaos concern the meaninglessness of pain, the demonstration of control over pain in rites of all sorts is an example of an optimistic portrayal of suffering controlled, even denied, and at the very least imbued with cosmological meaning. Third, an interpretation of trance in terms of Van Gennep's rites of passage model would interpret pain as part of a rite of separation, metaphorically alluding to the pain of birth; this kind of interpretation is consistent with the fact that, in Irula *séances*, pain is essential to the achievement of the trance-state - the medium actually achieves the trance-state by painful contraction of the muscles, chewing bitter leaves, and swallowing burning camphor. A fourth interpretation suggests that pain, particularly in the form of self-flagellation, is

indulged in throughout the trance to such an extent that it constitutes a celebration of chaos, of the sheer meaninglessness of pain. There is a fifth interpretation, contradictory to the fourth, which suggests that pain symbolises social control: the whip or cane is an essential item of the ritual paraphernalia kept by the priest who ideally is also the headman, and he also administers some of the whipping. And finally, supporting the latter interpretation, there is the fact that hypostatizing deities suffer because of human quarrels; this is gruesomely evidenced by their frequent screams of pain, and by pitiful cries such as ‘*ayyoo!* They’re tormenting me!’

In the ethnography of southern Indian ritual, there is a general emphasis on the ‘containment’ of disorder in the cosmography of temples, in myth, and in ritual actions. A clear example is Hart’s discussion of the ‘containment’ of sacred power:

In ancient times, the Tamils put up memorial stones to house the spirits of dead kings, heroes, and *satiis* so that they could keep these spirits under control by performing the proper rituals to the stones (which involved worship with blood, liquor, and drumming). ...The single most important aspect of worshipping a god or a spirit - of invoking its presence - is order: the proper treatment of the idol and its surroundings, observance of the proper times, the recitation of the proper texts, and so on. This notion extends also to the stories that, in some sense, contain the spirit whose story they tell: they must be performed in a proper manner. Since extemporized performances, which have no written source behind them, are quite fluid, it is felt necessary to have an invariant written ‘source’ behind them, the real container of the tale. (1986: 259)

Here, the criteria by which metaphoric ordering is judged ‘important’ are not made clear; nor are they balanced with an assessment of the countervailing portrayals of valued manifestations of disorder or ‘fluidity.’ Dumont likewise veers towards entelechy; for him, purity and impurity classify the Hindu’s opposition between that part of man which is religious, hence social, and that which is natural; the former has dignity and is ‘pure,’ the latter is ‘base’ (1980 [1966]: 65). His notion of the ‘encompassment’ of power by status (1980 [1966]: 212ff) - not itself a clearly expressed indigenous metaphor - is itself an entelechic representation which betrays an attachment to the notion of containment. A more sophisticated approach would recognise that Hindu values oscillate (or resonate) between nature controlled (society makes purity after the disturbing natural event) and nature uncontrolled (the wildness of the forest-dwelling renouncer); thus those people who are seen to be in some way closer to nature and less controllable - Harijans, women - are less pure than those who represent society - Brahmans and Kings, but the world-renouncer, who *chooses* to live close to nature and beyond the everyday concerns of society is the most pure human of all.

We should be wary of assuming, then, that Hindu values unequivocally approve of social control and disapprove of the uncontrollable and unpredictable aspects of nature. Superficially, this message seems to be readable in various cultural facts - sex is impure, but marriage is a highly auspicious and purifying event; uncontrolled sexuality (the goddess) is hot and dangerous, controlled sexuality (Parvati) is a source of purity and strength; birth causes pollution but naming ceremonies end the pollution and are auspicious; death is impure but funerals purify by re-establishing control; and the cow, the most controllable of domesticated animals, whose milk metaphorically suggests the the primary social unit of mother-child bond, is of course also the purest of beings. But in practice it is the (relatively) impure deities who are more often turned to for assistance than (relatively) pure deities; many world-renouncers derive ritual status from indulging in the most impure activities - eating meat and even human corpses (Parry 1982), unrestricted sex, alcoholism; some temples are periodically defiled in rites which are thought to renew the power of the temple<sup>1</sup>; the priests of many temples are forbidden to wash; fertility of young women is ensured not just through submission but through defilement - accepting a mother's brother's hand-rinsings<sup>2</sup>, eating a banana spat out by an Untouchable, lying face down in the dirt on the path to a temple<sup>3</sup>; and above all, the most efficacious purifying agent is cow-dung, supplied by the purest of beings but by the category which epitomizes defilement.

Shulman (1980: 26, 217-223, 1986: 114ff) acknowledges the ambivalence of Hindu values when he recognises the tension between order and disorder and the potential fruitfulness of the latter; but he assumes nevertheless that temple cosmography, ritual, and myth all insist that ultimately disorder, if given a certain amount of release, must be contained. Blackburn and Ramanujan, on the other hand, seem to be nearer to my own understanding of the interplay of containment and release when they suggest that 'we think of folk and classical as 'codes' in a culture-wide diglossia': 'folk and classical traditions ...complement each other as two ends of a continuum between the control and release of energy. ...The dialectic they form (between control and release) is constant across the several contexts. ...In fact, any item may be associated with either polarity, depending on context' (1986: 20).

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<sup>1</sup>This rite, performed at a temple in Kerala, was reported in the *Indian Express* during 1988.

<sup>2</sup>This is performed by Irulas at the girl's menarche ceremony.

<sup>3</sup>Performed in the Nilgiris and neighbouring Coimbatore District at many multi-caste festivals.

Indeed, it would not be difficult to counter Dumont's insistence on 'encompassment' of impure by pure by pointing out that in temple cosmography it is the 'pure' aspects of divinity that are most emphatically 'contained.' Brahmanical temples tend to be centrally located and surrounded by walls, and vegetarian deities tend to be inside whereas meat-eating deities tend to be outside (e.g. Good 1985: 135). Eck has suggested that 'in building a temple, the universe in microcosm is reconstructed' (1985 [1981]: 59). Yet in the same paragraph she refers to the emphasis on exorcism in the construction of temples, whereby unwelcome spirits, gods, and demons are excluded. Such a temple is *not*, surely, a microcosm at all if it optimistically attempts to exclude undesirable elements. If it is the desirable entities that are contained in the temple, the exorcistic preparation of the site emphasises the encompassment of this benevolent enclave by malevolent powers.

In Irula festivals there is considerably more emphasis on release than on containment; we might compare the effervescence of Irula trance with the controlled divinisation of Hindu ascetics and tantrics, or contrast the closed walls of the Hindu temple with the open wildness of the Irula forest shrine. But above all, in Irula festivals the opposition between containment and release is highlighted, and the interplay of these two points to a ritual transcendence of this opposition. Phrased differently, the festival conveys the message that there is considerable disorder in the world, but that this should be positively valued and balanced with order rather than denied or contained altogether. As someone once shouted to a deity who was criticising a drunkard, 'what use is a pot of *pongāl* without the froth?'

#### 4.4. Revelation and obfuscation

'In a Symbol there is concealment and yet revelation' (Carlyle 1902 [1833]); if symbols and the metaphors associated with them are sometimes used revelatory ways, they are not always very efficient revealers. There is more to this than saying that they do not quite succeed in revealing what they are meant to reveal: most of the time, people use symbols to reveal only in a distorted or euphemistic way, or else they deliberately use them to conceal part or all of the truth. It would seem, then, that the optimism suggested by the etymology of the Greek *sumbolos* - 'uniting that which has been divided' - would need some tempering.

If we accept that religion in general has to do with attempts by man to communicate with the unknown, then much of what is said about religion also holds good for processes of metaphor. There is, for example, a virtually universal myth of a past golden age in which man and god were one, or at least in which heaven and earth were next door neighbours and humans could easily reach and communicate with the gods; one of the things people aim to achieve in rites, then, is to temporarily re-create that golden age. And they try to do so through metaphors which establish links between parties which have been artificially divided. To this extent most ritual would seem to be concerned with celebration of the potentialities of metaphoric processes for re-imposing order on the chaos of the unknown. And there is no shortage of evidence to back up this kind of interpretation.

To say that the re-uniting process is inefficient, that religious metaphors don't achieve the desired re-imposition of order, would not be to deny that people act as if they do. And this latter assumption seems to be implicit in most analyses of ritual. The metaphors of Irula ritual, however, seem to me to place at least as much emphasis on division as they do on unification.

The path to the temple is a dominating concern of the festival. It is honoured with barefootedness and with its own special 'path-music' (*vöyyi kwä:l*). It is washed at the start and finish of the festival by the priest's wife; this action complements the priest's watering of the god-stone and the village; the husband washes a symbol of continuity and the wife washes a symbol of linkage - although by washing only the threshold of the village she also hints at separation. The attention paid to the path conveys a message remarkably similar to that conveyed by the etymology of the Ndembu word for a symbol, *chijikijilu*, from *ku-jikijila*, 'to blaze a trail,' which links the unknown bush to known paths - 'a symbol, then, is a blaze or landmark, something that connects the unknown with the known' (Turner 1967: 48).

In Irula ritual cosmography, the path is a link between the known world of village and the unknown world of the forest, and this is extrapolated to the general ideas of linking man with deity and the known with the unknown. At a metacommunicative level it stands, then, for the process of metaphor itself, since it constitutes the detour (i.e. the departure and the return) by which the known world of the village becomes known anew - the metaphoric movement, that is, by which the entropy of banal knowledge is counteracted. But if it represents unification with or privileged access to the sacred, transhuman world of the forest, there can hardly be a more

telling reminder of separation than a path which is difficult to climb and which has to be re-cut at each festival. Most Hindus are separated from divinity by pollution and by temple walls; Irula cosmography may lack these divisions but it certainly makes up for it in other ways.

In establishing a link between divided parties, the path at the same time is used to achieve the opposite effect, which is to remind us of the division. The separation of humans from divinity is also hinted at by *cutting* actions in the festival (the verb *vōTTu* - 'cut' - is used for these) - the division of the coconut and the separation of the sacrificial animal from its head, which goes to god's representative the priest. Complementary to these actions are the *tying* actions (the verb for these is *kōTTu* - 'tie') - tying up a money offering, tethering a goat.

All this is reaffirmed by the organising metaphor of the séance itself. The parable, which is an aid to understanding, a link between the known and the unknown, is at the same time a barrier to understanding - it is both divine revelation and divine obscurantism. Irula séances both deny and yet reaffirm the distance separating man from spiritual beings; they affirm both the ease and the difficulty of communicating with them; not only the séance, but the entire rite from start to finish is suffused with ambiguity on this point. With this in mind it is hardly surprising that the deity should by default be a 'woman'; she is treated in a manner analogous to a bride, and like the in-marrying wife in any society which emphasises patriliney, she is both incorporated into a group and a reminder of the dependence of that group on other groups. It is thus singularly appropriate that it should be a woman - the priest's wife - who waters the path.

#### 4.5. Trance, bewilderment, and the undomesticated mind

Evans-Pritchard tells us that 'Nuer say that they are just ignorant people who do not understand the mysteries of life and death, and of God and the spirits, and why things happen as they do. A favourite Nuer expression is '*yie wicda*,' 'my head goes round' or 'I am bewildered'" (1956: 11). This is not just a problem for Nuer. Everywhere, the religious imagination is essentially *sauvage*<sup>1</sup>, in the more resonant sense which the French word has. It 'saves' itself from reality, becomes wild, and in this unhinged state produces bewilderment - a condition which is dramatically expressed in trance-rites generally. The etymological connection between

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<sup>1</sup>I am alluding of course to Lévi-Strauss's title *La Pensée Sauvage*.

bewilderment and wilderness is not fortuitous; things which we don't understand are located in the wilderness, and it is to the wilderness that we go, metaphorically but often quite literally too, to deal indirectly with or to escape from the puzzles of everyday life. In trance as in ritual generally, people enter the wilderness, the arena of chaos, in order to return to normality, cosmos, strengthened and with a new awareness of the senses. In Irula séances the patient's worries are referred to as *niya anja panja vana* - 'the worries of your five-famine forest.'

As we have seen, the very existence of the séance acknowledges the inadequacies of ritualistic performance, yet throughout the séance there are constant reminders of the inadequacy of language in communicating with, and expressing, the divine. This is a problem which faces theologians everywhere. As Burke puts it,

there is this notable difference between the naturalist and the supernaturalist, so far as terminology is concerned: Whereas the supernaturalist has had to recognize explicitly that his words about the supernatural are but analogical, figurative, metaphorical, the naturalist would persuade us that his observed nonverbal realm is available to us in its immediate sensory aspects, completely free of verbal and sociopolitical elements... (1966: 379)

The séance, then, parades the naturalistic immediacy of trance vis-à-vis the mediacy of formal ritualism. The language of the séance is more efficiently evocative than the symbolic code of formal ritualism. However, divinity isn't constructed entirely out of metaphors, but out of repeated sounds; whereas metaphors *evoke*, repetitions *invoke* and, as psychologists have shown, produce radical alterations of our consciousness - hence the semantically untrammelled syllables in which the divine is invoked - *God, Om, Allah*, and the Irula '*hao! hao! hao!*'

Trance, as I have described it here, shares many features with trance as described elsewhere in India and indeed throughout the world. It is culturally stereotyped behaviour in ritual contexts which may result in a peculiar kind of speech which tends to employ more ellipsis, redundancy, and innovative metaphors, and fewer straightforward propositions than does everyday speech. And although the salient feature of trance is bodily disequilibrium, this is a product of social and personal control. It takes considerable experience in order to be able to control the trance sufficiently to make meaningful pronouncements; this constitutes perhaps an important diachronic message of the trance-ritual. This is similar to the Murias' progression from uncontrolled to controlled trance: 'the young inexperienced mediums ... manifest the most extreme behavioural aberrations, and ... appear more dissociated, while the older more experienced and indeed more important mediums,



frequently seem to be enacting a trance, rather than undergoing one' (Gell 1980: 236).

There is generally a comparative message in the different manifestations of trance in India, which accords higher status to those who exhibit the greatest control over divine invasion. But I would dispute Gell's claim that we can draw a distinction between 'enacting' and 'undergoing' trance, since to say this is to suggest that we can dichotomise between trance which is internally motivated that which is externally produced.<sup>1</sup> The state of trance, however controlled or uncontrolled it may be, is never something that people 'undergo' passively: it is a dramatisation of self even if the actor is unaware of the process by which he or she reaches the state of trance. More importantly, to imagine such a clear-cut dichotomy is to render irrelevant the role of ambiguity in the performance of trance; and we will never understand religion at all if we believe we can disambiguate the external deity-as-society from the internal deity-as-individual.

In the multi-caste festivals I witnessed, exuberant trance dramatised the presence of the divine in the priest as well as in many of the bystanders, but only within the main temple did this usually result in people worshipping those entranced, and only the priest, a specialist in trance, uttered divine pronouncements about the welfare of worshippers. But both the personnel (those possessed) and the deities imputed are accorded low status until there is some indication that the power of trance is controlled. There is a similar contrast in Irula festivals between the peripheral possession of women, which is less ritually circumscribed and more spontaneous, and the more controlled trance of men, which is more likely to result in dialogue. Irula mediums do not reduce the intensity of the physical manifestations of trance, though, and this agrees with the more tolerant metaphoric treatment of disorder in their rites generally.

Dumont notes the generally controlled nature of Kallar trance, which he describes as 'something like a degraded form of asceticism' - 'the absence of excess is rather

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<sup>1</sup>de Heusch regards the Haitian cult of voodoo or its Dahomian equivalent as the most typical examples of 'authentic possession'; although he doesn't provide examples of 'inauthentic possession' or 'less authentic possession,' the implication that possession is something which can be authenticated at the theoretical level remains (1981: 152). Adjudication of the authenticity of possession is an important social phenomenon, but not one which we should implicitly reproduce in our analysis.

impressive, whether the role is well acted or whether the man actually succeeds in passing within a few moments from one psychic level to another by means of a great nervous effort and a control of the breath as he gives the impression of doing' (1986 [1957]: 387). Again, we have the implicit contrast between 'acting' and really undergoing trance - though in this case it seems to be the peripheral possession which is, in Dumont's view, 'acted,' whereas in Gell's view it is the experienced mediums who 'act.' It is not clear in what sense trance is a 'degraded' form of mysticism<sup>1</sup> or asceticism; although Dumont doesn't say so, it would seem important to contrast absolutely the hyperventilation and increased heart-rate of the trance-medium and the much more controlled, calmer trance of the yogic-tantric ascetic who slows down his breathing and reduces his heart-beat (Eliade 1964: 437). Both the yogic-tantric and spirit-medium's techniques are connected with mastery over dangerous occult forces or 'fire,' yet they achieve this by seemingly opposite methods. The explanation may lie in the fact that the yogic ascetic is already outside society, whereas the spirit-medium lives a normal profane life outside the festival; only the latter still has to be made metaphorically wild before encountering the divine.

In other words, although the medium's preparation for encountering the divine is in some ways analogous to the renunciation of the forest-dwelling ascetic, as Reiniche (1979: 162) has observed, the medium's performance of renunciation emphasises metaphoric wildness, whereas the ascetic's performance emphasises metaphoric control. For Irulas, it is the priest, not the medium, who must perform austerities in preparation for the festival, and who ought to spend half the year as a forest-dwelling ascetic.

Although there are many types of trance in India, most are generally supposed to be associated with disorder and with capricious, violent, or inferior deities (Reiniche 1979: 211). Above all, even in the most ritually controlled conditions, trance is involuntary (Gell 1980: 234; Reiniche 1979: 180). By contrast, trance as the central event in the Irula festival is voluntary and participatory, and is not associated with any particular deities, capricious, malevolent, or otherwise.

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<sup>1</sup>Staal has suggested that despite the philosophical differences between the approaches, *samaadhi*, the mystical state aimed at by the Brahman, is 'from an anthropological point of view' related to possession of shamans by local spirits (1980: 268).

However, just as I suggested in the previous section that disorder is more prevalent as a metaphoric theme in Hindu ritual than has generally been recognised, so it would seem that trance is more central to Hindu worship than is generally acknowledged. Even in the normal performance of temple duties by hereditary priests, the idiom of trance may appear, indicating the divinisation of the priest and the humanisation of the deity. Gell (1980: 238) describes how the Muria priest has to stand with one foot in front of the other when encircling the icon with the offering; it is hard to keep balance, and as a result the priest trembles as if possessed. This brings to mind the one foot in front of the other posture often used by the Irula medium.

Staal has pointed out that 'possession and trembling are in fact part of the Sanskritic great tradition': *Manusmriti* texts refer to Brahmins as *vipra*, - 'the quivering one' - and 'the word *vipra* continues to suggest that the Brahmin is the trembling Vedic seer who is possessed by inspiring gods' (1963: 267). And Fuller tells us that the temple priest begins a rite by invoking the god within himself and then worships himself: 'the god is "humanised," but, because the god's power is transmitted to the worshipper progressively identified with him, man is simultaneously "deified," a result most powerfully symbolised by the rite's final element, the camphor flame' (1984: 15). He does concede, however, that Hindu ritual (but not texts) also recognises the impossibility of total identification of man with deity - the flame dies out at the end of the rite, 'symbolising the transience of imperfect man's communication with the deities and requiring him repeatedly to attempt it.' While the enactment of possession temporarily mingles man with deity, the circumscription of the event in rite, and the contrast between trance-behaviour and normal behaviour, reinforce the idea of the normal separation of the two. In ritual we confront the inadequacies of our categories; the identification of the priest and god expresses the inadequacy or undesirability of dividing the human world from the divine, but by so doing it actually reaffirms the distinction between the two. In the Irula séance, there is a further underlining of the separation of humans from their deity: it is the medium who 'becomes' the deity, while the priest is the primary representative of the villagers *in opposition* to the deity. The medium speaks for the deity, the priest speaks for the people in opposition to the deity. It is the priest who is reliable - he is the hereditary representative of the whole village - while the medium is unreliable, there being no predicting who is likely to successfully become possessed.

I do not want to suggest, though, that the priest represents the collectivity while the medium is individualistic. This kind of suggestion has often been made with respect to shamans - for example in Lévi-Strauss's analogy between the shaman and the psychotherapist (1963: 180), or in Piddington's attempt to construct a universal distinction between shamans, concerned with private or individual magic, from priests, who carry out public ceremonies on behalf of the collectivity (1952 [1950]: 365). Although it is important to recognise, where we find them, distinctions between personnel dealing with group concerns and those dealing with individuals, we should not expect this to match the priest:shaman or priest:medium distinction. Some events which look as though they are private concerns must be performed in public - for example, an exorcism of an individual may be an *essentially* public event (Kapferer 1983). In the Irula division of labour, both priest and medium are concerned with both private and public concerns: the priest is ideally the headman, who houses the deity and calls the festival, but also accepts individual offerings; the medium is non-hereditary in recognition of the lack of human control over the event, he communicates about the semi-private problems of individuals and individual families, but he can only go into a trance with the concerted efforts of the collectivity.

Indeed, trance in general appears to be an essentially public event, relying as it does on public acknowledgement or, in the Irula case, being explicitly said to be produced by collective efforts. Rouget has likewise pointed out that 'possession trance ...consists in a change of identity [that] would be meaningless if it were not recognized by the group. ...This is why the music is provided by the group' (1985: 325); and he contrasts the public nature of the trance-event with that of the shaman whose 'adventure' is primarily an individual affair and who makes his own music. This is a clear indication that Irulas are not alone in bringing group involvement and conscious public inducement into what looks superficially like a spontaneous and individualistic event. Superficially, the merging of the medium with the deity contrasts with the marked disjunction, even opposition, between priest and deity.

Turner draws a similar distinction between the 'person-to-person' communication of mediums, shamans, or prophets, who have an 'I-Thou' relationship with deities or spirits, and more mediated communication of priests, who have an 'I-It relationship with the transhuman' (terms borrowed from Buber's *I and Thou*); 'between the priest and the deity intervenes the institution' (1968: 439). By

contrasts Irula priests and mediums may be said to have I-You, an I-Thou, and I-It relationships with deities (as was evidenced by the variety of pronouns used in the séance). The medium has in addition an I-I relationship of temporary identification<sup>1</sup>, and all these relationships may be played upon in the same séance. Ideally, the dialogue of the Irula séance is also given the appearance of spontaneity in contrast to the more scripted priestly rite. But as we have seen, the séance is in practice a long chain of formulaic dialogues, and the priestly rite is not as rigid as it is made out to be.

Weber also recognised that both collectivist and individualist tendencies are identifiable in trance-behaviour, but he tended to emphasise the latter; he saw the evolution of religion as a progression from the more physical inducements of 'ecstasy as an instrument of salvation or self-deification,' to more transcendental or metaphoric means, involving 'a planned methodology of sanctification' (1966 [1922]: 157). In early religion, 'organic inhibitions were broken down by the production of acute toxic states induced by alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs which have intoxicating effects; by music and dance; by sexuality; or by a combination of all three - in short by orgies.' Later, this orgiastic intoxication is replaced by 'a much more enduring possession of the charismatic condition ...which may be experienced as either a dreamlike mystical illumination or a more active and ethical conversion' (*ibid*: 158). He might well have been puzzled to find, in the Irula festival, such a combination of different means used to achieve trance, from the grossly physical bombardment of the senses (hyperventilation, the bitter margosa leaves, smoke, music, noise, shaking) to more abstract inducements in the form of priestly invocation, collective will, and the expectation of divine arrival. He might also have been puzzled by the mixture of gross instrumentality and abstract metaphorical expressions of ethics in the séance.

#### 4.6. Physical and metaphysical disequilibrium

Rituals have often been assumed to be 'ideal representations' of how things *ought to be*; Irula ritual representations are 'ideal' only in the sense that they *imagine alternatives* good or bad, and not in the more usual sense of 'ideal' as entelechy. If ritual portrays desired results, it does so here only in a roundabout way by

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<sup>1</sup>The possession-trance may be contrasted with the trance of the mystic; the former is clearly framed so that the person is separated from the deity after the event, whereas the mystic aims at a progressive realisation of the divine within him.

portraying undesirable conditions and beings - illness in the gross physical sense is represented by the disequilibrium, and this is linked with the more abstract notion of chaos. Illness is further represented as arguments with the deity and with the spirit world in general. But we should remember that the disequilibrium of trance is also regarded as highly desirable - if trance does not occur, the deity has not turned up and the séance, perhaps the whole festival, has failed. We can infer, then, that the séance does not deny the reality of illness or enact an end to illness, but instead affirms the value of illness as an important component of reality and, moreover, as an avenue to the deity. Through the enactment of illness in the disequilibrium of trance, the séance is supposed to set people on the road to health.

Eliade has suggested that, for 'primitives,' suffering is always explained as the result of some magic, sorcery, or divine intervention: 'in each case, the suffering becomes intelligible and hence tolerable. Against this suffering, the primitive struggles with all the magico-religious means available to him - but he tolerates it morally because *it is not absurd*' (Eliade 1949/54: 98). The clearest example of a philosophy which attempts to normalise suffering and make it meaningful is the Hindu doctrine of *karma*. But Irula séances do not seem to deny the absurdity of suffering; instead of being blamed on human sin and on consistently applied divine retribution, suffering is portrayed as meaningless in moral terms - as likely to be a punishment for someone else's fault, or for one's own 'mistakes,' as for one's own 'sin.' In theatrical terms, this is theatre of the absurd rather than farce; farce ridicules the absurd and thereby asserts moral normality, whereas theatre of the absurd portrays the absurd as intrinsic to the human condition, something which morality must come to terms with.

Any discussion of a form of spiritual contact which involves trance should make some attempt to assess the reason why so many societies choose the idiom of hysteria in which to express themselves when they enter the realm of the sacred. Like the entranced medium, so too the dancers spin and sway, teetering on the brink between total disequilibrium and muscular control. The most satisfactory interpretation of this is that provided by Gell (1980), who compares the deliberate inducement of disequilibrium in trance to the practice, universal in children's play, of 'making sense of the senses' by spinning, swinging and so on to induce dizziness and subsequently reaffirm normality. I think we can synecdochically extrapolate from this interpretation, which works well from the point of view of the individual, to the level of society as a whole: normal control is denied by entry into

the world of chaos, the disequilibrium of the medium is closely mimicked by the swaying of the dance, and at a more abstract level the ritual takes villagers (after soliciting the deity's permission through trance) into the chaotic world of the forest.

There is one standard metaphorical action of the medium which neatly illustrates this love of ritualistically testing the body's ability to recover from a disruption: during the theriomorphic phases of the trance, the medium will often bite deeply into his own arm. This could be interpreted as just another demonstration by the goddess that she has enabled the medium to tolerate extraordinary amounts of pain. Or it could be interpreted as an indication of the notion, common in spirit possession, that the possessing spirit replaces the internal organs of the person possessed. Others might prefer to connect this with snake-symbolism, since the medium often hisses like a snake at the same time; Jung suggested that the uroborus, a snake biting its own tail, universally symbolises 'beginning, whole and perfect,' which the ego must learn to be separated from (1985 [1974]: 200). These may all be valid, but the interpretation most relevant to the above discussion is that the action, like the deliberate inducement of disequilibrium, shows us the body making sense of the senses by denying order so as to witness the satisfaction of a miraculous return to order. Children the world over also bite into their arms for the pleasure of seeing the 'scar' disappearing.<sup>1</sup>

There is one further aspect of the relation between physical and metaphysical disequilibrium that may clarify the primacy given to disequilibrium in the séance in particular and the festival as a whole. We have seen that Irulas are only too aware of the uncomfortable parallels between the drunkenness of many participants in the festival and the disequilibrium of the entranced medium; there is a milder proscription against chewing betel on the way to the temple, yet this could perhaps best be explained in terms of the etiquette of waiting till the deity has partaken of betel. Betel is, indeed, an essential item among the offerings made to the deity at various stages throughout the day by the priest. Betel is also an essential item at all Irula life-crisis rites and is used to invite people to weddings: it is essential for hosts on these occasions to offer betel to guests, and for a quarrel to be ended one party must offer betel to the other; in Irula symbolism the uses of betel conform closely to

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<sup>1</sup>The pattern of this little play-rite is reminiscent of that presented by Gluckman's 'rites of reversal,' where a part of the whole rebels in a controlled context in order that the stability of the normal whole may be reaffirmed, making 'statements of rebellion not of revolution' (1956: 22).

Dumont's suggestion that betel symbolises reciprocity (Dumont 1986 [1957]: 231), to which I would add that it also symbolises reconciliation.

It seems to me no accident that the metaphoric performance of reciprocity between parties between whom disputes ought to be minimised (hosts and guests, affines, humans and deities) should require a mild intoxicant. Nor is it accidental that the other archetypal means of ending a quarrel is dancing together in the whirling, spinning dance, which likewise has the effect inducing disequilibrium. This is of course far from peculiar to Irulas - all the world over, humans meet deities in states of disequilibrium, people use intoxicants to make peace, festivals involve alcoholic inebriation as well as the dizziness of dance, alcohol is used to metaphorically reverse the disembodiment of Christ, and so on. Anywhere where there has been or is a threat of disorder and conflict, the standard ritual response has been to meet the challenge by metaphorically and physically inducing disequilibrium; I doubt if this requires any explanation more complex than that offered by the phrase 'hair-of-the-dog' - the real disorders of everyday life are challenged by the inducement of disorder a ritual settings, with varying degrees of circumscription and control. The physical body's ability to recover from disruption alludes to the intended recovery of social equilibrium by providing an optimistic model of resilience which counteracts the brittleness of social relations.

#### **4.7. Comedy**

A common form of disorder is laughter, which is especially prevalent worldwide in rites connected with fertility (Apte 1985: 162-3); as a physical response to the disordering of comedy, laughter could, like the forms of inebriation mentioned above, be described as cathartic physical enactment of cognitive disorder. Comedy generally arises from the perception of a lapse in intentionality - whether it is our own lapse or someone else's that is perceived. Humour is thus intimately connected with power, since to be aware of the unintentionality of others is to be more conscious, and hence more powerful than they are. And to become aware of our own incompetence is to take a step towards increased competence. The irony of laughter is that this response may result in temporary lack of control<sup>1</sup> - indeed, by most definitions, genuine laughter must be unintentional, not subject to conscious planning and control.

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<sup>1</sup>Similarly, a person who accidentally stumbles on a paving-stone is likely to cathartically re-enact the loss of control with a parodic display of ungainliness before resuming a normal walk.



I have mentioned that part of the behavioural pattern of festivals involves hilarious parody of possession, and that the séance discussions, though deeply serious at times, are for the most part forums for partly improvised irreverent comedy in which everyone, including the main deity, is a legitimate target. So not only is the séance parodied by the drunkards, it parodies itself during its own performance. The comic elements in the medium's performance often seem to expose illusion and symbolise disorder. Kapferer (1983), drawing on Mary Douglas' characterization of comedy as *anti-rite* (1975), says that the comic phase in Sri Lankan exorcisms marks an end to the illusion of the ceremony. The demons who cause trouble by tricking people into believing in their power, have in the exorcism themselves been tricked into an illusory sense of power; the trick is now exposed and the demons are publicly ridiculed. The patient is thought to be healed only when he can be made to laugh.

But if we call this 'anti-rite,' are we not relegating the comic element of ritual to the status of something extrinsic, even inferior to the rite? In Kapferer's analysis, comedy emerges as the most essential part of the rite, so to call these 'anti-rite' seems as inappropriate as it would be to refer to the comic scenes in a Shakespeare tragedy as 'anti-theatre.' The comic elements in Irula séances seemed to me to be likewise an intrinsic part of the entire rite, and to suggest that its meaning, once again, is deliberately ambiguous. On the one hand, comedy symbolises and thrives on disorder - it is a free-for-all in which anyone may participate and improvise as compared with the ordered, formal rite with specified personnel; but the séance itself is highly disordered: the whole process of not only the main deity, but also innumerable ancestral and forest spirits turning up to the séance, each capable of and often accused of wreaking their own particular bit of havoc, affirms the chaos of the unknown. The comedy, then, could equally well be interpreted as Kapferer does, by showing how it enacts the triumph of order over disorder through ridiculing the latter.

I want to make clear, though, that the function of comedy in Irula séances is not to affirm unequivocally the victory of order over chaos, of reality over illusion, and deities over 'demons,' as Kapferer suggests is the case with Sri Lankan exorcisms (1983: 128). In his analysis, chaos is invited to the rite only as a straw person to be knocked down. A major contrast between Kapferer's exorcisms and Irula rites is that in the latter it is not just demons, but the main deity itself who must be

ridiculed and fought with - and the aim is not to defeat, but to come to a tenuous truce with the entire spiritual world. The handshake at the end of each debate might indicate to an optimist the happy ending with which ritual is generally assumed to conclude. But the pointing fingers, the insults and threats often continue after the handshake, and it is more like the bell at the end of a round of boxing than a cosmic truce.

There are two main sources of comedy in the festival - *incongruous mixtures or juxtapositions* (human/deity, drunkard/possessed medium) and *lapses in intentionality* (the mechanical puppeteering of the medium, the overtly formulaic divine utterances). Douglas's definition of the joke as 'a play upon form' would also do as a definition of ritual: a joke 'brings into relation disparate elements in such a way that one accepted pattern is challenged by the appearance of another which in some way was hidden in the first' (1975: 96). We should not be surprised that the performance of divine possession of a human being occasions laughter; one kind of falling about deserves another. As Bergson pointed out, humour arises out of the 'deflection of life towards the mechanical. ...The truth is that a really living life should never repeat itself. Wherever there is repetition or complete similarity, we always suspect some mechanism at work behind the living' (1980 [1900]: 82). The entranced medium's body is thrown around in a manner that suggests puppeteering by the deity, and the formulaic utterances of the séance are ridiculed if they are obviously mechanical and non-adaptive. The mixing of words or categories normally kept separate is universally a source of laughter. The laughter that results from the drunkard's caricature of the deity/medium is a visual pun, in that a unit of communication (a set of gestures, a single gesture, a stock phrase) acquires a double meaning - a sincere meaning as presented in the original, and an insincere one presented in the caricature. As Bergson puts it, 'gestures, at which we never dreamt of laughing, become laughable when imitated by another individual' (1980 [1900]: 81).

In Douglas's theory of joking as 'anti-rite,' what is really meant is that joking confronts the entelechy that is endemic in ritual. 'The joke merely affords opportunity for realising that an accepted pattern has no necessity. Its excitement lies in the suggestion that any particular ordering of experience may be arbitrary and subjective. It is frivolous in that it produces no real alternative, only an exhilarating sense of freedom from form in general' (1975: 96). But once we have rejected the reduction of ritual to entelechy, we are in a position to acknowledge that comedy is

not anti-rite but an essential element in ritual, whether or not this comedy is overtly expressed either in joking or laughter. What Douglas's Freudian account misses is the essential ambivalence of comedy; the joke is often at the expense of the relaxation of consciousness, but is itself constructed from a heightening of consciousness. It is a kind of metacommentary on categories, society, animality, and so on. Again, this applies equally to ritual, though in ritual the paradoxical simultaneous emphasis on form is more explicit; in joking, as in ritual generally, form may be challenged, but the ways in which form may be challenged must follow established rules.

#### 4.8. Absurdity

So it is a travesty of comedy and ritual to call one a *reductio ad absurdam* and the other a reduction to entelechy. Throughout this thesis I have emphasised the ambiguities, contradictions, discord, and the often farcical character of the ritual idiom as an antidote to assumptions about the semantic 'coherence' and narrative 'happy endings' of ritual. People always have some conception of both the geographical limits of the groups to which they belong, and the limits of that group's knowledge; this is what Eliade has referred to as the '*boundary situation ...which man discovers in becoming conscious of his place in the universe*' (Eliade 1961 [1952]: 34). Iritual takes people beyond the known and safe but infertile world of the village, into the unknown and dangerous but fertile world of the forest. At a metacommunicative level this constitutes a commentary on the process of cognition itself; people choose resonant and provocative metaphors, as opposed to fixed signs, when they want go beyond the limits of their understanding. And the metaphors they construct point the way to a possible understanding of the unknown or to a new understanding of the known.

In every society, however restricted individual expression may be, however much insistence there may be on order and the defeat of chaos, there is always a certain freedom to play with metaphors. And this is bound to involve a certain amount of infringement of normal cognitive, social, and geographical boundaries. Order is never imposed directly, people have to find and understand order themselves, by indirections. But there is always a dramatic irony in playing with metaphors; whenever metaphors appear to offer miracle solutions to intractable cognitive problems and unaskable questions, it turns out that they pose more questions than they solve. In short, they are absurd, and they lack boundaries. Metaphors are always mysterious and resonant, but though these qualities lead people to new

understandings, they also lead people away from understanding the obvious. Nowotny, discussing the approach to metaphor in literary criticism, points out that the contemporary tendency to take metaphor '*au grand sérieux*,' over-reacting against the assumption that metaphors evade reality, 'makes it difficult to see the workings of those metaphors which deliberately emphasize the frame, offering themselves as deliberate fabrications, as a prime means of seeing into the life not of things but of the creative human consciousness, framer of its own world' (1965 [1962]: 89). Thus there are literary critics who, like so many over-zealously relativistic analysts of religion, ignore the cognitive role of absurdity and thereby fail to acknowledge the value of what I have called the *metacommunicative* level of interpretation.

In the history of religions the symbol most commonly found to represent processes of cognition is what Eliade has called the 'ladder to heaven,' which is typically to be found 'at the cosmological point *where communication between Heaven, Earth and Hell becomes possible.*' (Eliade 1961 [1952]: 50) But like the tower of Babel which not only failed to reach Heaven but also sowed confusion among men, these ladders, like metaphors generally, do as much dividing as uniting, and as much concealing as revealing. If the path leading out of the Irula village indicates the possibility of communicating with the spirit world, it also serves as a reminder of the division between man and god. If it links the village with the little oasis of order created in the jungle by each festival, it also points the way to the great infinity of unconquered jungle beyond. Like the *chijikijilu* of the Ndembu, it 'blazes a trail' from the known to the unknown and thus comes to stand for the process of understanding the unknown through metaphor; if this process is conceived as an answer to the problem of disorder then it is surely doomed to failure. But in Irula festivals disorder, far from being conceived as a problem, is seen as an essential characteristic of the deity and of worship.

Geertz has identified three limits at which man is everywhere threatened by chaos - those of his *analytic capacities*, of his *powers of endurance*, and of his *moral insight*. At these limits, man experiences 'bafflement, suffering, and a sense of intractable ethical paradox' respectively (1966: 14). He quite rightly criticizes what he calls 'the crude confidence-type theory set forth by Malinowski: viz. that religion helps one to endure 'situations of emotional stress' (1966: 18). But while he recognises that ritual does not solve the problems of bafflement, suffering and ethical paradox that it sets out to solve, he suggests that it pretends to do so, that its

mission is to provide antidotes to unaccountability, disorder, incoherence, and irregularity. He acknowledges that ritual may celebrate paradox and disorder, but he assumes that it will do so in a way which symbolises the ordering of chaos. Unlike Malinowski, he does not assume that religion actually achieves the resolution of disorder; but he does assume that it pretends to do so by imposing metaphoric control (1966: 23).

I would suggest that insofar as it does so, religion is not contrastable on this account with science or art. As I mentioned in my 'prologue,' there are close analogies between ethnography and ritual, both being simultaneously cognitive and ludic, both involving the analysis of the chaotic world of experience and the comparison of this with the ordered world of ideas; and in both, the extent of our ignorance is mapped out, and the act of mapping itself eventually brings us back to normality with the comfortable feeling that our categories have been extended and enriched, brought closer to reality. Interpreting ritual metaphor, like the rite it concerns itself with, involves the imposition of at least some degree of order on the chaos of data that the mind is presented with. I am neither arguing against the imposition of order, nor implying that ritual does not always at least partially aim to impose metaphoric control over chaos. I am arguing, however, that honest anthropology, like honest ritual, explicitly admits to the continued existence of contradiction and chaos. We should admit that the exercise of inferring meaning is, like magic, witchcraft, and some rites, at least partially an exercise in metaphoric control over events which are not, for all our efforts, fully controllable. If people attempt, as Evans-Pritchard claims the Azande do (1976 [1937]), to metaphorically explain the inexplicable and control the uncontrollable, it is time that we recognised that *in the same rites and at the same moment*, they may be demonstrating, even celebrating, the impossibility of explanation and control. And we must recognise that this kind of contradiction is not just the uncomfortable by-product of a few spoil-sports among the players - it is of the essence of metaphor, which establishes difference at the same time as it establishes similarity, and reminds us of pretence at the same time as assuring us that illusions are real.

The history of ideas will surely remember the twentieth century as the century in which metaphors became 'real' and shrugged off their (metaphorical) image as parasites on 'literal truth.' Ideas expressing the possibility of alternative realities, such as the internal logic of dreams, the method in madness, and the 'rationality' of magic, the principle of *in vino veritas*, and so on, were certainly not foreign to

Western thought in other centuries; but following the Enlightenment the emphasis was always on the darkness, the obscurity of metaphoric thought; metaphors always tended to be viewed as evasions of reality. Freud turned this on its head by presenting the *ego*, the *manifest* self, as an evasion of reality, and the *id*, the *latent* self, as a lurking reality to be revealed through dream-symbols and jokes. Malinowski insisted on the rationality of magic, on the ways in which it answered human needs. And with the advent of structuralism, symbol-using acquired a dignity it hadn't had before: metaphors became important, not as illusions or for what they represented, but for what they themselves were thought to express and communicate. They came to be regarded not as surrogates or evasions of reality, but as a kind of *higher or deeper form of reality*.

If the recent tide of postmodern critique of writing continues, we will, towards the end of this century, become increasingly conscious of the all-pervasiveness of metaphor. One hopes that this will gradually erode the kind of sloppy use of altitudinal metaphors that are found, for example, in Geertz's writing - ritual performance and, more generally, religion, as '*heightened*' or '*deeper*' reality, play as '*deep*'; or, staying with Geertz since he so often professes his awareness of metaphor, references to the Balinese cock as a 'metaphorical self' - as if the self could be anything other than metaphorical - and to the passionate Balinese cockfighter as 'an enthusiast in the literal sense of the term' - as if an 'enthusiast' could 'literally' be 'possessed by god' (Geertz was presumably referring to this etymological meaning). Perhaps an easier target than Geertz is Victor Turner, who claims that the dominant symbols in Ndembu initiation ceremonies 'seem to be regarded as powers which, in varying combination, *underlie or even constitute what Ndembu conceive to be reality*' (1967: 107).

The increasing awareness of metaphor will, I hope, make us aware that to use terms such as 'symbol' and 'metaphor' is itself an act of metaphoric predication which imbues characteristics of illusion, intangibility and absence on the behaviour referred to, while the words 'reality' or 'literal' are metaphors which ascribe characteristics of seriousness, tangibility, and presence. Later in *The Forest of Symbols*, Turner is considerably more lucid when he discusses the role of monsters in ritual, which actually serve not to affirm their reality but to emphasise the reality of normal, profane existence. Had he set this insight beside his contradictory claims about the 'reality' of symbolism, he might well have acknowledged that in

ritual the 'reality' of symbolic performance is both asserted and denied - and that it is this dramatic tension which produces the resonance of ritual.

If we use a term like *heightened reality* to describe the importance of ritual, we should acknowledge that we are employing two metaphorical axes which need justification either in terms of indigenous usage or as heuristic devices. First, there is the *vertical axis*, and we should be explicit about the sense in which we want to describe ritual metaphors as 'above' or 'below' other metaphors (it is worth noting the terms 'higher' and 'deeper' seem to be used interchangeably in a loose meaning that might be glossed simply as 'more important'). Second, there is the *reality-illusion axis*, which might also be called the *literal-metaphorical axis*.

What brought about the anthropological obsession with proclaiming the 'reality' of ritual? I suspect it has more to do with the previous assumption of the illusion of all 'primitive' ritual than with indigenous claims. These proclamations which I am criticising are facets of the great pendulum swing of twentieth-century thought which is symptomatic of guilt about the epistemological haughtiness of the Enlightenment.

It may be that participants in some contexts feel the need to assert the reality of ritual, even to the extent of saying that ritual is to normality as reality is to illusion. But the observer can often make the reasoned inference that at some level of their consciousness, participants are aware that the illusions portrayed by ritual may equally well be reality turned on its head, which serves to throw into the relief the reality of the profane. Optimistic attempts to gain influence over occult forces and events through the manipulation of metaphors are also susceptible to the pessimism which admits the likelihood of failure. The idea of an exchange of food in return for useful divine advice, for example, is, like our English phrase 'penny for your thoughts,' subverted by its own irony: just as we are aware that access to other people's minds is not available on the open market, so too are Irulas aware that material offerings are not bound to achieve the occult influences which the givers desire.

There are two issues here, which have a tendency to become confused. There is the debate about whether or not the *reality:illusion* opposition matches in any way the *ritual:everyday life* opposition; and second, there is the debate about whether in ritual the formula proposed is *cosmos:chaos::reality:illusion*, as in Berger's

assumption that the sacred cosmos emerges out of chaos, which he defines as the ‘lurking “irrealities” behind every categorisation of ‘reality’ (Berger 1969). The Hindu textual doctrine of the world as *maaya* - illusion - suggests, perhaps, that ritual ought to point away from the illusions of everyday life; as we saw earlier, the complementary notion of *liila*, divine play, portrays deities as beings who regard the whole world as an illusion, and who treat the world as a play-arena (Good 1985: 157). This suggests that ritual points away from the illusions of everyday life towards elusive realities, but there may also be reminders that rites are themselves illusory. As Good points out, a festival drama may be overtly illusory, relativising both the festival and the ‘real’ world that will be restored when the festival is over (*ibid*: 156). So it is simply not true to say that the uncertainties and paradoxes of everyday life are replaced in ritual by certainties and logic. As Gellner pointed out long ago, if we over-enthusiastically attempt to see the ‘sense’ in all other people’s behaviour, we misinterpret that behaviour by neglecting ‘the social role of absurdity’ (1973: 36).

Max Black’s often-quoted analysis of the creativity of metaphor is instructive here. He asks, ‘what is the “mystery” of metaphor?’ and suggests that ‘perhaps the “mystery” is simply that, *taken as literal*, a metaphorical statement appears to be perversely asserting something to be what it is plainly known not to be. (And that makes the metaphor user look like a liar or a deceiver) ... ‘absurdity’ and ‘falsity’ are of the essence: in their absence, we should have no metaphor but merely a literal utterance’ (1979: 21). Much the same might be said of religion, which is a peculiarly insistent variety of playing with metaphors. Its essence is its absurdity and falsity, coupled with, for the believer, the possibility of seeing perceptible reality as absurd and false relative to religious beliefs.

In short, the ideas of religious metaphors as ‘really real’ (Geertz 1966: 28) or of ritual as ‘heightened’ reality (Turner 1967: 89) or ‘more “real” than ordinary experience’<sup>1</sup> (Schechner 1988 [1977]: xiv) seem to be the least clarified and least clarifiable concepts in the sociology of religion. William James made a similar claim for drunkenness, which is for him a proto-mystical experience: ‘one of the charms of drunkenness unquestionably lies in the deepening sense of reality and

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<sup>1</sup>Schechner is specifically referring here to the Hindu notions of *liila* and *maaya*; it is by being ‘an illusion of an illusion,’ he claims, that Hindu ritual performance becomes ‘more real’; I presume, then, that what I have called the drunkards’ ‘pretend pretence’ of trance is *even more* ‘really real’ than ordinary experience.



truth which is gained therein. In whatever light things may then appear to us, they seem more utterly what they are, more 'utterly utter' than when we are sober' (1950: 284). But we must surely interpret the aphorism *in vino veritas* not simply as 'in wine, truth,' but rather 'in wine, there is greater *concern* with truth.' If religionists claim that their beliefs are 'really real' or 'utterly utter,' the tautology itself introduces a note of undermining insecurity; these are statements which, like the phrase 'I believe in...' frame themselves with doubt-signals. Further, even if the subjective experience of trance (whether induced by alcohol or by religious persuasion) were to be an experience of being convinced of an alternative or even 'higher' truth, to make this subjective experience stand synecdochically for religion in general would be miss the crucial fact that participants in the same event are not so entranced by religious symbols that they fail to challenge their veracity.

Quite apart from the nebulosity<sup>1</sup> of claims about the 'utter factuality' of religion, this sort of language seems likely to obscure what is often a crucial aspect of ritual, which is that participants may be given opportunities to examine critically the epistemological basis not just of secular but also of ritual claims, and remind themselves that illusions are created in both. It is certainly not my intention to denounce as fraudulent the mystic's claim that numinous experiences have a 'reality' that is denied to normal life; but we do ourselves no service by ignoring the dramatic irony here - *phrases like 'ultimate reality' are used precisely because of the elusive nature of the experiences.* They are *illusory* in the etymological sense of *illusio* - that is, they are available to those who enter the game, and only while they are playing the game.

If I seem obsessive about the kinds of dualism which produce oppositions such as *illusion: reality* and *metaphorical: literal*, then it is, I hope, not just a philosophical bandwagon but a reflection of a major theme of Irula séances. If Berger assumes that chaos is 'irreality' and cosmos is 'reality' we must not assume that this is so for all peoples; for Irulas, the chaos surrounding the village and, as we will see in our discussion of séances, the linguistic chaos lurking behind normal communication, are affirmed as different orders of reality. They may lack the explicit doctrine of *maaya*, but in finding benevolent forces in the chaos of the forest, and cognitive fertility in the nonsense of *jaaya*, they make implicit statements to the effect that normal life and normal cognition may be illusory.

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<sup>1</sup>I hope that this word conveys their 'height' in the sense of lack of empirical grounding, as well as their elusiveness and obscurity.

This theme provides a crucial link between my own academic writing and the activity I am writing about. By the very act of discussing a metaphor we accord it some kind of reality, whether that metaphor is God, culture, the self, or whatever; the act of analysing culture is itself an engagement in the proliferation of subjunctives<sup>1</sup> - a phrase that might aptly be used to describe religion. This thesis has been a study of various aspects of festive play; I am emphasising that play is too general, too intertwined in all aspects of life and language, to serve as a label for a discrete *kind* of activity; it is an *element* of all activity, and *illusion*, the abstract noun which we couple with it, is present everywhere we look.

Since I have insisted that institutionalised scepticism is not *anti-rite* because it is an intrinsic part of the rite - the rite, that is, would be incomplete without it - I may perhaps be justified in characterising these rites as *anti-solifidian*. The solifidian believer hopes to attain salvation by faith alone, and this idea is so forcefully bludgeoned home that it constitutes, ideally, a frame which hermetically excludes reason and scepticism; behaviour throughout Irula séances, however, is constantly reminding participants of the value of scepticism - man cannot live, let alone attain salvation, by faith alone. To say this is not the same as to assert, following Bateson (1973 [1955]: 158), that these rites are framed with an implication that everything that occurs within the frame is 'untrue.' Framing reminds participants that what occurs *may* be untrue.<sup>2</sup>

The Irula deity is, like tricksters all over the world, both a hero and an absurd master of illusion; as Apte says, 'tricksters frequently change form. They seem to switch back and forth from an anthropomorphic to a theriomorphic form and from one sex to another' (1985: 226), and the same might be said of both the medium

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<sup>1</sup>This is particularly evident in work of French writers like Dumont and Bourdieu, which are liberally peppered with the phrase 'everything happens *as if ...*'

<sup>2</sup>At the same time as pointing out the salience of doubt in Irula festivals, it should be noted that any straightforward Durkheimian confidence-theory of religion is suspect. According to Durkheim, the 'primitive' religionist acquires confidence in control over nature, because 'science has not yet taught him modesty. ...His rites are, in part, means destined to aid him in imposing his will upon the world'(1976 [1915]: 86). On the contrary, I take it as axiomatic that in proclaiming symbolic power over the uncontrollable forces of nature and chance, the religionist expresses concern or doubt at the same time as expressing confidence. 'The tiger,' as Fanon once put it, 'does not go about proclaiming its tigritude.' All ritual that superficially purports to control the chaotic forces of nature is essentially ambivalent.

and the deity in Irula séances. My thesis concerns the social role of absurdity as portrayed in ritual contexts; I have been setting up a critique of the sociology of religion which has tended to focus on the connections between beliefs, rites and power. In its anti-solifidian insistences on matching faith with scepticism, the Irula festival acknowledges that religious speculation is an endless chase after proliferating subjunctives. *If* the goddess is real *and if* the medium is telling the truth *and if* both medium and goddess are unimpeded by adverse agents *and if* everyone turns up and pleases the goddess with their offerings, *then*, perhaps, something good may come of the festival. If there is optimism here, it is certainly high-fibre optimism which the worshipper has to make considerable effort to digest.

In all my emphasis on the elusive, multivocalic nature of religious dialogue, we should not lose sight of the need to relate tricksterism, or the welcoming of ambiguity, to social contexts and to kinds of society. I have not so far come across any serious attempt to explain why some cultures seem to welcome the trickster, to welcome ambiguity and contradictions, and to be more irreverent towards their deities and sceptical about their religious metaphors than others. Fernandez, for example, contrasts the unwelcoming attitude of Western societies to the trickster with the more positive valuation of the trickster in other cultures: 'it is our tendency to see the trickster as a fraud, a social cheat, an outcast. The more often, and perhaps in the more perceptive cultures, he stands not in some far off closet but at the very center - dancing and pranking, wisecracking at the very top of the stairs' (1986: 223). If we excuse Fernandez' anthropomorphisation of culture, it would still be helpful to know what kinds of people are 'more perceptive' in this way. I am glad that Fernandez would doubtless see Irulas as 'perceptive' - since they could well be said to put the trickster at centre stage, and this is literally what they do in their séances, where various supernatural entities talk in riddles and wisecrack, and are treated with a bewildering mixture of flattery and abuse. But what does this tell us about their culture?

It is my contention here that where religion is not closely tied up with the empowerment of some humans over others, then that philosophy will not try to enforce faith in the ultimate reality of metaphors, and will not try to deny the ultimate arbitrariness of fortune. I am going to suggest that the ways in which Irulas welcome contradictions are indicative of the social atomism of a society which I describe as informally *person-centred* but formally hierarchical. The

individual goes to the festival not only to demonstrate formal solidarity with the other festive participants and formal obedience to the priest-headman; he or she also goes with personal problems on his or her mind. People play with the group, but also have a private rendezvous with the deity; out of the multiplicity of possible meanings in the séance discussions, the individual is not forced to choose any particular set of socially constructed meanings, but rather selects meanings that are suitable to his or her personal needs.

This is reminiscent of Empson's seventh type of ambiguity, which was contradiction: 'since it is the business of the reader to extract the meanings useful to him and ignore the meanings he thinks foolish, it is evident that contradiction is a powerful literary weapon' (1961 [1930]: 197). Irulas come to the séance to be healed, advised, entertained and so on; I am suggesting that they have the choice of whether they worship, or laugh *at*, or laugh *with* their deity, according to their personal requirements. In the informality of the séance, they can decide for themselves whether the possessing spirit is the goddess, a demon, an ancestor, a psychoanalyst or doctor, or even a play-acting friend who may be ridiculed.

Although I have rejected Douglas's grid-group analysis by showing its inapplicability to whole societies (in any event, a structural-functional account would be of limited applicability to Irula society, situated as it is in an encompassing ancient civilisation), it is nevertheless incumbent on me to give some suggestions as to why Irulas happen to enjoy such effervescent, chaotic, and undogmatic religious practice. Why is their behaviour so subversive? Why is there less metaphorical containment of divinity? Why are the boundaries between good and bad spiritual agents not rigidly maintained? And why does the narrative of their festivals not demand a clear-cut 'happy ending'?

It is clear that theirs is a society which has a higher-than-average tolerance of absurdity. Where absurdity is repressed, or cathartically expressed only in rigidly framed rites which exorcise absurdity, it is likely that there must be good reasons why both people and nature are required to behave in predictable ways. Conversely, where the undependable or absurd behaviour of nature or of other people does not constitute such a major threat, we might expect absurdity to be ritually welcomed in a variety of ways.

For Irulas, belief is something chosen by individuals at relevant moments, and not something which can ever be bludgeoned into the collectivity by the collectivity; in order to emphasise the importance of choice, scepticism is forever being presented as an alternative to belief. I am suggesting that this is appropriate to a society which in most contexts, and certainly in their séances, puts the *person* rather than the *role* in centre stage. As I said, in the formal frame of the séance, *communitas* manifests itself as a host of voices shouting in unison, and this helps to produce the trance of the medium and the manifestation of the deity. But the deity doesn't speak in one authoritarian voice; instead, there is a host of different and often mutually contradictory voices which are in a sense constituted by the multiplicity of selves who listen and interpret. Whether you attend the festival with levity, or with weighty matters on your mind, you can simply select your own interpretation of the goddess's rhetorical question, 'are you playing games with me?'

#### 4.9. Returns

We have learned something about Irulas and their environment, looked at one aspect of their behaviour - their festivals - which seem to be of paramount importance to them, and followed them through the ritual activities of the festival and the linguistic intricacies of the séance. In the concluding sections, we have widened the scope to see what how this study can contribute to our understanding of less culture-specific issues such as play, the cognitive challenges of ritual, metaphor, ordering and disordering, the notion of 'other worlds,' the relations between cognitive and physiological aspects of trance and related phenomena such as drunkenness and laughter, and the universal problems of faith and doubt. Perhaps because the events were so striking and enjoyable at the time of my fieldwork, it scarcely occurred to me to ask the questions which I must ultimately attempt to answer: why do Irulas bother performing festivals, and when they return from their festivals, what have they gained?

It is easy to say what they *don't* gain. Unlike other festivals in India and elsewhere, there is no intercultural assertion of group identity, no touristic exploration, no financial gain from associated markets, no clandestine meetings of potential business partners, no clear definition of the calendar, and no surreptitious negotiation of marriages. They have had a good meal, and one with meat-protein in it, which constitutes an important departure from the usual rather monotonous diet. Since a goat fetches more money in the market than most Irulas earn in a month, this is a good means of ensuring that those fortunate and clever enough to keep

goats safe from panthers and wildcats should share the benefits. And the roundabout way of giving, making the collectivity receive the goat second-hand from the deity, ensures that no-one becomes unduly arrogant or powerful through the feeding of others.

They have engaged in collective activity, and though the festival day will have been marred by late starts, poor logistical arrangements, and disputes, there is still every chance that people will in the end feel some pride in the collective accomplishment of a loud, colourful, and traditional performance. In the absence of other groups against whom to unite in a sporting contest or dispute, Irulas choose to engage in collective shadow-boxing, fighting with words rather than with footballs or spears, imagining the deity as a force who can't be taken for granted, but who may be persuaded to fight with people against other occult adversaries. In the séance, people have sharpened up their verbal acuity against unseen verbal combatants whose heteroglot language is a metaphorical echo of the puzzling heteroglossia of the outside world. As forest-dwellers in the eyes of the surrounding population, Irulas might be expected to invert the normal association of forest with mystique and danger and the village with predictability and safety. In some senses the forest is more benevolent to Irulas than to others: it feeds them, provides them with several sources of income, and can provide them with a refuge from the law. To Irulas, it is doubtless less bewildering than the bureaucracy of the market towns and the multi-caste mayhem of the plains. But *vis-à-vis* their own villages, the forest is undoubtedly dangerous - it is full of threatening wild animals and armed criminals, and adult Irulas will not venture into the forest at night if they can possibly help it. Even for Irulas, then, there is a certain exhilaration in a day-trip to a place which frightens them at night.

Festivals are often a form of unusual exercise, bringing movement to otherwise sedentary or pedestrian populations; but I doubt if the physical exercise of the Irula festival is of paramount importance to them - although with its steep climb and lengthy bouts of frenetic dancing it is often an extremely strenuous day. Irulas are all well exercised physically, and it is hardly surprising that many people choose not to go to the festival, or to stay away for most of it, preferring to snooze in the village. It is from the cognitive exercise that they stand most to gain, from meeting the challenge of properly executing the complex rites which should follow tradition as closely as possible, from the digestive process whereby they appropriate elements from the surrounding cultural diversity, and from understanding at least

something of the difficult language in which the occult forces speak during the séance.

I can only guess at whether meeting these cognitive challenges enhances the confidence of village leaders to deal with the outside world - whether, for example, dealing with an obstreperous goddess equips them to deal with obstreperous officials at the government coffee board. Certainly, there is an almost painful contrast between their brashness at their own festivals and their timidity on local buses, and when even when outside officials visit the village. At the very least, though, it may be that during the séance people learn who will be least ill-equipped to talk to outsiders. It is not generally the hereditary priest-headmen who are the favoured spokesmen in the outside world, nor even those who choose the most challenging task in the festival, that of becoming possessed. Rather, it seems to be those who have sharpened their wits against the occult speakers who are the most up-front when it comes to dealing with difficult non-Irulas. I know this mainly from observing who chose to speak to me at a time when I was a stranger, and from watching people at the estates and occasionally in the Kotagiri market. Some of these, of course, were also priest-headmen and mediums; but in a general sense, to be skilled at reasoned argument with unreasonable opponents is the special preserve neither of hereditary hierocrats nor of self-selected mediums.

Indeed, if we can talk of social skills acquired through arguing with the deity, the role of medium seems to provide much more personal gains. A significant number of those who choose this role display personal idiosyncrasies in everyday life which the role of medium may be a response to. The most obvious is Bagalā, who gets possessed at every festival in Biliyuur; he is an extremely intelligent man, the youngest brother of the headman, and someone who would undoubtedly be a major political influence in the village were it not that his disastrous stutter prevents him from seriously engaging in ordinary debates. It was clear to me early on that he would have liked to be friendlier with me, but could barely get the words out when we tried to conduct conversations. As soon as he became possessed, however, the stutter vanished almost entirely, and his high-speed, staccato utterances were richly spiced with inventive metaphors and sharp wit. Of the other regular mediums I know, two are unusually effeminate and quiet in normal life, and a further two are oddballs who have difficulty getting on with people. It would seem straightforward to assume that the role of medium offers personal gains for these people as an form

of public expression which is denied to their normal selves; mediumship offers them cathartic self-expression rather than political clout.

Returning to the level of collective gains, that of entertainment seems to be the least controversial; with their varied livelihood, everyday life for the Irulas is probably less monotonous than that of many people on the plains, but they lack the access to the cinemas, sporting events, and itinerant entertainers enjoyed by so many Indians. I also considered dispute-settlement as a function of the festival, and though I mentioned that festivals might spark off rather than resolve disputes, it seems likely that people who joke, dance, worship, and eat together have gone at least some way to sinking their differences.

But I also mentioned that Irulas deny that the festival has a dispute-settling function; and neither the meal, nor the cognitive exercise, nor the cathartic self-expression, nor even the entertainment, would be presented by Irulas either as legitimations for the festival or as gains made from the festival. For Irulas, the festival is primarily spoken of a duty even though they clearly enjoy it and look forward to it. They must feed and look after deities and ancestors, and regularly renew contact with them by 'clearing the path.' There may be rewards, such as rain, protection from wild animals, and recovery from illness, but these can't be guaranteed and must be haggled over. Indeed, if these gains could be guaranteed then the festival would be just another investment of labour from which predictable returns were expected.

I mentioned the high tolerance of cultural diversity in Irula life, and suggested a correlation between this and their isolation from the caste society of the plains. In the absence of the need to maintain a unified ethnic front in status competition with other castes, Irulas can select at will from the traditions of the diverse populations which they come into sporadic contact with. It would not be too far-fetched, then, to suggest that their ability to indulge in *cultural foraging* finds expression in *ritual foraging* among a wide diversity of attitudes and approaches to the world of spirits, and in the *linguistic foraging* of the polyglot séance. Formally they perform the festival as a social body - as 'one voice,' in the language of the séance; but within this formal frame, the heterogeneity of the voices that are heard matches the heterogeneity of individuals that take part.

As to their relations with one another, there is no overwhelming pressure to resolve differences when a dispute breaks out. Quarrelling is by far the most salient event



of public life, and on most evenings there is a cluster of people engaging in grandiose dispute. *naaya mänikkyä:ru* - 'they are talking justice' - is the usual description of these events, but the talk may continue until it peters out, there is no need for a formal resolution. *naaya* also means 'truth' and 'talk,' and I came away with the strong impression that it was the talk, rather than any end-product, that mattered. So too, in the *séance*, the formal handshakes and the pretence at discrete topics belied an overall lack of clear resolutions to those topics. In village politics, there is great play on form, with several different formal hereditary offices distinguished; but nobody relies on having a strong headman, so it matters little if people come to his festival in dribs and drabs - this will provide an occasion for enjoyable inventive banter.

If a marriage breaks up, no great squabbles over property result, nor is it likely to produce a feud between extended families. So there is no need for a major public marriage; if money is available, they will throw a grand party, but otherwise couples may simply set up home together. Nor is there any need for an acrimonious public divorce; both partners can go their own way without fuss. Perhaps we can see here an explanation for their lack of interest in the common Hindu motif of a divine marriage.

I also mentioned the rather *ad hoc* manner in which they established correlations between the festivals and the agricultural cycle. Were they entirely dependent on agriculture for a living, it seems likely that their attempts to perform analogical consonance with predictable agricultural productivity would be considerably more serious. But none of them depends entirely on agriculture for a living. Irulas are not 'hunter-gatherers,' but their *ad hoc* approach to cultivation is combined with a foraging approach to both the products of the forest and the rewards of the outside world - occasional day-labour on plantations, odd jobs with the forestry department, unpredictable benefits from the *Adivasi Welfare Association*.

It does seem likely that a general contrast could be drawn between the ritual of foragers and the ritual of agriculturalists. In a predominantly agricultural society, the fickleness of the weather is so much more threatening that unpredictability is likely to be portrayed in ritual only as an enemy. For hunters, success in the hunt could not be achieved *without* unexpected occurrences, and there is an implicit hunting-metaphor in the Irulas' insistence that the domesticated goat must jump before being killed - this adds an unpredictability which spices up the event. The

threat of panthers to the Irulas' goats is a major source of worry, and it is not surprising that this is a major topic in the séances; but even here, since they don't rely on their domesticated animals, they are able to joke with and verbally abuse the deity who is responsible for the protection of goats.

In my 'prologue,' I began drawing analogies between the festival and ethnography; now we can add to these analogies the cognitive exercise, the appropriation of cultural foragings, the celebration of doubt and unpredictability, and if not the cathartic self-expression, at least the cathartic adventure, of social misfits. We can admit that were a Martian to come and ask us what legitimates ethnography and what gains are made from it - what we return with and what returns we expect from our investment of time and effort - we would be more likely to talk about duty than about entertainment, and more likely to claim that we are concerned with 'them' than with ourselves. Indeed, a myth which has sustained the ethnographic enterprise has been that of the cumulative flight from ethnocentrism, each generation of ethnographers exposing the ways in which previous ones wrote about themselves when they claimed to be (or thought they were) writing about others, and each generation showing how the subjects of their predecessors' ethnographies were creations of the ethnographic imagination.

Festivity, like ethnography, will always involve a kind of 'barbecuing' of reality. If nature (like data) is raw and culture (like ethnography) is cooked, the festive (or ethnographic) excursion into the wilderness is a performance which, like barbecued sausages, may be simultaneously overcooked (culture exaggerated) and underdone (embracing the metaphors of nature). Drawing analogies like these may help us to identify common patterns in human approaches to learning and entertainment, and in the kinds of behaviour whose functions we disguise. But if this is to be more than just a pleasurable game, we must recognise differences too. The beings which ethnographers encounter are real people as well as being creations of our imagination; our sense of duty makes us try to translate the voices we encountered on our adventure; and whereas a festival need not produce anything, we insist that there must be a written product to record the event. Both the festival and the ethnographic adventure deliberately make problems out of reality and subject it to critical scrutiny; but festival-goers don't subsequently have to problematise the adventure, whereas ethnographers do. Not only that, we are duty bound to embellish the experience: we *note down* what we see and hear, but we *write it up* afterwards.

## **5. Epilogue: Divinity**

### **5.1. Anthropologists and theologians**

Bertrand Russell defined electricity as ‘not so much a thing as a way things happen.’ We might say the same of divinity, and I have a hunch that Russell would have agreed. Throughout this thesis, I have worked on the premise that we are in a poor position to analyse the happenings associated with divinity if we don’t keep reminding ourselves that divine agency is an enabling fiction rather than an empirical fact. According to Needham, ‘anthropologists do not as a rule begin by declaring that God does not exist or that ancestral spirits are merely imaginary or that the benefits of blessing are illusory’ (1979: 27-28). Although I didn’t say that ‘God does not exist,’ my insistence that divinity (and by extension ancestral spirits) is a product of the human imagination would be regarded by many as atheistic; I would also go along with the idea that both divinity and the benefits of blessing are ‘illusory,’ at least in etymological sense that they are created in the ‘play’ of the religious imagination.

This is precisely why I began by expressing my objection to Evans-Pritchard’s policy of leaving theologising to those who call themselves theologians. The ‘meaning’ of religion, he assures us, ‘depends finally on an awareness of God and that men are dependent on him and must be resigned to his will. At this point the theologian takes over from the anthropologist’ (1956: 322). This is an extraordinarily rash disclaimer, coming as it does at the end of the book that brought belief and rationality back into the study of anthropology. What do his words ‘ultimately’ and ‘finally’ contribute to our understanding of ‘God’ - or is he just admitting that he has come to the end of his intellectual tether? It is interesting to note that at the point at which the theologian takes over, Evans-Pritchard’s often lucid prose degenerates into nonsense, and we are left wondering how meaning can depend ‘finally’ on a word - and more specifically, how Nuer meaning can depend finally on a Christian word in English.

In a later publication, he went further by proposing that analysts who lacked theistic beliefs were likely to provide inadequate accounts of religious beliefs and practice - a proposition which strikes at the heart of the whole ethnographic enterprise:

If we ask ourselves ...whether [anthropological accounts of religion] have any bearing on our own religious experience - whether, shall we say, they make any more significant for us ‘peace, I leave you, my peace I give unto you...’ - I suppose that the answer must be that they have little, and this may make us

sceptical about their value as explanations of the religions of primitives, who cannot apply the same test. ...This followed from their assumptions that the souls and spirits and gods of religion have no reality. ...The non-believer seeks for some theory - biological, psychological, or sociological - which will explain the illusion; the believer seeks rather to understand the manner in which a people conceives of a reality and their relations to it. For both, religion is part of social life, but for the believer it has also another dimension. (1965: 120-1)

In refutation of such a position, I offer my thesis as a defense of the ethnographic enterprise and of the analytical value of 'non-belief.' There are several very strong refutations of Evans-Pritchard's argument here. First, he makes an unexplained leap from the 'religious experience' of saying 'peace, I leave you, my peace I give unto you' to insisting on 'the reality of spiritual being' (something which in any case he fails to explain or identify at any stage in his book); as a theistic believer, he is constrained to avoid saying directly what the non-believing analyst can acknowledge - that 'spiritual being' is, in part, constituted by linguistic events such as the recitation of 'peace, I leave you, my peace I give unto you.'

Second, it is a grotesque caricature of atheistic analysis to suggest that it portrays religious belief as 'stupid'; we can surely insist on the improbability of any 'spiritual being' *as an empirical agent* without suggesting that it is 'stupid' to believe in spiritual being. Third, if Evans-Pritchard does believe in the empirical agency of the 'spiritual being' which he sees as the object of worship, then by his own admission he has no need of explanations of the social constitution of this reality, and it is therefore inappropriate for him to play the role of explainer. He goes on to insist, following W. Schmidt's *The Origin and Growth of Religion* (1931: 6), on the unique validity of 'grasping' religion 'from within.' We have progressed beyond the embarrassing we-they dichotomy which assumed that ethnography required people 'from without' to write about 'other cultures'; but the enterprise of ethnographic translation can't proceed from within a particular language or a particular cognitive mode, and if we follow Evans-Pritchard's logic we will fail to translate the idea of 'God' or 'holy spirit' or any other cultural construction for that matter.

The kind of non-belief which I am suggesting is an essential pre-requisite for valid interpretation of religion is itself an insistence that whatever 'spiritual being' we are interpreting must be assumed to come 'from within' the individual mind, 'from within' society, and 'from within' the knowable world, and not, as Evans-Pritchard would allow, from without. If it does come from outside - if it is an invisible and

unknowable agent - then there is no point in trying to understand the psychogenetic and sociogenetic construction of divinity.

Atheistic analysts of religion have no need to enter into the kind of reality-illusion debate which Evans-Pritchard is talking about here; we can simply acknowledge the 'reality' of 'spiritual being' in the phenomenological sense that it exists by virtue of being believed in. But this does *not* mean subscribing to the fiction of deities as 'actors.' I am not just setting up straw targets. Egnor, for example, insists that 'Hindu deities are not only symbols or tools which are manipulated by human beings to express certain ideas - such deities are actors, with wills of their own, and to a great extent they do control the lives of their servants, whether the latter are willing or not.' (1984: 24). To say this is to deny the intentionality of human agents, and this is very precisely what she does later in the same article, suggesting that it is Hindu deities who manipulate human worshippers, rather than the other way round, 'because these deities operate, for the most part, in realms which are entirely beyond the control of individuals - the realms of subconscious drives and of social forces' (1984: 41). In this way, what starts out from a position of relativism, seeing deities as actors see them, ends up with the analyst playing the part of all-seeing explainer of unseeing human patients.

## 5.2. Obscure objects of worship

Turning back to the Hindu context, let us look at an example of a different kind of accusation of 'unbelief,' levelled by a religious sophisticate against pragmatic Hindu religionists. The French spiritual leader of Pondicherry known as 'Mère' fires the accusation of 'misplaced concreteness' which we so often hear believers in some 'divine' agent using to disparage the beliefs of idol-worshippers:

Are there many people ...who believe in the Divine? ...Certainly not in Europe. But even here [in India], there are plenty of people who, by tradition, have a 'family deity,' and yet when they are displeased nothing stops them from going and throwing her in the Ganges! That's what they do, I know people who have done that; they had a family Kali in their house, and they took her and threw her in the Ganges because they were angry with her - if you believe in the Divine, you can't do things like that, can you?' (1980 [1966]: 235)

Irulas threaten their deity with precisely this kind of treatment, and in making these threats they indicate the reverse of the kind of 'upward' movements of deities described by Obeyesekere (1982: *passim*), indicating that Hindu practice exemplifies the 'turnover in magical procedures' (Goody 1961: 146-7) which inevitably results from the combination of an empirical end and a non-empirical

means. But to say that people who do such things don't 'really' believe in 'the Divine' is to impute to them a confusion of symbols, names and invisible agents. As Eck puts it,

Worshipping as God those 'things' which are not God has been despised in the Western traditions as 'idolatry,' a mere bowing down to 'sticks and stones.' The difficulty with such a view of idolatry, however, is that anyone who bows down to such things clearly does not understand them to be sticks and stones. No people would identify themselves as 'idolators,' by faith. Thus, idolatry can be only an outsider's term for the symbols and visual images of some other culture. (1985 [1981]: 21)

Hindus worship the bodies of other people, often bodies which belong to their social inferiors, while those bodies are believed to be inhabited by the deity. So too, they will worship whatever comes to hand, because it is the act of worship which makes the object divine. Hindu practice therefore implicitly acknowledges the metaphorical construction of divinity, whereas those who disparage the manipulation of idols are mistakenly denying that divinity is constituted by the concrete operations of religious practice as well as by the metaphors of the mind. We find this implication running throughout the endless thoroughly unhelpful debates about whether or not Hindus equate symbolic representations of deities with the deities themselves. We find it, too, in a passage in *Nuer Religion*, where Evans-Pritchard is evidently relieved to be able to announce that the various Nuer representations of divinity 'are no more than metaphors for Nuer, who do not say that any of these things is God, but only that he is like (*cere*) them' (1956: 123). What he implies is not simply that Nuer are conscious of the insufficiency of their metaphors (which in any case means that these are similes rather than metaphors), but that they are aware of some *literal* divinity beyond the similes they use. His mission is to defend the Nuer against the calumny of Lévy-Bruhl's notion that 'primitives' assume the 'participation' of the signifier in the signified; the paradox is that symbolising divinity is, on the contrary, an activity in which the symbol genuinely does 'participate' in the referent - insofar as there *is* a referent - whereas this is not the case with the 'twins-are-birds' metaphor, which apparently the Nuer announce as a metaphor rather than as a simile ('Nuer are not saying that a twin is like a bird but that he is a bird' (*ibid*: 131)).

The irrational person is not the believer who points at a stone and says 'this is my god,' but rather the religious sophisticate who says to such a believer, 'No, this is not your God, it is *like* your God but is only a representation.' To say this is to accuse such a believer of the fallacy of misplaced concreteness; but in this case the

sophisticate is inventing an unattainable concrete divinity which has, of course, no concrete existence. It is crucial to our understanding of divinity to observe that the distinctions between the metaphorical and the literal, symbol and referent, already difficult to apply in everyday life, can never adequately describe the relation of icon to deity; yet all accusations of 'idolatry' or 'misplaced concreteness' implicitly assume that there is some 'non-metaphorical' divine entity of which images are 'only' representations. We should note the chauvinistic, disparaging use of the accusations, but not reproduce these epistemological blunders in our analysis.

Even Gilbert Lewis, in one of anthropology's most helpful discussions of metaphor in ritual, manages to make this mistake: 'for the individual to see that what he uses is a metaphor or a symbol, he must see at some level of consciousness that one is after all merely a picture, the other the land in front of him; one an image of the god, the other the god itself' (1980: 113). It is of course hard to imagine a worshipper who wasn't in some sense able to separate tangible from elusive representations of divinity; and worshippers may understand this distinction by means of a variety of metaphorical axes such as material:abstract, present:absent, visible:invisible, sensory:cerebral, and so on. But the analyst must acknowledge that icon-for-deity is *not* the same as map-for-territory or signifier-for-signified. It is not a straightforward case of two things, one of which stands for the other; *it is a special kind of metaphor, for since there is no clear referent, neither can there be a signifier which is clearly distinguishable from signified*. In fact, the signified is (in part at least) *constituted* by the signifier. For Lewis, the 'superstitious' confusion of concrete symbol and 'transcendent' deity occurs when 'the element of conscious make-believe is lost':

Objects, actions and images may represent in the sense of serving as substitutes rather than by imitating the external form of something else. The piece of wood may serve the gull as a substitute for an egg; the baby's thumb, as substitute for the mother's breast; the idol, as substitute for a god; the wax dummy, as substitute for the person whom the sorcerer desires to harm. (*ibid*: 116)

Here again, by putting the idol-for-god substitution in a cluster of one-thing-for-another substitutions, Lewis fails to identify the essential difference in symbolising divinity. When a wooden egg substitutes for a real egg, a thumb for a nipple, a wax dummy for a real person, the referent has an independent existence, and we are justified in seeing the signifier as in some sense illusory or inferior. This is not the case with an image or portrayal of divinity, though believers inevitably talk as if it were. So even though he rightly points out that 'the common factor between the object or the action and its substitute or symbol is function rather than form' (*ibid*:

117), he cannot deny that in all these examples, with the notable exception of icon-for-deity, there is some aspect of relevant physical form which is selected for replication. Similarly, symbols for divinity are performatives - they *create* divinity rather than *referring* to it, since divinity exists empirically only insofar as metaphors alter our experience.

We are now in a position to understand the irrelevance, from an analytical rather than chauvinistic point of view, of questioning whether religionists confuse their religious symbols with the deities which they are supposed to symbolise. Elwin discusses the 'Hindu notion ...that an image is a symbol':

It is not a portrait of a god, but it attempts, by representing certain symbolic values in human form, to convey their spiritual meaning to the worshipper, and so help him to concentrate his attention on the divine. This is commonly held by the more sensitive and intelligent Hindus, but I do not think the Saoras have arrived at it. (1955: 181)

But Elwin's question is itself not relevant to religious practice. Of course it is absurd to think of an image as equal to a deity; but it is equally absurd to say that a deity 'is not' an image or is not 'in' an image - since this assumes that the entity worshipped is both *somewhere* else and *something* else.<sup>1</sup> And this is precisely why the analyst of religion must proceed on the assumption that this is not the case. Were we to listen only to the ideology of transcendence, or what Kenneth Burke called 'negative theology,'<sup>2</sup> then our observation of religious behaviour is relegated to a purely negative role, assessing practice as deviation from prescribed transcendentalism. And this would prevent us from recognising the undermining

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<sup>1</sup>The claim, made by some feminist Christians, that the Christian God is a She might seem heretical, heroic, or irrelevant, depending on your point of view; and yet it is as incontestable as saying that the unicorn has two horns. In both cases the creature discussed has no testable existence, and therefore no *contestable* existence. We might parody theological sophistry in this way: A: 'The Unicorn has two horns.' B: 'No it doesn't.' A: 'Prove it.' Both A and B are believers in unicorns, but since the unicorn's unicornity has no material existence, A is quite entitled to be unconventional and believe in a two-horned unicorn. There can be no defence of pedantry in discussion of the transcendental.

<sup>2</sup>'The simplest route to negative theology is to make negatives of all terms that designate positive availability to sensory perception (as *invisible*, *unknowable*, *boundless*). Such a description of *God* is also, necessarily, a statement about resources of language' (Burke 1966: 457). Discussing the role of the negative theology of Protestant Christianity as a 'powerful secularizing agent,' MacIntyre points out that this kind of theologising undermines theism altogether, since 'the kind of negative theology which refuses to identify any object with the divine (God is not this, not that) has its final fruit in the kind of atheism which Simone Weil and Tillich both see as a recognition of the fact that God cannot be identified with any particular existing object' (1970 [1964]: 76).



irony in every construction of divinity, in that the deity, unknowable and non-empirical, is constructed out of everything that the believer insists it is not.

### 5.3. Fear and fervour

Elwin's assumption that Saoras have not 'arrived at' an understanding of religious icons as 'symbols' allows him to perpetrate the even greater calumny which is often found in the literature on both 'tribal' and 'village Hindu' religion - that it is a religion based on fear and aiming at exorcism, a religion from which devotion and the desire to incorporate divinity are absent: 'the images do not symbolize anything, they are not a focus to devotion, they do not bring the gods near: they keep the gods away. And the offerings that are made from time to time before them are to ensure the continued absence of the gods' (*ibid*: 184).

The arguments against simplistic attributions of the label 'exorcistic' have been discussed already [2.3.2], and if my account has gone some way towards breaking down the caricature of the religion, particularly the goddess-worship, of the vast majority of the Indian population as exorcistic, then it will have served a useful purpose. The opposition of malevolence and benevolence has been one of the mainstays in both sociological and popular discussion of Hinduism. The degree to which attempts are made to separate these two aspects of reality by personifying them doubtless varies from one religion to another and from one context to another within a religious tradition. Perhaps the separation of these two is an ideal aimed at, but no clear and unambiguous distinction between malevolent and benevolent spiritual beings is possible.

One example from my own ethnography will suffice to demonstrate the tendency of deities to develop a split personality. I refer to basic contradictions in the characterisation of *buumi taay*, the Earth Mother. As elsewhere in India, the Earth Goddess is the protectress of agriculture, and is worshipped in rites connected with agriculture; every morning before the first dig with a spade, each worker will touch first the ground, and then touch his or her forehead, as a gesture of homage to *buumi taay*. Yet this action is explained fairly consistently as asking for *buumi taay's forgiveness* for ploughing - which, as elsewhere in India, is potentially sinful in taking microbiotic life. The action says, 'for what I am about to do, may the Lord know that I am proleptically repentant.' So, logically, *buumi taay* is *antagonistic to agriculture* and her worship before ploughing can be interpreted as proleptical expiation. Paradoxically, however, the simple act of expiation turns her,

affectively and effectively if not logically, into the *goddess of agriculture*. This is a clear illustration of the fact that divine malevolence is not just hard to distinguish from divine benevolence; the one is axiomatically inseparable from the other.

But the opposition of malevolence and benevolence has often been matched in a slipshod manner with 'levels' of Hinduism, always with the assumption that the 'lower' the level (both in the sense of status of worshippers and in the sense of degree of materialisation), the greater the emphasis on *exorcism* and *propitiation* of *malevolent* deities or 'demons.' In non-academic, semi-educated circles in India, village Hinduism tends to be grotesquely caricatured as a disturbing mixture of demonolatry<sup>1</sup> and exorcism. This serves as a backdrop to highlight the '*devotion*' that is said to characterise the 'higher' worship of Sanskrit deities. Mandelbaum (1964: 10ff) translated this opposition into the slightly more subtle, but none the less misrepresentative opposition of a '*pragmatic complex*' involving 'vernacular' worship of 'local' deities with the emphasis on individual welfare, and a '*transcendental complex*' which is 'ultimate, supernal, derived from Sanskrit texts.' There is implicit social evolutionism in both these comparisons, the assumption being that 'tribals' and lower castes have evolved less than Brahmans and city-dwellers.

Sharma has endorsed the pragmatic:transcendental distinction by pointing out that 'practically no institutionalised religious activities are directed purely to God conceived as Bhagvan,' whereas

all the *devatas* are considered to be both potentially troublesome if their wishes are ignored and potentially helpful if their goodwill is solicited in the right manner. The correct way to avert their anger as well as to seek their active aid in a particular project or dilemma is to make offerings to them accompanied by the performance of certain simple ritual acts. (The orientation of these cults is therefore decidedly pragmatic rather than directed to any species of other-worldly salvation). (1978 [1973]b: 61)

If 'other-worldly orientation' is interpreted as 'unpragmatic' and 'transcendental,' then its social relevance is denied and it ought logically to transcend our analysis; if, on the other hand, we recognise that such a philosophy is invented and followed by social beings with some practical ends in view, then we ought not to be calling it 'unpragmatic.' Conversely, if we allow ourselves to define 'other-worldly orientations' as 'unpragmatic,' then all religious activity is by definition

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<sup>1</sup>Though Dumont (1986 [1957]: 349) has pointed out that 'a demon or spirit becomes a god when he becomes the object of a regular cult.'

unpragmatic, since it posits the existence of transcendent beings and thereby avoids the means-ends relationship of normal pragmatism.

Lawrence Babb, though rejecting the characterisation of Hindu deities as unambiguously benevolent or malevolent, nevertheless retains this opposition by virtually equating benevolence with divine maleness and malevolence with divine femaleness, at least when the goddess is represented as being in the ascendant:

Divinity seems to have two basic qualities or transmutations. One is essentially protective and benevolent, the other is the very embodiment of malevolence when unrestrained or unappeased. At the most abstract level these doubtless represent two different aspects of the same thing, a notion of potential 'power' intrinsic to the sacred. However, in myth and ritual these emerge in the sense of a sex-linked opposition, a distinction between *devta* and *devi*, between 'god' and 'goddess.' (Babb 1975: 217)

But neither in my own experience of Irula and non-Irula worship of village goddesses, nor in any reliable recent anthropological literature on South India, can I find any evidence of consistent portrayal of the goddess as any more malevolent or less worthy of devotion than male deities.

This kind of opposition has also been linked in the study of Hinduism with the opposition of meat-eating and vegetarian deities, with the assumption that the former are impure, malevolent, and exorcised or tamed, whereas the vegetarian deities are pure, benevolent, and incorporated as objects of devotion - though 'the same' deity may oscillate between these manifestations. The evidence from Irula rites demands a rather different interpretation; most of the deities accept blood sacrifice more or less directly, though in some cases the goddess may be shielded from view of the slaughter. But there was no suggestion that acceptance of blood sacrifice marks any deity as more dangerous or malevolent than any other; in fact, of the Irula festivals I witnessed, there was far more emphasis on fear at the worship of Basavayya (identified with Siva), whose danger and power was *explicitly based on his purity and vegetarianism*.

Outside India, several anthropologists, notably Turner and Lewis, have recognised that it may not be possible to characterise evaluation of spiritual invasion as unambiguously positive or negative. But though they reject this kind of simplistic distinction, they assume that we can, on the other hand, distinguish unambiguously between *reactions* to ambiguously evaluated spiritual entities, classifying them either as *exorcism* or as *domestication*. Most anthropological analysis has

succeeded in finding that *either* the phenomenon concerned is driven out *or* it is tamed and turned into a friend. Ioan Lewis (1986: 88-9), for example, has quite rightly argued against Mary Douglas's (1970: *passim*) assumption that every society can be said to unambiguously evaluate spiritual invasion in terms of malevolence or benevolence of the spirits. But he replaces this assumption with the assumption that each reaction to spirit possession can be clearly categorised as *either* exorcism *or* domestication of the spirit. Similarly, Shirikogoroff pointed out that Tungus don't unambiguously distinguish 'good' or 'bad' spirits, but see them rather as malevolent, benevolent, or neutral, according to context and treatment, but especially depending on whether or not they are 'mastered' by a shaman (1935: 121-122).

In a more general discussion of the treatment of anomalies, Turner refers to the 'widely prevalent social tendency *either* to make what falls outside the norm a matter of concern for the widest recognized group *or* to destroy the exceptional phenomenon. In the former case, the anomalous may be sacralized, regarded as holy' (Turner 1969: 45). But in India as elsewhere, people ritually do both of these things, making the abnormal sacred, celebrating it for a while, then exorcising it. This kind of interpretation of ritual takes for granted the forgone conclusion that order will symbolically triumph over chaos. But as we have seen, if the Irula festivals make this kind of optimistic symbolic statement, they also contradict it by stating the opposite - that chaos is not defeatable; not only this, but they in many ways express and revel in the value of chaos. Where my analysis differs from Turner's, then, is that I do not assume *a priori* that the analysis of ritual gives any clear idea about what participants would like to do with anomalies.

Douglas (1970: 35) quotes at length Strindberg's autobiography about growing up in Sweden, where there was a progression of increasingly distant and terrifying authority from the child, through parents, landlords and politicians, to God. This seems to be matched by the Hindu relation to God in his scriptural manifestation - physically represented in major temples by the Kafkaesque maze of walls and ticket barriers which have to be passed in order to reach the deity. In village Hinduism, deities become more accessible, and there is less emphasis on the awesome distance between the deity and the worshipper. But there may still be some degree of separation; as Beals says of the village deities of Gopalpur, 'In a general way, these gods resemble the higher-ranking government officials. They are generally kindly, but it is difficult to obtain an interview with them' (1966 [1962]: 47).

Irula relations with their deity are not characterised by separation: the deity is located in the home, in the medium, and in the forest shrine - everywhere easy of access, as is symbolised most clearly by the handshake. But the general proximity of the deity is, like all other apparent messages, subverted and contradicted by the difficulty of persuading her to manifest, and the obscurity of the language. Overall, the deity is bound to remain a bundle of enigmas - at once immanent yet obscure, controllable yet capricious; at once a free agent and yet bound by human laws of reciprocity; benevolent and malevolent; closely associated with the group of worshippers yet opposed to them; associated with culture yet located in nature; all-powerful yet at times severely inhibited by the machinations of inferior spirits.

An account of such a jumble of contradictions may seem confusing, but at least it has the merit of avoiding the essentialist definitions of particular deities that we so many interpreters of Hinduism are accustomed to giving. It must be concluded that the Irula portrayal of divinity matches closely what Dumont has to say about the beliefs of Kallars, who 'do not believe in spiritual beings individually': 'caste commands a specific belief which appears alienated from an ordinary point of view. It is a belief in the unity of opposites, in a totality of oppositions which resolves into an illusory multiplicity, which entails in the last analysis the unreality of the gods' (1986 [1957]: 461). This 'unity of opposites' means that it is nonsense to call a particular deity vegetarian or meat-eating, benevolent or malevolent, high or low status in any fixed and substantial sense.

#### **5.4. The Great Divide**

It has been my hope that this discussion of divine play and divine language will contribute both to our understanding of Hindu theology and to theology in general. I have portrayed an extreme case of the humanisation of the divine, where deities become fully human and are not even verbally raised above humanity by polite forms of address, and it might be tempting to use this material in support of the idea that Hindus don't clearly differentiate between humans and deities. In addition to this ethnographic endorsement, I have also given theoretical endorsement to social pantheism by insisting throughout on the social construction of divinity.

It is worth examining some of the explicit denials that there is a Great Divide, in Hindu cosmology, between deities and humans, to see how far we can agree with them. Beals assures us that in Karnataka 'there is no sharp line of demarcation

between gods, men, and animals. All are part of the single unity described as “God,” “Brahman,” or “Paramahatma.” God is all-inclusive as well as all-powerful and all-knowing (1966 [1962]: 48). But such an argument can be knocked down very easily: if God really is ‘all-inclusive,’ ‘all-powerful,’ and ‘all-knowing,’ this in itself is enough to draw a sharp contrast between God and all humans - quite apart from making the idea of divinity so diffuse as to be altogether meaningless. As we have seen, however, the deities worshipped in Irula festivals are not so omnipotent and omniscient - at least not in any straightforward way. Despite the fact the large gathering of people in honour of a deity is itself a clear indication of great power, and despite the euphemistic appellation of ‘Thousand-eyed Mother,’ the familiar address and undermining irony in the *séance* dialogue ensures that superior vision doesn’t draw a clear boundary between worshippers and the goddess. Indeed, the festival constitutes as much an attack on the boundaries that divide humans from deities and animals as it is on the boundaries that divide civilisation from the wilderness.

Statements about continuity between humans and deities are confusing if they fail to make clear whether they are referring to ritual, or to general everyday thinking about these matters. We need to recognise that the relations between humans, deities, and animals are subjected in ritual to much the same kind of classificatory confusion, inversion, and reversal that happens to all the rest of human cognition in ritual. If a rite can be shown to systematically blur the normal - indeed self-evident - distinction between humans and deities, it is patently absurd to conclude from this that the distinction no longer exists. Anthropologists are familiar with the ritual reversals of normal human power-relations and the ritual blurring of human social distinctions; much less has been written about what happens to everyday human-divine relations in ritual, yet it would be quite surprising if similar reversal of asymmetries and similar blurring of boundaries did not occur with respect to these too.

Bearing in mind this distinction between the blurring of boundaries in ritual and everyday life, it becomes clear how dangerous it is to assume that people labelled as adherents of a particular religion are unconscious of boundaries which are blurred in certain manifestations of that religion. This mistake is made by Piatigorsky, who claims that a ‘phenomenological’ approach to Hinduism highlights radical contrasts between Hindu and Christian consciousness:

we [i.e. Christians] differentiate God from man in our own consciousness: that is already something. But there is no certainty that a similar distinction is to be found in all religions: it has to be pursued, it cannot be axiomatized. And, indeed, in Hinduism this distinction is blurred rather than absolute, men being distinguished from rishis in more fundamental ways than from some gods. (1985: 209)

Such a monolithic presentation is hard to apply to an official dogma, let alone the consciousness of a whole people. Why does he choose not to interpret the phenomenon of Christ as a blurring of the human-divine distinction? I doubt if we can usefully compare one religion with another by reference to the degree to which it draws absolute distinctions between 'god' and man; the more blurred the boundary, the less likely we are to speak of 'god,' and the more absolute the distinction, the more likely we are to speak of some unpersonified abstraction such as 'force' or 'principle.'

It is ironic, then, that just such a non-personalised abstraction, the concept of *shakti*, forms the basis of one of the most frequently-cited arguments for the cognitive nonduality of deities and humans in Hinduism. Wadley makes an enormous cognitive leap from the description of supernatural entities as *shakti sanpann* - 'power-filled' - to the assumption that 'the notion of power is the defining characteristic of Hindu deities, who are in fact 'powerful' beings'' (1975: 54-5) and that since 'potentially, all beings can be members of a Hindu pantheon; any being with powers over other beings could be, for the individual concerned, a member of his pantheon,' therefore this linkage of human and divine power means that Hindus have no concept of a 'bounded supernatural spatial domain,' and 'no native conception of a bounded domain of religion or the spiritual, and no separation of sacred and profane' (1977: 137-140).

We do need to recognise is that the traffic in metaphoric predication between humans and spiritual beings is, in Hinduism, considerably more promiscuous than in other religions. Hindus are less reluctant than, say, Christians, to humanise deities and deify humans. But to imply that therefore there is no consciousness of radical distinction between living, visible humans, on the one hand, and the occult world of spirits and deities on the other, is absurd. It is, like the whole enterprise of ethnosociology, a peculiar modern version of the long outmoded linguistic determinism of Sapir and Whorf.

The advantage I have gained from the analysis of séances is that I have been able to address not just what is said *about* deities, but also what is said *to* them, and this

has enabled me to avoid essentialistic interpretations of divinity. Where Wadley reports that deities in Karimpur are 'power-filled' (*sakti-sanpann*) beings, and Srinivas (1976: 304) reports the Karnataka definition of deities as 'very truthful' (*bahala satya*), I have been able to show that although Irula deities undoubtedly possess these qualities as required, the festival dances them through an infinite variety of transmutations, so that at any given moment they may be powerful, pathetic, truthful, deceitful, anthropomorphic, theriomorphic, visible, hidden, or any combination of these.

In fact, the most significant aim of the séance ritual appears to be to put the deity on centre stage and then systematically frustrate all her efforts at impression management, even to the extent of querying her ultimate reality; her anger is revealed as so much posturing; her 'thousand eyes,' revealed elsewhere as pustules, are here at least revealed as not particularly visionary. The elusiveness of divinity is hinted at by the manifold uses of the verb *puDi* (catch) in the séances; the medium is 'caught' by the deity, the wrongdoer ought to be 'caught' by the deity, the deity must 'catch' the thoughts of the client, and it may be no accidental pun that makes the medium call for a musical interlude by shouting *puDi puDi puDi puDi!* (an elliptical way of saying *puDi oru kwä:l* - 'play a *kwä:l*' - which is a synecdochic demand for music).

The idea of divinity is in Hinduism divided up into an endless plethora of categories and labels. Some of these labels are simply the localisation of a pan-Indian idea - the fierce goddess and her subordinate male consort; and we can say that these numerous local deities are really the same deity with different labels. Conversely, however, the use of pan-Indian labels such as Siva, Parvati, Durga, and Kali does not by any means give us permission to assume that 'the same deity' is being worshipped. Nor, even in a single séance at a single festival in a single place can we assume that 'the same deity' is the same from one moment to the next. To do so would be to miss the essential point about deities, and in particular the volatile local goddesses, which is that their identities can never be pinned down, just as they can never be pinned down to any single locality. Addressed with formal respect one moment, the goddess might be Parvati, but cursed the next moment she becomes the demoness who kills children and makes the crops fail. The point I am making is that to personalise a deity - 'Maariyamma is a terrifying, destructive goddess' - may be as misleading as the personalisation of a whole culture - 'India is a very



friendly country.’ The danger of accepting uncritically Hindu personalisations of divinity is succinctly expressed by Fuller:

no adequate analysis can ignore the fundamental differences between gods and men, for these differences, in Hinduism as in other religions, are at the root of the problem of communication between human and divine beings which rituals, in part, are intended to overcome. In Hinduism, in absolute contrast to the monotheistic religions, that problem is sought to be resolved by progressive identification of the worshipper and his god, so that the two can ultimately become one. (1984: 14)

In Hindu ritual, then, ‘progressive identification’ is always counterbalanced by implicit recognition of the radical separation of the human and the divine - and if we fail to recognise this internal contradiction, we grossly misinterpret Hindu ritual. After all, if separation were not a major theme, why would there be the need for purification before and after contact with the sacred? And we must use this understanding to counter the over-simplified assumption that if deities are addressed with kinship terms or understood to be dead humans, this indicates nothing but proximity. For example, Gardner informs us that Paliyans sometimes call their village deities *taata* (‘grandfather’), that some say they are ‘parentlike,’ and that ‘however it is phrased, they are usually thought to be fairly immediate beings’ (1988 [1972]: 433). The important point about deities is that they can’t be said to be either immediate or distant in any fixed way. Although we might draw general comparisons between proximate and distant deities, they are all ambiguous; indeed, for Irulas, the supposedly ‘distant’ Sanskritic deities are present in home and workplace in mass-produced images, whereas the supposedly ‘proximate’ lesser deities are generally absent except at festival time.<sup>1</sup>

Whereas people are catchable, the deity is elusive, and this is expressed in the contradictions of her symbolic representations and metaphoric associations: the forest-dweller and the protégée of the village priest-headman, the petromorphic constancy of the deity-stone and the theriomorphic capriciousness of the effervescent trance; the poetry of the verse and the bellowing of the interludes. This is above all a rough, unhewn deity (represented by an unhewn stone) that interacts with the world rather than superimposing on it. The polyglossia of the séance is the linguistic counterpart of the common sartorial appearance of the trickster in other cultures, the patchwork of the harlequin’s motley.

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<sup>1</sup>I have no explanation for why this should be the inverse of the situation described by Sharma in northern India, where private worship is directed at ‘non-Sanskritic’ deities, and public worship is directed at ‘Sanskritic’ deities (1978 [1973]b: 59-60).

I remember that as a child, whenever I was ill, and subsequently in occasional bouts of teenage drunkenness, I would be bothered by thoroughly unpleasant visions of a dancing comic-strip figure whose shape would vacillate between needle and beach-ball, and that this would culminate in my vomiting. I am told that this is a common manifestation of the disequilibrium of fever, and I was reminded of this in the shape-shifting of the trickster-like Irula medium, crouching and whimpering one moment, leaping and bellowing the next. Culturally conventionalised though the performance of divine possession may be, it is not hard to discern in it a physiological basis, rooted in the dizziness of fever, of alcoholism or the love of bodily dissociation found in all children's play. The idea that the divine is only accessible via the dizziness of trance is perhaps the most honest and informative of all theological theories, for it reminds us that deities are inseparable from human physiology, despite quite ungraspable as persons.

### 5.5. Performative fictions and 'the Other'

I have explained my objections to the use of the representational signifier:signified model in the analysis of divinity. If we say that divinity is 'represented' in a ritual, we must then say *what* the representations represent; we can't simply say, circularly, that they are representations of divinity, since divinity is only known through representation. In fact, it would be more precise to speak of the *presentation* or even the *performative creation* of divinity in ritual. There is dramatic irony in any statement such as 'God made the world' or 'God made man,' since anyone who stops to think about it will realise that such phrases reverse the arrow of performative creativity; it is clear that divinity is indebted to the world for all the metaphors that constitute it, and indebted to man as the constructor of those metaphors.

However, I have also insisted on the palindromic reading of metaphors. Kenneth Burke, in *A Grammar of Motives*, says that a metaphor asserts both 'the this-ness of a that' and 'the that-ness of a this' (1966); divinity is created by metaphors drawn from human experience - types and categories of people, animals, vegetables, minerals and climatic events in the environment; conversely (or palindromically), once created in this way divinity provides metaphors for human action and events - it reminds us both of our transparent animality and our opaque transcendence, it adds extra dimensions to illness and dementia by representing these as spiritual invasion, and so on. Any equation of the form 'God is *x*' must be

read palindromically. Thus in the Christian cliché ‘God is love,’ ‘God’ is a metaphor predicated on love, which itself is enabled to transcend instinctual attraction thanks to its predication on ‘God.’ The bi-directional forces of the metaphor, as it were, uplift human nature from its material roots at the same moment as the transcendent deity becomes immanent in material realities.

In the séance, deity becomes man, man becomes animal, and animal becomes deity; this Escherian circle is reminiscent of the Zen Buddhist’s assertion that ‘All is one. One is none. And None is all.’ I have described the festival as ‘an endless chase after proliferating subjunctives,’ in which people leap between a bewildering variety of ‘as ifs.’ There are fictions involved at every moment of normal waking life. As G.H.Mead pointed out long ago, the process of becoming human necessitates ‘taking the role of the other’ toward ourselves (1934: 153); in other words, we experiment with different perspectives on reality in order to make sense of the world. We also ‘take the role of the other’ in a different way, not just gaining new perspectives on ourselves, but changing our selves by playing roles which we had hitherto thought not to be our own - a topic which has been imaginatively explored by Goffman’s *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). The performance of divinity is the engagement with the most significant other of all; divinity is the enabling fiction which allows people, individually and collectively, to become objects to themselves, and hence learn to control certain objectifiable aspects of their identity. A similar point has been made by Fernandez with respect to the performance of animality by children - which we have seen to be an implicit component in the Irula performance of divinity. This he describes as a progression from playing the part of an animal to playing the part of the controller of an animal (1986: 35).

Much of the discussion of the dramatic performance of alternative identities portrays individuals acting different parts in order to establish who they are or who they might be. But I don’t think either Goffman or Fernandez here make forcefully enough the point that if we act in order to know who we are, we also act in order to know who we are *not*. They fail to distinguish what I have called *associational* (*homophilic* or *homophobic*) and *contrapuntal* (*heterophilic* or *heterophobic*) orientations. To borrow a phrase from Ricoeur, ‘the metaphorical “is” at once signifies both “is not” and “is like” (1978 [1975]: 7). In positing a straightforward identification with the ‘other’ which we create when we play, they lead us away from recognising the ambiguous liminality of divinity. Like faeces and nailparings,

divinity is both me and not-me; from the point of view of the group, likewise, divinity is both identified with the group and at the same time the sparring partner used in the construction of collective identity. When we discuss any transaction involving imputed occult entities, we should see any occult entity to whom the status of 'actor' is imputed, as created in the process of transaction. It is this strategic creation of a non-empirical 'actor' which Orwell alludes to in the 'ten minutes hate' episodes of *1984*.

The analytical terms I have provided, then, seem to be of considerably more towards understanding what happens to the idea of divinity in Irula festivals, than the terms in which divinity is more commonly analysed - 'benevolent:malevolent,' 'god:goddess,' 'god:demon,' 'pure:impure,' 'transcendental:pragmatic,' 'high:low,' and so on. If we immerse ourselves too much in the religionist's fantasy, it is these terms which we are bound to come up with, since these are the tools of the fiction. Important though it may be to acknowledge the tools of fiction, they are of limited value in analysis. A deity is not 'benevolent' or 'malevolent,' 'male' or 'female,' since a deity 'is' not in an essentialist sense. It is the *use* to which a deity is put that matters, not the labels which are put on its fictional attributes. Deities, like all symbols, 'do not tell us *what* to mean, but give us the capacity to make meaning' (Cohen 1985: 16). Deities with the same name may be performed differently at different moments, and interpreted differently by different participants. With this in mind, it is no longer puzzling that a deity with the same name and represented by the same image can be a vegetarian inside her temple and a meat-eater outside it (Good 1985: 135).

If Irulas fear the outside world of heteroglot officialdom, we can recognise this implicit metaphor in the construction of their heteroglot spirits. But this is a metaphor *of* and *against* reality, since the heteroglot spirits can, unlike the real-life officials, be meaningfully conversed with and addressed in familiar terms. Though we should follow Fuller in rejecting the functionalist assumption of simple homology between divine and human hierarchies (1987: 19ff), it is nevertheless clear that deities are elusive enough to vacillate within the same performance between associational (or homologous) and contrapuntal roles. Thus in the Irula festival, the goddess can play the contrapuntal role of a tyrannical, all-powerful superwoman one moment, and the associational role of a familiar and rather crotchety grandmother the next. The fact that the Irula pantheon lacks a clearly-defined divine hierarchy matches well the absence of hierarchy in Irula society.

Leach, on the other hand, posits an exclusively contrapuntal construction of divinity when he suggests that 'visible hierarchy among deities goes with egalitarian politics among men; isolated monotheism goes with hierarchical politics among men' (1983: 83), and in his eagerness to countermand functionalist homologising he over-protests.

The Irula performance of divinity, their encounter with 'the Other,' is as much about discovering who they are not as it is about discovering who they are. By analogy, the performance of fieldwork by anthropologists is as much about discovering who we are not as it is about discovering who we, and they, are.

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## Appendix 1: The festivals

### **Irula village-based festivals**

*Biliyuur Mā:riyamma*, Monday-Tuesday 18th-19th April 1988: an Irula festival largely taken over by BaDagas, who provide two priests to assist the Irula priest. and the locus of major quarrels between the two communities. Attended by about 1000 BaDagas and 400 Irulas.

*Mandare Pagavadi*, Sunday 24th April 1988: the Biliyuur *gowdā* 's festival; attended by most of the 400 members of Biliyuur, but occasion of major disputes because the *gowdā* 's junior male affines failed to turn up until the afternoon.

*tudikere pagavadi*, Sunday 1st May 1988: small village one mile from Biliyuur; priest is the headman of Tudikere; attended by the 20 residents of Tudikere and about 100 from Biliyuur

*tudikere Pā:iraayā* , Sunday 8th May 1988: ill-attended festival on a rocky outcrop an hour's walk from both Tudikere and Biliyuur; most of the 10 people who came failed to become possessed until Bagälā , the main Biliyuur medium turned up. Worship finished after two hours.

*KiiLkuppu Mā:riyamma*, Tuesday 4th May 1988; the main annual festival of this village, attended by all the 30 villagers, plus about 20 outsiders. Occasion for mockery of the Tamil forest guard during the séance. In the middle of the day, about twenty men went for an extra pilgrimage through thick undergrowth to a tiny forest Madeshwara shrine.

*Meelkuppu Mā:riyamma*, Wednesday 11th May 1988: major festival on land recently taken over by tea estate. Attended by all 50 villagers, plus about 200 outsiders, mainly Irulas and BaDagas. Preceded by a month's *uurmele* at which the movable image was taken round about twenty Irula villages.

*SuNDeyuur Madeshwara*, Tuesday 30th May 1988: attended by about fifty of SuNDeyuur's population of 100.

*SuNDeyuur Mā:riyamma*, Wednesday 31st May 1988: main annual festival, attended by 100 SuNDeyuur people plus about fifty outsiders.

*Kooyikere MahaagaalIyamma*, Monday, Tuesday 6th-7th June, 1988: main annual festival, attended by 200, preceded by a three-day *uurmele*; a dispute between the priest-headman and his brother has produced a political split in the village, reflected for the last six years in the separate festivals.

*Biliyuur nilagiri toga*, Saturday 11th June, 1988: local version of the Rangasaami Malai festival, held on the same day; attended by about 100 Biliyuur people.

*Vaagapane pagavadi*, Wednesday-Thursday 13th-14th June, 1988: major exodus of 100 people from Biliyuur occasioned by the offer of two goats by comparatively well-off Biliyuur men. Four-hour walk each way.

*Kooyikere Basavayya*, Tuesday 14th June, 1988; attended by about 100 people, on land now taken over by coffee estate.

*Kooyikere MahaagaalIyamma*, Tuesday 21st June, 1988: another version of the same festival, attended by about 200, including about 20 who went to both.

*Jemmanare Ossatta Mä:ri*, Sunday 24th July, 1988; attended by about 100, said to be held to celebrate the 'new harvest', of which there was scant evidence.

### **Multi-caste festivals**

*Rangasaami Malai*, Saturday 27th September, 1986; Saturday 2nd October 1986; Saturday 15th September 1988. Two Irula priests, attended by about 100 local Irulas and up to 4000 Tamils from Nilgiris and from the plains. Income from festival has been forcefully appropriated by local BaDagas.

*MaasaniguDi Maasaniamma*, Saturday 11th - Sunday 12th October 1986: one of a series of linked festivals to the 'seven sisters', including *Aanaikallumaari* and *baNNaari maariyamman*: held to coincide with Dassara; Irula priest possessed by goddess 'kills' demon-tree with arrow; attended by 2000 from a variety of local castes.

*Puuchuur Viirabaddiran, VeTTekaaran, and Lakshmi*, Tuesday 16th - Thursday 18th February 1988 (near Coimbatore): annual festival in multi-caste village which invites Irulas from nearby mountains to play music and bring the mountain deity with them. Mass possession occasioned by arrival of Irulas.

*Bokkapuuram*, Monday 29th February - Tuesday 1st March 1988 (northern Nilgiris): massive regional festival which has been building up in recent years from a local Irula/Kurumba/BaDaga festival; attended by 100,000 for several

days. Irula priest mainly important as medium for the goddess, assisted by scores of others, mainly BaDagas.

*Aanaikallumaari*, Tuesday 1st March 1988: in middle of forest near an Irula village; attended by 1000, mainly BaDagas, with Irula priests and musicians.

*KaaramaDai Ranganaadan*, Wednesday-Thursday 2nd-3rd March 1988: attended by 100,000 over several days; temple linked with Rangasaami Malai, and said likewise to have been an erstwhile Irula temple. No Irula priests or musicians, but there is a linked event a week before at which an Irula priest in nearby mountains initiates the festival by going into a cave and soliciting the deity's permission to hold the festival.

*Siruur Maari*, Monday - Tuesday 6th - 7th March 1988: in the middle of the forest by an Irula village, attended by 20,000 who all stayed overnight. Irula and BaDaga priests

*BaNNaari maariyamman*, near SattyamangaLam, Monday 4th - Tuesday 5th April: attended by 300,000 people.

*Maanar Maariyamman*, Tuesday 26th April: Irula village festival on the plains (Coimbatore District) attended by about 500, mainly non-Irula outsiders.

*Glenburn Estate Vinayagar/Maariamman*, Friday 7th - Saturday 8th May, 1988: festival and temples founded by the estate managers; Irula priest; attended by about 1000

*Mahagaaliamman*, near MeeTTupaLaiyam, Wednesday 18th May: monthly regional festival, popular with Irulas.



## Appendix 2: Ancestor installation ceremony

The formal installation of ancestors is a costly and lavish festival which I never witnessed because, so far as I know, there was no performance of it within reach of Biliyuur during my fieldwork. It ought to be held within a year or two of a death, but in practice people usually wait several years and hold a collective ceremony for several deceased. It is called the *soor vekkäl*, which means ‘rice-giving.’ Irulas say they only acquired this practice after they began to cultivate cash crops in their gardens and to eat rice as opposed to mainly forest-millet. All the spirits roamed free in the past, and consequently the number of unexpected deaths was much higher. This is the final rite of passage, through which a dead person achieves the peace and stability of ancestorhood. The limbo between death and the *soor vekkäl* is called *jaganaaDu*, in which the spirit roams free and may be a threat to society; after the *soor vekkäl*, they stay in the *koppe*. Until the *soor vekkäl* they are called *sattavä:r*, and thereafter they are called, collectively, *arumene-gurumene*, an echo-word which might be, somewhat clumsily, translated as ‘separate-house-guru-house.’

These are the details of the ceremony as described to me:

- There are several people designated as *puujä:ri* (priest) for the event: the men and boys of the immediate family of the deceased must wear only a white cloth for three days, observe fasts, wash regularly, and wash their mouths out after even beedi or areca and betel; two women *puujä:ris* who don’t go to the *koppe* are responsible for domestic preparation of seed oil and the food.
- On a Tuesday, the men and boys wash a rice and bean mixture in the nearest sizeable river, and fetch a smooth river-stone to represent the deceased. The rice and bean mixture is brought up from the river wrapped in a *komb-ele* (the rounded part of the banana-leaf, other sections of the leaf being unsuitable for offerings to the ancestors).<sup>1</sup>
- On the same day, seed-oil (*koTT’öeNNe*) is brought up in a bamboo container slung over the shoulder, and poured over all the ancestral stones.
- On the Thursday the ancestors in the *koppe* are worshipped as in any other major festival, and the new ancestral stone is installed. Every year on the first day of *thai* month (January-February), there is a smaller version of this, with individual families bring food and new clothes to offer to the ancestors in the *koppe*.
- Irulas tell me that in the past, before embarking on a hunt they would worship the ancestors at the *koppe* and solicit their help, and also sharpen their knives on the ancestral stones.

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<sup>1</sup>I was unable to elicit any interpretation as to why ancestor-stones and the leaf-plates offered to ancestors must be rounded, while deity-stones and the leaves used for divine offerings may be either angular or rounded. The choice of a river-stone has obvious metaphoric associations with eternity and the passage of time, and it may be that the insistence on a rounded leaf simply echoes the shape of the river-stone.

**Glossary**

<i>arumene</i>	(or <i>arumene-gurumene</i> ); the ancestors
<i>adivasi</i>	'tribal'
<i>dēyva</i>	deity
<i>edirmuDi</i>	lit. 'opposite image,' a stone a few yards from the main shrine, at which special offerings and usually blood sacrifices are made
<i>gowDā</i>	priest-headman
<i>jaattis</i>	<i>kula</i> functionaries with special duties at all rites of passage, especially weddings and funerals
<i>karma</i>	Hindu notion of fate as correlated with actions in previous incarnations
<i>kongā</i>	(pl. Non. <i>kongā:ru</i> ); person of Coimbatore District (by extension, all non-Irulas)
<i>koppe</i>	ancestral stone-hut
<i>kulas</i>	patriclans
<i>kwā:l</i>	oboe-like reed instrument, made by Irulas
<i>linga</i>	phallic stone symbol of Siva
<i>maNiagā:r</i>	Irula village functionary, alternative headman
<i>meestri</i>	foreman in a tea or coffee estate
<i>modāli</i>	Kurumba priest who has special responsibilities at all ritual events
<i>pilli</i>	sorcery, witchcraft
<i>pongāl</i>	lit; 'boiling' - boiled rice with either meat or vegetables, cooked in special way at festivals; gives its name to the <i>tai pongal</i> new-year festival in mid-January
<i>prasaada</i>	sacred food which has been offered to a deity
<i>puuja</i>	offering or worship; used especially for worship in multi-caste temples
<i>puujā:ri</i>	priest
<i>saami</i>	'Lord,' 'God' (also used as default address for goddess and all spirits)
<i>siime</i>	'territory' comprising about twenty villages
<i>soor vekkāl</i>	lit. 'putting the food' - ancestral installation ceremony
<i>toga</i>	'assembly,' 'festival,' 'temple,' 'corpse,' 'dead person's spirit,' 'ancestral spirit,' 'forest spirit' and any kind of invisible force
<i>uurmele</i>	taking the movable image of a deity round neighbouring villages in preparation for a festival. Defines the <i>siime</i> over which the deity is supposed to have authority

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