The wedding of two trees: connections, equivalences, and subjunctivity in a Tamil ritual

Soumhya Venkatesan *University of Manchester*

A wedding between two trees in a Tamil village reveals that a tree can be more than, while still remaining, a tree. It needs to be a tree because trees do certain things. It can be made more than a tree, however, through a logic of homological connections which temporarily create equivalences between trees and divinities. The wedding (*kalyanam*), a ubiquitous Tamil ritual form which pertains not only to marriage, creatively and subjunctively opens up new possibilities to change 'it could be' and 'it should be' to 'let it be so'. The wedding of two trees seeks to materialize ideal situations and outcomes by mobilizing the aliveness of trees, a quality they share with humans and animals, without positing personhood, identity, or confusing categories. In making this argument, I question choices of comparators in anthropological analyses which posit a holistic 'non-West' against a dualistic 'West' and contrast a taken-for-granted 'us' with 'our' really rather different 'others'.

January 2010.[1] I was chatting with 'Mahesh' on his veranda in his small home village in Pudukkottai, Tamilnadu, India. He handed me a sheet of pink paper on which the yellow of auspicious turmeric made bright splashes. 'Do you want to come to a wedding (*kalyanam*) I am conducting?' he asked. Puzzled, because, as a Brahmin temple and consecration priest, Mahesh does not normally officiate at weddings, I read through the beautifully phrased Sanskritized Tamil. Unusually, the wedding invitation (*thirumana azhaippidazh*) did not contain the couple's biographical details. Instead it included a short tract on the grace of the Lord Shiva and his consort Parvati (Shakti), and the quest of the soul to attain liberation from the cycle of birth and rebirth. This was followed by a brief announcement of the generic identities of the bride and groom, and the name of the village where the ceremony was to be performed. Indeed, it was the village itself, which I call 'Maramur' (tree-town), that was issuing the invitation. Mahesh and his mother, who had just brought us coffee, smiled as it dawned on me that I was being invited to a wedding of two trees (*maram kalyanam*) – between a neem (*vepamaram*) and a pipal (*arasamaram*).

I had read about tree weddings before (Gupta 2001), but not been to one. I peppered Mahesh and his mother with questions. There was an undercurrent of amusement in his mother's voice when she talked about the wedding but Mahesh himself seemed to take it seriously, proffering two different reasons for the ceremony when asked. First, he advanced a karmic logic. Souls (*atman*) have to take bodies to spend karma accrued in previous embodied births. Once a soul has zero karma (i.e. performs no consequential actions that require rebirth), it can attain liberation (*moksha*) from the cycle of birth and rebirth (*samsara*). Some souls might have a last karmic duty left to fulfil and so take a final body. This last body ideally is one that will not accrue more karma. Trees make good last bodies because trees do not act intentionally; no karma attaches to their actions of giving shade, fruit, and so on. When a neem and a pipal tree grow close together, Mahesh told me, it is said that they are the bodies of advanced souls whose last karmic duty is to undergo marriage. When you wed the trees to each other, you enable the liberation of the souls therein. This explained the disquisition on souls and *moksha*, something I had not seen before on a wedding invitation. Mahesh told me he had written this himself and asked the villagers to print it on the invitation.

Mahesh's second reason focused on the atmospheric effects that trees are commonly understood to bring about under their canopies. The air found under intertwining neem and pipal trees

> makes women pregnant. It can even make barren women pregnant. But the attainment of the allocated share of progeny (*putrabhagyam*) should only be for married women, otherwise it would not be proper. The wedding of the trees will ensure that only married couples benefit from the child-endowing air under the trees.

The ritual, then, takes a characteristic effect of these two trees' proximity and functions to channel it appropriately: married women who 'take the air' (*kaathuvaangu*) under the trees will become pregnant and unmarried women will not.

When asked how he would wed the two trees, Mahesh said that he would ritually install the deities, Shiva and Shakti, in the pipal and neem tree, respectively. The wedding would then take place between the two deities as trees. Would the deities remain in the trees afterwards? Mahesh's answer was noncommittal: 'They will come when they are invited; after all, they are everywhere'.

My question in this article is two-fold: first, what is a tree that can be wedded like a human? Second, what is a wedding in this context? The answers to these questions move us away from two trends in anthropology, one of which multiplies persons by attributing personhood to nonhumans; the other of which privileges alterity or the otherness of the non-Western other in ways that seek to bridge nonhuman and human being in the world. I will discuss the promises and pitfalls of both these approaches later; for now I simply make the ethnographic point that the trees in question were neither conceptualized as persons per se nor were they identified as *really* something else. Rather, throughout the wedding, the trees remained trees, albeit sometimes treated as 'just trees' and at other times conceptualized and transformed as *tree+*.

The wedding ritual holds in balance the various things that the tree is, can be and do. In its work of generating equivalence and connectedness between different kinds of entity – soul, tree, divinity, and archetypal male and female – the ritual oscillates between 'is' and 'as if': that is, between identity and subjunctivity. Building on Srinivas's (2018) analysis of popular Hinduism as experimental and of ritual as creative and improvised, I argue that the tree wedding instantiates a particular Tamil Hindu

approach to religious practice, one that is summarized by a word I have heard countless times in fieldwork: *irukkalaam* (it may be). *Irukkalam* admits of various possibilities and potentialities. It accepts that things of the world are both themselves and, by polysemous logics, more than they seem. Ritual can make these things, sometimes deliberately briefly and partially, other than they are without losing their specific quiddity. Further, *irukkalam* refers to the fundamental unknowability of cause and effect. It leaves people open to trying things that might bring about good outcomes, and at any rate will not cause harm. The performance of rituals such as the tree wedding is premised on their ability to transform *irukkalaam* (may be) into *aakattum* (let it be so) for benefits across many scales: for the ritual patron(s), for the larger community, and for the good of the reordered world, which includes divine, human, and other living beings that are brought into relations with each other within and through the ritual.

I will focus on two kinds of rituals involving trees: first, weddings between trees and humans and, second, a wedding between two trees that I attended. Both 'wedding' rituals set in train new states of being and possibilities for the humans involved. However, while tree-human weddings mobilize the logic of the stand-in, commonly seen in sacrificial logics, tree-tree weddings draw on the logic of the counterpart and posit continuities and homologies. In both cases, I argue, the tree or plant is itself, which is what makes it usable in the wedding ritual, whilst also substituting for something else.

Trees: what they can be or do in Hindu Tamilnadu

The first context we need in order to understand a wedding between a pipal and neem tree is the religious and other meanings the two trees hold for Hindus generally, and in Tamilnadu specifically. Throughout India, the pipal (*Ficus Religiosa*) is associated with the gods Shiva, Vishnu, and Hanuman. Pipal trees are often found in temples to these deities. The neem (*Azadirachta Indica*) is most commonly considered a form of the goddess Shakti. In Tamilnadu, leafy twigs of the neem are used to signal the presence of the goddess. Priests wave bunches of neem leaves over individuals possessed by divinities to cool them down: that is, to return them to their selves after possession. Thus, the pipal is generally linked to male deities and the neem to Sakti or the female goddess.

Pipals and neems are prolific, and not every single pipal or neem is considered religiously significant. However, when growing in or near temples, or by certain riverside spots where people regularly perform rituals, some trees can become objects of religious attention. In such locations, as Haberman (2013) shows, people pay obeisance to the trees, making votive offerings, decorating them, and performing circumambulations in fulfilment of vows or seeking blessings. Indeed, on the basis of fieldwork in Banaras, Haberman argues that Hindus conceptualize such trees as persons. I will return to this argument.

In Tamilnadu, where generosity is a key virtue, trees are held up as ethical exemplars. Like the rain, which provides water to good and bad people alike and to weeds as well as to crops (Pandian 2008:467), trees provide shade, firewood, and flowers and fruit to all. They do so without discrimination or evaluation of beneficiaries, and people are enjoined to follow their example. However, this generosity does mean that trees can also offer shelter to undesirable or harmful entities such as wild animals, roving spirits (*pey*), and demons (*pisaasu*). Tamarind and pipal trees in deserted places are deemed particularly attractive to such creatures.[2] The wise person avoids such trees in wastelands (*palai*) or in less trafficked areas, especially in the dark or when alone.

Analogies of flowering and fruiting trees with females abound. Popular Tamil songs liken barren woman to trees that do not fruit, and a common term for menstruation is *Puttal* or flowering. The resemblance of the white sap produced by some trees, including pipal, to milk gives rise to a practice of sympathetic magic. Owners of cows place the placentas of newly born calves into bags which they tie to branches of trees that extrude this milky sap. The tree 'feeds' the placenta in the same way as a cow feeds her calf. Throughout Pudukkottai district, one can see these trees festooned with such bulging plastic bags. Interestingly, here, the pipal is associated with life-giving substances produced by females and people were very clear about the analogy of the white sap with milk (*paal*) and not semen (*vindhu*).

Trees are also understood to affect the quality of air. It is a commonplace now to speak of trees as producing oxygen, but the Tamil understanding of trees extends to specific atmospheric effects produced by particular trees. These may be beneficial or harmful. Several different people have told me a folk tale: a man wishes to go on a journey despite the protestations of his wife. Determined that his trip be short, she consults a wise man, who advises her to gain a promise from her husband to sleep only under tamarind trees on his outward journey and only under neem trees on his return journey. She does so. The insalubrious air under tamarind trees causes the husband to feel unwell, and after a few nights he decides to return home. On his way back, as promised, he only sleeps under neem trees. These trees imbue the air beneath them with health-giving properties, and he soon begins to feel well again. By the time he reaches home, he is fully restored to health. Needless to say, husband and wife enjoy a happy reunion.[3] As we have seen from Mahesh's first reason for the pipal-neem wedding, the air under intertwined pipal and neem trees promotes fertility. Perhaps the man and wife, following their joyful reunion, went and sat under an intertwined neem and pipal. The folktale does not say, but it is a pleasing speculation.

Finally, trees straddle Tamil understandings of space in some important ways. A core structural principle which organizes Tamil understandings of space is the division between *akam* and *puram*, referring to the interior and exterior, the domestic and public, and love and war, respectively (Selby & Peterson 2008). Trees, as Ramanujan (1999: 425) points out, connect the realms of *akam* (the domestic interior) and *puram* (public space). Their flowering and fruiting is associated with female sexuality, the safeguarding of which matters both to the woman's household and the wider caste group. When a (female) neem and a (male) pipal tree are in close proximity, they rouse the fear of unfettered fertility: of women who might give birth outside the confines of marriage. The outside here can affect ordered domesticity in disorderly ways.

Akam and *puram* also map on to other Tamil distinctions such as that between *naadu* and *kaadu*. *Naadu* is inhabited space that, as we have seen in the case of flowering and fruiting trees, moves between *akam* and *puram*: that is, between the interior domestic and the exterior public. *Kaadu*, or the wild, needs to be kept at bay through practical techniques including ritual. Notwithstanding this, *kaadu*, as we have seen in the case of the milky sap of trees, can be productively brought into play in domestic concerns, such as the milk yield of one's cows. This can help both the *veedu* or house and *naadu* more generally by increasing prosperity, and thus the likelihood of people performing rituals that benefit not only them but also all the inhabitants of *naadu*.

Thus, trees are clearly significant in more ways than one in Hindu Tamilnadu. This is well known from classical Tamil literature and folktales, from Tamil popular songs and everyday speech, and from contemporary as well as colonial sources such as Thurston (1906), and has been of anthropological interest since Frazer's *Golden Bough* (1911).

Tree persons

Scholars who have paid sustained attention to trees and plants in Hindu rituals (e.g. Haberman 2013; Mocko 2011) have tended to do so against the work of evolutionists such as Frazer and Tylor who identified tree worship and marriages to and between trees and plants as evidence of primitive thinking. Such primitives, the logic went, were incapable of distinguishing between humans and nonhumans and approached the world through a mixture of 'superstition, magic and irrational ritual' (Mocko 2011).

Haberman refutes such charges of primitivism and category confusion by arguing instead that the ways in which Hindus treat trees reflect a 'cultural difference' (2013: 189) which values continuity between humans and nonhumans on the basis of shared life and sentience. This does seem to substitute one essentialism for another. Notwithstanding this, Haberman's study is sympathetic and, based on interviews and observation in Banaras, draws out several dimensions of tree veneration. His guiding question is 'who is a tree' (2013: 7), and his answer is that for Hindus, trees are persons – sometimes treated as kin, sometimes as deities, sometimes as 'sentient beings with whom one can develop a mutually beneficial relationship', or sometimes even as friends (2013: 189-92).

The list of entities to which personhood is attributed is growing, and not only in anthropology (e.g. in plant studies: Hall 2009) and with regard to animal rights (K. Good 2017; Rowlands 2016). These attributions are often made on ethical or environmental grounds. Within anthropology, such an identification of nonhumans as persons may be weak (i.e., following Gell 1998, any social agent with the capacity to influence or cause changes in the social milieu can be analysed as a 'person') or strong (as in Daniel's analysis of Tamil houses as persons: 1984: 149). Anthropologists are also interested in personification as a product of anthropomorphism, whereby nonhumans are treated as if possessed of human qualities and able to be affected in human-like ways. Guthrie, for instance, argues that religion may best be understood as systematic anthropomorphism (1993: 15).

What is at stake in expanding the category of personhood? For some scholars, considering nonhumans as persons is a political, moral move – it turns acceptable orthodoxies about what counts on their head and expands the range of political actors in the world (e.g. Andersen & Krøijer 2017; Nadasdy 2007). In a related vein, it is a way of overturning what they see as a problematic separation of human and nonhuman, culture and nature, which underpins what Latour (1993) calls the modern constitution. Finally, in some cases (Haberman is an example), the non-Western other is held as an exemplar of how a more inclusive world, where diverse things are conceptualized as continuous rather than categorically separate, might operate.

Haberman's is thus a familiar move: for Hindus, trees are persons, and that makes them different from 'us', who see trees as objects. However, personhood is not a value in and of itself: there are more or less valued persons, as the treatment of Dalits by caste-minded Hindus certainly shows. More pertinently, those individuals who identify a specific tree as 'an animate sentient being with feelings and consciousness' or as 'a man [*admi*] who can speak and think just like you and me' (Haberman 2013: 74-5)

are remarkable even in Haberman's text. I think it is fair to say some people treat some trees as *personages*: that is, as individually important or significant. By and large, though, as Haberman also acknowledges, tree worship is predominantly performed to benefit worshippers; it is not *for* the tree.

Certainly, at the tree wedding I attended, neither the officiating priest, Mahesh, nor anyone in Maramur displayed any affective recognition of the trees as persons or showed any interest in anthropomorphizing them. Rather, the wedding was impersonal and typological in its approach. Its main value was in its hoped-for benefits. This brings me to the work of Mocko (2011), who, in her analysis of tree-human weddings, sees the use of trees as wedding partners as a means to an end.

Tree as proxies for humans

Mocko also, like Haberman, refutes the charge of primitivism, but in a rather different way. Drawing on fieldwork in Hindu Nepal and placing it against a careful study of Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1911), Mocko shows that Frazer's own footnotes pertaining to rituals involving trees and plants undermine the charge of primitive thinking and category confusion found in the main text. She outlines three models that emerge from Frazer's discussion and which she encountered in her own research:

> First, utilizing plants and stones as symbols of gods, whose relationships are then acted out through the ritual; second, utilizing trees as a method for deflecting social problems between humans out onto the non-human realm; and third, utilizing the rituals of betrothal and marriage to establish moral relationships between people and the objects of their agricultural cultivation (Mocko 2011).

I focus here on Mocko's discussion of the problem-solving aspects of weddings between humans and plants or plant products, partly because such weddings take place in Tamilnadu too, including among the Kallar caste group who commissioned the tree wedding, and also because these weddings form an interesting contrast with tree-tree weddings in the logics they mobilize. Neither treats the tree as a person.

Writing about '*ihi*-marriages' between pre-pubertal Newari girls and fruits of the *bel* tree, Mocko (2011) argues that such weddings prevent the stigmatization of the girl as a widow if her later human husband were to die. So, although a priest is called to perform the Vedic wedding ritual between the child-bride and the fruit, the latter is respectfully discarded following the ceremony. The girl usually goes on to marry a human man when older. However, were her human husband to die, the earlier *ihi*-marriage ensures that she is not denied participation in society as widows normally are in this Hindu Nepali group. Thus, 'the purpose of the ritual is not to create a lasting girl-fruit partnership, but to protect the girl and ensure her social status against the possible instabilities and misfortunes of her future life' (Mocko 2011).

While the *ihi*-marriage seeks to manage a problem (widowhood) that may never occur, Mocko gives other instances of plant-human weddings performed among Hindu Nepalis to avert foretold calamities. Thus, if an astrologer predicts that some misfortune will arise from the marriage of a man, he is often first wedded to a basil plant, usually considered female. Similarly, women are wedded to a pipal tree. This 'spends' the misfortune, leaving the human to make a more propitious second marriage. Tamil Hindus, too, organize such weddings, usually to banana trees, which are subsequently cut down. I have had a first-hand account from a Kallar woman who was wedded to a banana tree following an astrologer's reading that a mishap would befall her future husband, and also read a newspaper article by another 'banana-bride'.[4] This latter bride

evinced distress about having to be wedded to a banana tree, while the woman who told me about her wedding to a tree simply seemed amused by the ritual. In neither case was there any sense that these women thought about the trees as more than dispensable stand-ins, with the wedding performed purely to allow more important things (i.e. marriage to a human), to take place without anyone having to worry about predicted marital catastrophes.

These human-banana tree weddings underscore Mocko's point that there is no category confusion between humans and trees. All the human ritual participants are quite clear that the tree wedding serves to avert predicted misfortune. The proxy's central place in a wedding ritual normally meant for humans does not render it permanently the spouse of the human to whom it is wedded. In other words, the tree spouse is not even person-like, much less deemed human.

Temporary connections

The logic of the proxy or stand-in is central in Hindu sacrifice. In banana tree-human weddings, the tree, which stands in for a human bridegroom, is subsequently cut down. The logic of sacrifice, then, appears to apply here. As to why a plant is used, Bloch (1998) argues that ritual symbolism in religion works in terms of conceptual analogies based on perceived continuities and discontinuities. Ritual connects things that are similar enough to create a relation, but are also dissimilar enough that the relation can be cut without fully losing the connection. One such continuity is based on aliveness. Acting on one alive thing is 'as if' acting on the other. This is the logic of the live sacrifice. The sacrificer offers the life of the animal as if it were his own life. The sacrificer both dies and lives to enjoy the benefits of the sacrifice. Based on the work of cognitive psychologists as well as drawing on the ethnographic record, Bloch argues that plants are universally attributed a peripheral living status. This makes them suitable for use in rituals that are based on shared aliveness (Bloch 1998).

In the case of trees wedded to humans, the tree, which stands in as a 'first spouse', is alive when wedded and then disposed of, leaving the person technically widowed, but completely free as if he or she had never been wedded.[5] This person is thus later able to have a human-human wedding and marriage without any harm befalling the human spouse. The sacrifice of the tree, then, benefits a person who does not participate in the ritual, but whose well-being is at its heart.

The tree-human wedding is manifestly not a marriage in the Hindu sense with its concomitant 'implications for an entire lineage's social and ritual status, for the fate of the souls of that lineage's deceased ancestors, and, eventually for the fate of an ordered relationship between humans and between humans and deities' (Harman 1987: 180). It also clearly differs from Tamil marriages, which enduringly connect not only two people, but also their groups (Dumont 1953: 35); enable affines to make specific claims (*urimai*) on one another over time (Arumugam 2011); and involve intensities of emotion (Clark-Decès 2014). Human-tree weddings, by contrast, are one-off events with no expectations of long-term relationships either between the 'bride' and 'groom' or between affinal groups, or, indeed, of resulting in legitimate offspring.

Thus, while Mocko uses the term 'marriage' to describe time-bound human-tree unions, I prefer the term 'wedding' (Tamil *kalyanam*). This is for two reasons. First, Mahesh and everyone in my fieldsite referred to the ritual involving the trees as *kalyanam*. Second, while *kalyanam* commonly refers to marriage, its resonances

extend far beyond marriage. The etymology is complicated, but the word *kali* refers to 'flourishing, thriving, prospering' and *yaˉṇar* to 'fresh (or new) income, fertility, wealth' (Chandrasekharan 2011: 44-5). *Kalyanam* rituals, then, open up fresh possibilities that bring about good things. They may be repeated with the same participants: for example, weddings between deities are conducted annually in temples to renew the cosmic and social order and promote flourishing.

The word *kalyanam* is used as a suffix in Tamil for a range of rituals, including *sadangu kalyanam* or the ritual signalling the end of a girl's first period; also *arupatham* and *ennbatham kalyanam* – respectively, the rituals that mark a married man's sixtieth and eightieth years, when he re-weds his wife. These latter weddings indicate the movement of the couple from an active householder role to a more detached, perhaps even renunciatory, role. In all these cases, the term signals the movement of a person/persons into a different life-stage. Thus, Good shows that among some Tamil non-brahmin castes, on emergence from her seclusion following menarche, the girl is wedded to a 'female bridegroom' or to a very young boy. Such a wedding marks the girl's coming of age and is a life-cycle rite, one which is primarily concerned with directing female fertility in the right ways (A. Good 1982). The girl will later go through a wedding ceremony with a suitable groom resulting in a marriage.

A *kalyanam* may be performed between any two beings: human, nonhuman, embodied deities and combinations of the above. They may be conducted for diverse ends. Thus, frogs (ubiquitous in the rainy season) are wedded to one another in the hopes of ending drought. Such a wedding happened in June 2019 in Karnataka state, north of Tamilnadu.[6] The frogs were subsequently released: that is, there was no expectation that a marriage would result from the wedding, only longed-for rain. We see here echoes of Mocko's argument: the wedding is performed to try to resolve a problem. While the wedding of trees that I attended did not serve to resolve a specific problem, it, too, is an example of a creative *kalyanam* ritual that makes explicit and, it is hoped, creates the conditions for the renewed flourishing of human inhabitants of a place. The ritual is performed with/*to* the trees, not *for* them.

The wedding of the trees
Mahesh, his assistant, and I arrived at the village at around 8 a.m. We were warmly greeted by various people who were awaiting our arrival. The atmosphere was simultaneously playful, celebratory, and serious.

The neem and pipal trees were growing very close together and their branches were intertwined. In front of them was a statue of the Lord Ganesh flanked by two stones with a stylized cobra carved on each. On the right, behind the trees, was a partially broken anthill. Anthills such as these made by termites are often taken over by cobras as dwellings. Lord Shiva wears a cobra around his neck, leading to their veneration. Understood as monogamous, cobras are also symbols of ordered fertility. People place bowls of milk by anthills for the snakes and may also erect stone representations of snakes, as was the case here. A Ganesh temple stood around 500 yards behind the trees and anthill. There was a cluster of houses beyond the temple, a pond near a banyan tree to the left, and fields with paddy and banana all around what looked like a prosperous village.

All five patrilocal groups (*karai*) of the Kallar, the agricultural caste which dominates this village, had come together to conduct the tree wedding, dividing up the duties amongst themselves. An elderly woman told me that two trees had been planted as

saplings twelve to fifteen years ago when the Kallar group had erected the Ganesh temple. The planting was accompanied by a promise that the trees would be wed when the neem first bloomed. Neither she nor anyone else present knew by or to whom the promise had been made. Rather, it felt like the priest who consecrated the Ganesh temple and statue had suggested that it would be good to perform a wedding when the neem flowered, and people had remembered this. Despite the fact that neem trees normally come into flower and thence fruit after three to five years of planting, the caste group had clearly not hurried to fulfil this promise. Instead, it appeared that they had waited both for a good financial year and also for the branches of the two trees to intertwine. Once they had committed to performing the wedding, money was collected from every Kallar household, making it a co-operative affair. The collection amounted to around 50,000 rupees (approximately £500 at the time), which, while a lot of money in rural India, is small compared with the expenses incurred in a regular wedding. The main cost here was the wedding feast. A temporary marquee had been erected for serving food.

Mahesh began to set out his ritual paraphernalia. First, he performed a small ritual to propitiate Ganesha, the god of beginnings and remover of obstacles, so that the whole ceremony would go well. Next, he ritually cleansed the area where the wedding ritual would take place by chanting the requisite Sanskrit mantras whilst sprinkling water over it. His assistant, in the meantime, instructed a local man to smear turmeric paste onto a long, straight pole. This pole was made from a freshly cut branch from a nearby tree, with the bark stripped to make it smooth. Once the pole had turned a bright yellow from the turmeric, Mahesh handed the villager two leafy twigs that had been broken off from the pipal and neem trees that were to be wedded and asked that they be tied to the top of the pole with a red cloth. Green, yellow, and red are the colours of fertility and are auspicious throughout Tamilnadu.

Mahesh then turned his attention to a number of village men who were going to play key roles in the wedding as the bride's and groom's parties. He tied a circle of turmeric-soaked string around each of the men's wrists, indicating that they were now within the protective space of the ritual and were bound to see it through. These men were then asked to carry the pole all around the purified space to the northeastern corner, where a hole had been dug. The pole was placed upright in the hole and stabilized with some mud, so that the yellow of the pole and the green of the leafy twigs tied with a red cloth stood out vividly against the blue January morning sky. The pole connects the earth and the sky, inviting the divinities to attend and witness the wedding. Everyone present was asked to smear red turmeric on the pole and pour milk and assorted seeds on its base. Again, these auspicious substances indicate fruitfulness and plenty.

As Mahesh and his assistant busied themselves with preparations for the ceremony, I asked villagers why they were performing the wedding. Most people, male and female, said that the air under the trees would alleviate barrenness. The wedding would confine the child-endowing properties of the air to married women. Also, 'we were told by elders it is a good thing to do, so we are doing it'. One older man mentioned the souls embodied in the trees and the wedding enabling their liberation. The man with him, however, said that the satisfaction of being wedded would cause the souls to linger, blessing the village with their presence. 'Could be (*irukkalam*)', said the first. It clearly did not matter whether the souls were liberated or induced to remain by the ritual so long as good came

of it. Everyone seemed to take pleasure in the wedding. It was an opportunity for people to come together and enjoy the day.

Mahesh, having readied everything, called us over. The wedding ceremony itself was short. Following a fire sacrifice whereby Mahesh invited the deities Shiva and Shakti into the trees (although he did not mention it to the assembled participants), he instructed a pre-selected young married woman (*sumangali*) to tie a turmeric-smeared thread around the neem tree, signifying its wedded state. This completed the ritual. Most people went off to enjoy the feast. Mahesh and his assistant put away their paraphernalia and were given their prestations. We then left. The whole event was over by midday.

Artifice and experimentation

I was struck throughout by the sincerity that people displayed towards the ritual. This seemed in no way impaired by their evident appreciation of its unusual bride and groom, its multiple explanations, and the ritual's fangledness (i.e. its taking on an existing set of forms and fashioning them into an intervention in both familiar and new ways).

Writing about Hindu temple rituals in Bengaluru, Srinivas (2018) shows that priests and worshippers experiment with forms to increase the impact of people's encounters with the divine. That is, everyone acknowledges the artifice that goes into visually showing connections between divine favour and wealth or between helicopters and flower petals showered from the sky as if from the heavens. But no one minds – indeed, part of a priest's skill is in forging connections between different things people care about that they may not normally put together materially. Thus, Srinivas describes how in one temple a priest decorated the deities with garlands made from various currencies to induce IT workers, who make their money working for American, Australian, and other companies or dream of working abroad, to visit the temple on New Year's Eve in addition to partying.

There was something similarly experimental and creative about the tree wedding, and not only because it made and played with connections both between trees and ordered human fertility and between weddings and salvation. All the human participants in the wedding know that what the ritual promises to bring about may or may not be realized. They know that not every married woman will be able to bear babies, and that unmarried women may still become pregnant. They also know that they will continue to cut down trees when necessary, even as they extol the life-enhancing properties and associations of trees with deities. But none of this is the point. Rather, the purpose of the ritual is to mobilize the understanding that a pipal and neem tree, when growing in close proximity, are appropriate participants in a ritual that can bring about good outcomes of various kinds. What we were participating in was an experiment in transforming 'could be' and 'should be' into 'let it be so'.

The form of the ritual also attests to its fangled nature. In the absence of a model familiarized through repetition, the villagers seemed to draw on the oft-performed model of the human-human wedding in terms of how they organized the event, even keeping detailed records of wedding contributions (*moy*). Similarly, Mahesh, who does not normally perform human-human weddings, instead specializing in the installation of divine presence in material bodies, very much drew on his own experience as a consecration priest who invites and installs divine presence in temple images, and who performs marriages between embodied divinities in his own temple. The purification of

the space, the fire sacrifice, the installation of the deities in objects, and their subsequent treatment as deities were all familiar to me from other ritual events I have attended with him. His performance of the wedding thus felt simultaneously consummate and somewhat made-up from elements with which he was familiar. What was missing, as I discuss in the next section, was the kind of reverential care that he normally takes of the bodily integrity of temple deities.

Intuitive and counter-intuitive ontologies

Tree-human weddings use the trees to deflect predicted misfortunes from humans. The trees are precisely not humans, nor are they even 'persons'. By contrast, in tree-tree weddings, the temptation to anthropomorphize the trees is very present, at least from the outside. Thus, Haberman quotes from a newspaper article describing a wedding between a neem and a pipal in Kerala, South India: 'The bride . . . looked innocent and elegant as she flushed with tender green leaves' (2013: 157). It also describes both the bride and groom's clothing and refers to them using gendered pronouns.[7] Haberman sees this as yet another instance of the personhood and humanity of trees for Hindus, but the newspaper article, written by a man with a Hindu name, felt rather tongue in cheek. In fact, it reminded me of Mahesh's mother's attitude to the tree wedding in Maramur, indulgent and only partially serious.

Boyer (1996), in yet another engagement with the primitivism thesis, this time on the basis of experiments in infant cognition, argues that, far from being a continuation of a child-like category confusion, anthropomorphism (i.e. the projection of the human onto the nonhuman) is counter-intuitive. It violates intuitive expectations about what something is, what it is capable of, and so on. This, argues Boyer, is what gives religion its attention-grabbing potential: the dead arise, mountains show anger, and pictures of living deities perfume their surroundings or produce flowers. We need not go very far to see how a wedding between two trees or two frogs does grab attention – the articles (and their tone) in national and international newspapers about these events testify to this.

Elsewhere I have written about how Brahmin consecration priests ritually transform stone statues into embodied divinities worshipped in Tamil Hindu temples (Harvey & Venkatesan 2010; Venkatesan 2020). Priests are very aware that it is their work that effects the transformation from object to materially present deity, and consecration rituals tend to be as lavish as possible and, like most temple rituals, rather theatrical (also see Srinivas 2018). In other words, there is a clear sense that an ontological transformation has taken place, such that the statue in the temple is qualitatively different from a morphologically identical statue elsewhere. The materially present deity is treated as an honoured guest and as an adored child. I even know of a priest who warms the water used in ritual ablutions and pours it over the deity's head very gently so 'it will not hurt him'. In other words, the counter-intuitive acceptance that *this* statue is the deity brings with it some assumptions about the ability of the stone body to feel pain and pleasure in similar ways to humans.

But humanity was not projected on to the tree bride and groom in the wedding I attended. Indeed, the pronoun usage throughout underscored the recognition of the trees as animate, but neither human nor divine. Tamil divides nouns into 'higher-class' and 'lower-class' nouns, respectively. This division is based on rationality and lack thereof, and not on animacy or lack thereof. Human beings and deities, including the statues worshipped in temples as materially present deities, are placed within the higher

class of rational beings and are grammatically gendered. Conversely, trees, like plants, animals, and inanimate things, fall within the lower class of noun and are neuter. They are referred to as 'it' (*adhu*). Even when the trees had been transformed through ritual into the deities and the bride and groom, they were referred to as 'it' rather than as 's/he'.

Further, a couple of jarring notes caught my attention during the ritual. A twig from one of the trees kept getting caught in Mahesh's topknot when he was performing the fire sacrifice. A man reached over, casually broke it off, and threw it away. Mahesh made no objection. Similarly, when Mahesh broke off more leafy twigs than were needed to tie to the post, he simply threw the excess away. There was no sense that the trees were anything more than 'just trees', despite their ritual transformation into bride and groom and goddess and god.

In other words, the trees were wedded but neither human nor divine, and animate but not presumed to feel pain or to require the maintenance of their bodily integrity. Rendered 'as if' divine for the purposes of the ritual, there is nevertheless no category confusion, commitment to ontological transformation, or imputed personhood to the trees. This poses a puzzle: in a religious tradition in which counter-intuitive ontologies are posited and fully accepted in practice and theologically (i.e. this particular statue, following the installation rituals, is the god and is sensible), why was the identification of the trees with divinity and with a human-like bride and groom only partially, if at all, accepted – evidenced by the reference to the trees throughout as 'it', and the careless breaking off of twigs?

I want to think through this puzzle with reference to Vedic cosmologies, which underpin Brahmanical ritualism. According to Smith and Doniger (1989), in the Vedic sacrifice, ritual efficacy and ritual efficiency are made possible through a doctrine of counterparts. The counterpart is not identical to but resembles and can be made equivalent to higher forms to which it is connected through elaborated logics and ritual practices. This works because, cosmologically speaking, elements are hierarchically organized in a series of resembling forms: from the most complete prototype to its least complete manifestation. Thus,

> Vedic ritualism was first and foremost an exercise in and the product of a particularly contoured homological mode of thought. Supposedly resembling entities and phenomena were linked by 'connections' (*bandhus* or *niddnas*) and human beings could therefore claim to understand and to exert an influence on the natural, supernatural, and social realms from within the confines of their ritual world (Smith & Doniger 1989: 196).

While I do not want to draw too great a correlation between Brahmanical-Vedic ritualism and the tree wedding (which, while performed in the Brahmanical manner, also draws on specifically Tamil understandings), what I do want to emphasize here is the conscious fabrication, in these rituals, of homological connections between hierarchically ordered entities such that action on one affects the other. What is produced is temporary equivalence not identity. This is what we see in the tree wedding as well: everyone, perhaps particularly the Brahmin priest who is generating the connections, knows that the trees are really only trees – not the deities or the prototypical male and female to which they correspond because the ritual temporarily and instrumentally connects them.

What comparisons for what connections?

The emphasis on substitution in ritual links tree-human marriages with animal sacrifice and with tree-tree marriages. The first two draw on the logic of the stand-in and the latter on the logic of the counterpart. In all cases, the stand-in/counterpart is a particular kind of creature/thing chosen on the basis of shared and elaborated understandings that make it, specifically and particularly, suitable for playing its role in the ritual (Smith & Doniger 1989). I want to draw on the above insights both to perform a particular comparison, and to make the point that our choice of comparators makes a difference to understanding and analysis. Comparing animal sacrifice with tree-tree weddings definitively moves us away from tree personhood, anthropomorphism, and identity (x is really y). These kinds of foci, I suggest, come from comparisons of 'non-West' to that which is set up as the dualist 'West': that is, given to separating human from nonhuman, culture from nature, mind from matter, and so on. Here, 'the West' is found lacking when compared to the 'non-West', which provides a corrective by exemplifying a more holistic and respectful attitude to all life forms. But my interest here is not in showing the 'West' how it can be. Rather, it is in asking how these Tamil villagers show themselves how their social lives can and should play out. In order to do so, they deploy the logics of stand-ins, counterparts, and connections to experimentally and creatively transform a mixture of 'it is so' (*appadithan*) and 'it might be so' (*irukkalam*) to 'let it be so' (*aakattum*).

As my own research focused on the work of priests, my interactions with the Kallars of Maramur were limited to the tree wedding. I thus draw on Arumugam's work with the Kallars of Vaduvur village in Thanjavur district (2015), not far from Maramur, which is in Pudukkottai district, to think through the resonances between tree weddings and animal sacrifice.

Focusing on the collective sacrifice of a goat made by a Kallar lineage to their tutelary deity, Arumugam argues that the sacrifice of the goat, which stands in for the lineage, promises a permanent life to the lineage (2015: 761). That is, the deity takes a life (offered as the life of the lineage itself) and gives the lineage continued life in return. Like the trees, which straddle the spatial-moral categories of 'domestic/public' and 'inhabited/wild' (*agam/puram; naadu/kaadu*), the tutelary deity, too, is located in and yet outside the inhabited village. He is responsible for agricultural and domestic fertility, and thus the continued reproduction of the lineage. Arumugam outlines a paradox: lineage sacrifices to tutelary deities are increasing, even though people say that these gods are losing their power (2015: 761). The growing proliferation of sacrifices to lineage deities, perhaps unsurprisingly given the doubts about the tutelary deity's potency as times change, goes hand in hand with the commissioning of Brahman priests to perform rituals to obtain the favour of pan-Hindu deities whose scope and interests, unlike tutelary deities, are universal and transcendental.

Brahmanical rituals, such as the one Mahesh performed with the trees, do not involve bloodshed. However, like the goat sacrifice, they also work on the basis of connections posited in the ritual that play with 'is' and 'as if' to effect changes in the human realm through the means of stand-ins and counterparts. Indeed, the two kinds of religious complex – territorial, caste/lineage-specific and transcendental/universal – complement each other. Both serve as much to showcase wealth and corporate strength as to secure positive nonhuman interventions in human affairs to ensure fertility and status reproduction. In that sense, these rituals are aimed at creating and re-creating the

lineage itself, showing it to itself as united, strong, and keen to manage its reproduction properly.

Both the sacrifice and the wedding, then, promote complementary goals. They work through similar underlying logics of substitution and homological connection to forge 'appropriate relationships between persons, their places, their fellow humans (specifically their kin), and their gods [which] is the foundation of productivity in the Hindu universe' (Arumugam 2015: 782). The sacrifice reiterates the fact that the lineage owes its continued life to the lineage deity. The wedding of the trees repeats the divine wedding between Shiva and Shakti. In doing so, it not only reveals the centrality of marriage to reproduction, but also transforms and reforms the actions of these two trees in this specific space, positively affecting humans.

In the goat sacrifice and the human-tree wedding, the logic of the stand-in is clear. Each nonhuman participant is scaled up to that which is really important – the lineage and the eventual human spouse, respectively – and gives its life as if theirs. The tree-tree wedding, conversely, plays on the logic of the counterpart: the scaling serves to connect the trees with more complete prototypes (the deities, the male and female principle), weds them as if they were these prototypes, and then leaves them in place to continue doing good in the ways that these trees do, albeit channelled according to social mores. These differences notwithstanding, it is the logic of homological connections that underpins all these rituals and their promises of bringing about positive change. Further, the quality that makes these nonhuman ritual participants fit for purpose is the quality of aliveness they share with humans. The sacrifice of the goat or the banana groom brings its aliveness to an end; the tree-tree wedding harnesses the flowering and fruiting of the alive female tree to its own ends.

These rituals are not personal. That is, any goat, so long as it has certain visual and physical characteristics, will do, as will any banana tree. Similarly, any pipal may be wed to a neem so long as the branches are intertwining.[8] Unlike the banana-groom and the sacrificed goat, however, the trees do remain in place. A ritual such as the tree wedding can begin a process by which the trees become personages in the ways that Haberman identifies, but more needs to happen for this. For example, if a woman becomes pregnant having purposely sat under the trees for many days and attributes her pregnancy to the trees, she may visually mark her thanks by tying a cloth or hanging a cradle from the neem's branches. This might encourage other women, too, to come to the tree in the hope of becoming pregnant and adding votive offerings to it. Over time, the tree might be laden with such offerings, marking it as special and turning it into a personage. But such transformations are contingent – they may or not happen.

Conclusion

The primitivist thesis holds that people who do not categorically differentiate between humans and nonhumans are cognitively and culturally less evolved than people who do. This thesis is deeply problematic. Nevertheless, I contend that the answer is not necessarily to expand the category of the person to include nonhumans, even when, as in the case of the neem and pipal tree of Maramur, they are assigned roles normally taken by humans in ritual. Showing that all kinds of things are persons in different non-Western settings might serve to reveal that the 'Western' distinction between persons and things and concomitant political and economic ramifications are neither universal nor natural. Valuable though such an endeavour is, it has two problems.

First, it reinforces the putative exceptionalism of the post-Enlightenment 'West' in opposition to a presumably more holistic 'non-West'. Second, it neglects the ways in which people elsewhere deploy nonhuman things for their own purposes without positing identity with humans or human-like personhood for these things. It ignores the 'as-if' quality of rituals that utilize other-than-humans which can be rendered equivalent (not identical) to humans or to divinities and thus affect human worlds positively.

This also means that looking for radically different ontological assumptions (we would say it is a tree, but really, for them, it is *x*) among non-Western others does not serve either. The answer to the ontological question 'What kind of thing is a tree for Tamils?' is fairly straightforward: my informants would unequivocally agree that a tree is a tree, that is, a living, albeit non-rational, being. This is evident in their use of 'it' when referring to the trees. However, this is not the whole answer. Trees as trees are richly meaningful in Tamilnadu. Their unstinting generosity makes them ethical exemplars. Images of flowering and fruiting trees serve as analogies for sexually mature and pregnant women, respectively, in popular songs and speech. Specific species are associated with particular deities. Trees also affect the world materially: for example, by altering the atmosphere under their canopies in ways that make a difference to human bodies. Because they share the quality of aliveness with humans, trees are used in rituals that mobilize continuities and discontinuities with humans to make vertical connections between different kinds of social being.

The fact that the tree is alive, grows, and reproduces is crucial, but so is the fact that it is just a tree. Its consent is not required, nor is its life valued if the ritual demands its demise. In that sense, the tree is an alienable and disposable other even as the ritual temporarily transforms it to an intimate not-quite other. The very treeness of trees, their otherness from and continuities with humans, and connectability in cosmological terms inform their central role in the wedding ritual as counterparts or stand-ins for humans, divinities, and the archetypal male/female.

The specific form of the ritual – a wedding (*kalyanam*) – is widely used throughout Tamilnadu and usually signals the opening up of new possibilities. It does so in a number of ways: by moving individuals or groups from one life-stage to another, by averting or semi-controlling the course of a predicted misfortune; and/or by connecting two entities to each other so as to make connections between microcosmic and macrocosmic realms in order to positively affect the former. The ubiquity of the *kalyanam* form of ritual means that most Tamil Hindus will have attended several, including those with nonhuman bride and groom, such as the annual weddings between embodied divinities in temples. While the cosmological import of divine weddings is very clear, every *kalyanam* where the bride and groom are also identified as the divine couple (Shiva and Parvathi, or Vishnu and Lakshmi) explicitly makes cosmological connections between local and transcendental domains. Awareness of the specific ways in which rituals scale up is mixed, but the general principle of contiguity between lower and higher domains and ritual's ability to set up a chain of actions and reactions is either known or can be explained by priests.

In other words, the idea of a wedding between trees (or frogs), once mooted, does not seem crazily far-fetched – not because these beings are human-like or persons, but because connections based on contiguity, continuity, and/or resemblance can be and are commonly instrumentalized in Hindu ritual for individual, collective, and general good. Pipal and neem trees are particularly suitable, as I have shown, because they

are associated with and do so many things in Tamilnadu. This means that a wedding between these trees can address any number of concerns, not just channel fertility. Thus, the invitation for another pipal-neem wedding promised that the wedding would bring myriad benefits: help unmarried girls get married, married women pregnant, bring rain, give job satisfaction, bring prosperity and grace, and promote peaceful relations among all people.[9]

In sum, the wedding ritual is synthetic and creative. It experiments with connections and in doing so reveals or lays the ground for the realization of prescriptive or ideal situations. Such connections may be widely known (*appadithan*, or that's how it is), or they may be of the order of '*irukkalam*' (it may be). The performance of the ritual, by an expert deploying the basic form, is a non-zero-sum attempt to transform known and/or plausible connections into realities on the ground by proclaiming that they be so (*aakattum*). And, like all good experiments, the characteristics of the things that are deployed matter, not as 'persons' or as something other than what they are, but because of what they are.

This leads me to my final point. As Nandy points out, 'India is not "non-West". It is India' (1983: 73). I read this to say that we need to take places and practices on their own terms. Defending Tamil or Hindu 'others' who perform tree weddings from charges of primitivist thinking and category confusion, instead redeeming them by claiming that they have a respect for nonhuman life that 'we' have lost, seems like an, albeit well-meaning, attempt to idealize the non-West as the corrective to the problems of 'the West'. Tamil Hindu ritual practices which seem to treat trees as humans or deities cannot be read as inspiration for attempts to inculcate care for nonhuman living beings. As a Tamil, one brought up in a Hindu household in India, albeit not religious myself, I find myself impatient with anthropology's assumptions of a 'we' who differ in our Cartesian inflected intellectual baggage from 'them' – 'our others' (see Chua & Mathur 2018). Among other things, such classifications assume a 'we-ness' where it may not exist and, importantly, flatten 'others'. They can lead us to neglect how these 'others' posit their own others and play with similarity and difference in richly productive ways, including by performing weddings between trees.

NOTES

[1] I conducted fieldwork among Brahmin and Potter consecration priests in Tamilnadu for around ten months between 2007 and 2010.

[2] See also Haberman (2013: 106) on similar ideas about pipal trees in Banaras.

[3] This folk tale is also recounted in Cowen (1970 [1950]).

[4] *https://www.thehindu.com/features/metroplus/confessions-of-an-anonymous-woman-being-a-banana-bride/article6665013.ece* (accessed 6 May 2021).

[5] We might ask why the human is not married to an animal, which is even more alive than the tree. I have never heard of a human-animal marriage in Tamilnadu. Perhaps these do not occur because the implication then would be that the human is animal-like, with corresponding negative connotations. As peripheral living things, trees seem both just about alike and significantly different from humans to fit the purpose.

[6] *https://www.asianage.com/india/all-india/080619/watch-people-in-udupi-try-frog-wedding-to-appease-rain-god.html* (accessed 6 May 2021). Also *https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/india-frog-wedding-drought-heatwave-udupi-karnataka-a8955741.html* (accessed 7 May 2021).

[7] See *https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/When-a-peepal-married-a-neem/articleshow/2112077.cms* (accessed 7 May 2021).

[8] Sometimes such weddings may have personal resonances, as recounted by Walter (2015: 54-5). But in my fieldsite I heard of no such instances.

[9] *https://simplicity.in/news-detail.php?nid=26224* (accessed 7 May 2021).

REFERENCES

ANDERSEN, A.O. & S. KRØIJER 2017. More-than-human politics. *AnthroPod*, *Fieldsights*, 11 October (available online: *https://culanth.org/fieldsights/more-than-human-politics*, accessed 7 May 2021).

ARUMUGAM, I. 2011. Kinship as citizenship: state formation, sovereignty and political ethics among the Kallars in central Tamil Nadu. Ph.D. thesis, London School of Economics.

——— 2015. The old gods are losing power: theologies of power and rituals of productivity in a Tamil Nadu village. *Modern Asian Studies* **49**, 753-86.

BLOCH, M. 1998. Why trees, too, are good to think with: towards an anthropology of the meaning of life. In *The social life of trees: anthropological perspectives on tree symbolism* (ed.) L. Rival, 39-56. Oxford: Berg.

BOYER, P. 1996. What makes anthropomorphism natural: intuitive ontology and cultural representations. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (N.S.)* **2**, 83-97.

CHANDRASEKHARAN, P. 2011. Pleonastic compounding: an ancient Dravidian word structure. *Electronic Journal of Vedic Studies* **18** (available online: *https://crossasia-journals.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/ejvs/article/view/319/308*, accessed 24 May 2021).

CHUA, L. & N. MATHUR (eds) 2018. *Who are we? Reimagining alterity and affinity in anthropology*. Oxford: Berghahn Books.

CLARK-DECÈS, I. 2014. *The right spouse: preferential marriages in Tamilnadu*. Stanford: University Press.

COWEN, D.V. 1970 [1950]. *Flowering trees and shrubs in India*. Bombay: Thacker Spink & Co. Ltd.

DANIEL, V.E. 1984. *Fluid signs: being a person the Tamil way*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

DUMONT, L. 1953. The Dravidian kinship terminology as an expression of marriage. *Man* **53**, 34-9.

FRAZER, J.G. 1911. *The Golden Bough: a study in magic and religion*. London: Macmillan and Co.

GELL, A. 1998. *Art and agency: an anthropological theory*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

GOOD, A. 1982. The female bridegroom: rituals of puberty and marriage in South India and Sri Lanka. *Social Analysis* **11**, 35-55.

GOOD, K. 2017. Why granting animals 'personhood' is so important. *One Green Planet* (available online: *https://www.onegreenplanet.org/animalsandnature/why-granting-animals-personhood-is-so-important/*, accessed 7 May 2021).

GUPTA, S.M. 2001. *Plant myths and traditions in India*. Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, *http://www.vidyaonline.net/dl/shaktigupta.pdf* (available online: *http://www.vidyaonline.net/dl/shaktigupta.pdf*, accessed 7 May 2021).

GUTHRIE, S.E. 1993. *Faces in the clouds: a new theory of religion*. Oxford: University Press.

HABERMAN, D.L. 2013. *People trees: worship of trees in Northern India*. Oxford: University Press.

HALL, M. 2009. Plant autonomy and human-plant ethics. *Environmental Ethics* **31**, 169-81.

HARMAN, W. 1987. The Hindu marriage as soteriological event. *International Journal of Sociology of the Family* **17**, 169-82.

HARVEY, P. & S. VENKATESAN 2010. Faith, desire and the ethics of craftsmanship. In *The social after Gabriel Tarde: debates and assessments* (ed.) M. Candea, 129-42. London: Routledge.

LATOUR, B. 1993. *We have never been modern* (trans. C. Porter). Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

MOCKO, A. 2011. On tree marriage and encountering the rituals of others. Invited contribution to the Religion and Culture Web Forum, April (*http://divinity.uchicago.edu/martycenter/publications/webforum/archive.shtml*, no longer available online).

NADASDY, P. 2007. The gift in the animal: the ontology of hunting and human-animal sociality. *American Ethnologist* **34**, 25-43.

NANDY, A. 1983. *The intimate enemy: loss and recovery of self under colonialism*. Delhi: Oxford India Paperbacks.

PANDIAN, A. 2008. Tradition in fragments: inherited forms and fractures in the ethics of South India. *American Ethnologist* **35**, 466-80.

Ramanujan, A.K. 1999. *The collected essays of A.K. Ramanujan* (ed. V. Dharwadker). New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Rowlands, M. 2016. Are animals persons? *Animal Sentience* **10**, 1-18.

Selby, M.A. & I.V. Peterson 2008. *Tamil geographies: cultural constructions of space and place in South India*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Smith, B.K. & W. Doniger 1989. Sacrifice and substitution: ritual mystification and mythical demystification. *Numen* **36**, 189-224.

Srinivas, T. 2018. *The cow in the elevator: an anthropology of wonder*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

Thurston, E. 1906. *Ethnographic notes in Southern India*. Madras: Government Press.

Venkatesan, S. 2020. Object, subject, thing: Tamil Hindu priests' material practices and practical theories of animation and accommodation. *American Ethnologist* **47**, 447-60.

Walter, K.J. 2015. Sacred trees among the Tamil people of South India. *Suomen Anthropologi: Journal of the Finnish Anthropological Society* **40**, 47-65.

Le mariage de deux arbres : connexions, équivalences et subjonctivité dans un rituel tamoul

Résumé

Un mariage entre deux arbres, dans un village tamoul, révèle qu'un arbre peut être plus qu'un arbre, tout en restant un arbre. Il doit être un arbre car les arbres font certaines choses. L'on peut toutefois en faire plus qu'un arbre, par le biais de connexions homologiques qui créent temporairement des équivalences entre les arbres et les divinités. La cérémonie de mariage (*kalyanam*), une forme de rituel très répandue chez les Tamouls qui ne concerne pas seulement l'alliance matrimoniale, ouvre la voie, avec créativité et subjonctivité, à de nouvelles possibilités de transformer « il pourrait en être ainsi » ou « il devrait en être ainsi » en « qu'il en soit ainsi ». Le mariage entre deux arbres cherche à matérialiser des situations et des issues idéales en faisant appel à leur qualité d'êtres vivants, qu'ils partagent avec les humains et les animaux, sans avancer de statut de personne, d'identité ni de catégories confuses. À travers cet argument, l'autrice remet en question les éléments de comparaison utilisés dans les analyses anthropologiques, qui décrivent un « non-Occident » holiste contre un « Occident » dualiste et opposent un « nous » considéré comme allant de soi à « nos » si différents « autres ».

Soumhya Venkatesan is Senior Lecturer in Social Anthropology at the University of Manchester. She is the author of *Craft matters: artisans, development and the Indian nation* (Orient Blackswan Private Ltd, 2009) and of numerous other publications. Soumhya is currently preparing a book on decolonizing the anthropology curriculum. She has conducted research in India among weavers, potters and priests, and in the United Kingdom among right-wing activists.

Social Anthropology, Arthur Lewis Building, University of Manchester, Manchester M13 9PL, UK. soumhya.venkatesan@manchester.ac.uk