

THAIPUSAM CELEBRATION IN MALAYSIA: A STUDY ON THE SACRED POSSESSION, SELF-MORTIFICATION AND TRANCE DANCE

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Indians and Thaipusam Celebration

Malaysia is a multicultural nation composed predominantly of the Malay ethnic group, followed by the Chinese with the Indians comprising just over 10% of the population. According to Arasaratnam (1979), about 80% of the Indian community is Hindu, and the majority is the Tamil linguistic group. Among the various Hindu religious festivals, Thaipusam is regarded as a very prominent, elaborate, and fascinating celebration in the country.

Tied to the South Indian religious tradition, it is celebrated on the full moon in the month of Thai, the tenth month of the Tamil calendar (between end of January and early February) and on the star Pusam. Therefore, Thaipusam derives its name by merging the month Thai and the star Pusam. According to the Hindu mythology, this is the day Goddess Parvathi or Sakthi, the consort of Lord Shiva, gave her son, Lord Muruga the *vel* to vanquish the evil demon, Soorapadman. *Vel* is a term that represents a lance or spear wielded by Lord Muruga which he uses to fend off evil and symbolizes wisdom. It is a day of celebration, commemorating the victory of good over the evil. On this special day for worship of Lord Muruga, Indian devotees, regardless of class, caste, or gender, publicly offer prayers and thanksgiving by fulfilling vows for favors granted.

Even though Thaipusam is grandly celebrated at the Muruga temples in various states of West Peninsular Malaysia, the main highlight of the ceremony is the two landmark venues – Batu Caves Temple, located near Kuala Lumpur, and the Arulmigu Balathandayuthabani Temple or the Penang Waterfall Hilltop Temple

in the island of Penang. Thousands of devotees and non-devotees climb two hundred seventy two flights of steps of the former temple, and two hundred forty eight steps of the latter to get a glimpse of Lord Muruga as well as to witness the extravagant celebration. Lately, the festival has captured the attention of the foreigners which has resulted in the arrival of burgeoning number of tourists from all over the world to those two venues.

The religious offerings take various forms, from simple offerings constituting of breaking coconuts and bearing milk pots on the hand or head to bizarre offerings such as *kavadi* bearing which are accompanied by ecstatic trance. The celebration stretches over three days – festival eve, festival and post-festival. On the eve of the festival, a beautifully decorated and lighted silver chariot that contains Lord Muruga shrine is taken on a pilgrimage from the Sri Maha Mariamman Temple (the Goddess temple) to Batu Caves, the temple of celebration. Thousands of devotees follow the procession, some carrying *palkudam* (pots of milk on their head, or hand), and some carrying simple *kavadi* on their shoulders as a form of devotion, offering, and thanksgiving. The chariot, which leaves the Goddess temple early morning around 4 am reaches its destination about noon. Once the chariot reaches the temple, the festival begins momentum with devotees ascending the stairs with bags of offerings (which contain incense sticks, coconuts, and beetle leaves, and nuts), with *palkudams*, and simple *kavadis* to complete their sacred mission. The chariot heads back to the Sri Maha Mariamman Temple the following day after the festival, marking the official end of the festival.

This paper will focus on the festival day, the Thaipusam day proper. On this day, devotees make various kinds of offerings to Lord Muruga. Huge, grandly decorated and colorful *kavadis* are carried by devotees who enter into ecstatic trance. Devotees inflict pain upon themselves by piercing their bodies with needles, hooks and skewers in an expression of devotion or *bakthi*. To control the pain and bleeding caused by the massive piercing, the devotees depend chiefly on ritual trance, during which the body of the devotee is believed to be possessed by the spirit of the deity. The deity possessed devotees then perform what is known as the trance dancing.

In order to theorize my study, I will be referring to various scholarly works on self-possession and trance rituals. The work of Diane P. Mines, *Fierce Gods: Inequality, Ritual, and the Politics of Dignity in a South Indian Village*, Colleen Ward's journal article "Thaipusam in Malaysia: A Psycho-Anthropological Analysis of Ritual Trance, Ceremonial Possession and Self-Mortification Practices," Frederick M. Smith's text on *The Self Possessed: Deity and Spirit Possession in South Asian Literature and Civilization*, *Travelling Spirit Masters* by Deborah Kapchan, Sheila S Walker's *Ceremonial Spirit Possession in Africa and Afro America*, and Jane Belo's *Trance in Bali* have been pertinent to my study. Moreover, Victor Turner's theory on ritual and religion, particularly the concepts of "Liminality" and "Communitas" have greatly assisted me in presenting my study.

I am keen to explore how the issues of self-possession and trance rituals have been treated in the mentioned scholarships through the diverse readings and discussions. The aim of this inquiry is to identify the major arguments articulated, the theories or models utilized and deliberated, and to do a comparative study between these theories and my own research interest.

Mythology

Many Indian devotees make it a point to carry *kavadi* to the Murugan temples. What is *kavadi*? What is the significance of *kavadi*? *Kavadi* is a concept that originates from South India. South Indian devotees carry *kavadis* to the famous Murugan temple in India known as Palani. The *kavadi* is likened to a mobile altar carried on both shoulders as a sign of thanksgiving for prayers accomplished or answered.

The following is a mythological story related to the practice of *kavadi* bearing. The popular myth or legend behind the *kavadi* is associated with Idumban and Lord Muruga. According to the myth,

Idumban was a disciple of Sage Agasthya. One day, Sage Agasthya instructed Idumban to carry two hills, Sivagiri and Shaktigiri. Idumban digged and lifted them up and was preparing to carry them to his divine master on his shoulders. Lord Muruga

who was watching this decided to test Idumban's determination and devotion to his master. Lord Muruga disguised himself as a child and stood atop a hill. Idumban tried to lift the hill but was unable to do so. He saw a child on the hill and asked the child to get down, but the child refused to move even after repeated requests. This enraged Idumban. Idumban attacked the child, but unfortunately lost and got hurt in the battle. Idumban who then gained composure, realized who the child really was. Soon, Lord Muruga transformed to his original self and appeared before Idumban and blessed him for his determination and devotion. Lord Muruga declared that people who carry *kavadi*, which symbolizes the hills of burden taken by Idumban, will be blessed. The deity also declared that *kavadi* bearers should first offer prayers to Idumban before carrying the *kavadi* for the Lord.

(Personal communication, 2009)

The venerable burdens that are carried on the back and shoulders of the devotees are seen as a representation of a divine understanding. It is an emblem of tradition, an indication of a "total surrender to God." There is a belief that it is not easy to attain the feet of God without putting some effort and labour as a sacrifice. But, how far this is true and how widely this belief is accepted are questionable and contestable.

Rituals and Offerings

Devotees conform to a sanctifying ritual in their preparation of mind and body before they can participate in fulfilling their vows during Thaipusam. The preparation takes a month prior to the celebration. During this period, they observe strict vegetarian fast of one meal per day which comprises of milk and fruits and complete chastity. According to Hindu orthodox doctrine, fasting and abstinence from sex, alcohol and smoking have to be observed for about 48 days prior to the offering of the *kavadi* on Thaipusam day. The main purpose is to fortify the senses and suppress passions, in order to achieve a profound control of the mind over matter. Devotees indulge in prayers, chanting of mantras, and singing during this period to prepare their body as a worthy vessel to embody the spirit of the deity.

Various types of offerings are made by the devotees on the Thaipusam day. First, breaking of coconuts during the chariot procession, and on the temple grounds. This act signifies humility and the crushing of man's ego to attain divine wisdom (*jnana*). Devotees break coconuts as a form of thanksgiving for answered prayers. Since there are no restrictions to this offering, anyone who has taken a vow is allowed to break the coconuts. There is no special preparation period for this since it does not require trance. Second, there are two types of *palkudam*¹ (milk pot) bearers, those with body piercing (normally on the forehead, tongue, and cheek)² and without piercing. Third, there are two types of *kavadi* bearing, with and without body piercing. *Kavadis* with body piercing are predominantly taken by men, while in some cases women bear *kavadis* with their cheeks and tongues pierced with skewers and lance. Children and women carry simple *kavadis* on one side of their shoulders. Men pierce their bare torsos with hooks and skewers fixed to their individual *kavadis*, which are then positioned in such a way that it sits on both the shoulders of the bearer. The fourth kind of offering only involves mortification practices, in other words, body piercing without bearing *palkudam*, or *kavadi*. This offering creates a sense of uneasiness among spectators due to its bizarre outlook and dangerous feat such as devotees hanging lime or oranges on the hooks pierced on the torsos, pulling a mini Muruga chariot with ropes tied to the hooks pierced at the back of torso, and whipping oneself repeatedly upon possession.

The choice to carry *kavadi* and the type of *kavadi* to carry rely entirely on the personal discretion of the devotee, the *kavadi* bearer. The choice to carry *kavadi* is mainly motivated by the sacred vow made by the individual devotee. According to Colleen Ward, *kavadi* bearing have several significances: thanksgiving, sacrifice, penance, vow fulfilment, self-mortification and devotion (1984, 318). Devotees promise to make offering for a specific time period, such as one, three,

¹ For more details, refer to Diane Mines' *Fierce Gods*, p. 158-162.

² Piercing on the cheek and tongue is supposedly to prevent devotee from speaking and needles on the forehead signifies the third eye, the window of communication with the spiritual world (Ward 1984, 318). Initially it was limited to only cheek, tongue and forehead, but now more dramatic piercing on various body parts seem to have appeared. According to Ward again, this later development is largely confined to Malaysia and Singapore and reputedly banned in India. Though I am skeptical about this statement, the investigation about how far this is true is beyond the scope of this paper. Therefore, I will not delve into the matter at the moment.

or five years, or sometimes lifelong. “Most Hindus believe that their pleas will be answered and fulfil the vow after receiving favours” (318). During the forty eight days of austerities, the *kavadi* bearer constructs his own *kavadi* based on his preference and artistic creativity. The *kavadi* is either made from wood or steel and is decorated magnificently with Muruga miniature shrines, peacock feathers, coloured papers, tinsels, flowers, and lime. So, every *kavadi*, either small and simple, or huge and elaborate, is different and unique in its own way.

On the Thaipusam day, the second to the fourth vow fulfillers aforementioned gather at the riverside near the temple from as early as 6 am. Dressed in yellow garments,³ the devotees enter into the river for their purification bath. Following this, they smear their foreheads and body with ashes. Once they are ready to begin their sacred penance, the devotees kneel down before the priest and the ritual begins. The family members, friends and relatives of the devotees will assist the priest, chanting “Vel Vel Muruga,” or “Vel Muruga Vel” (“Glory unto Muruga”), singing and drumming.

In describing the possession trance in Morocco, Deborah Kapchan utilized the metaphor – Falling/Rising/Standing Up. Kapchan illuminates vividly the process of falling into the trance, the rising of the spirit and the contrast, standing up of spirits. When the spirit appears outside the body, in a vision and dream, they are said to “stand up before you” (2007, 55). Even though the concept of “Standing Up” does not seem to fit well into my study, the concepts of Falling and Rising are deemed suitable for this study. I further develop this metaphor through my own observation and understanding by positing the process of Falling in-Rising up-Falling out.

The devotee who kneels down before the priest closes his eyes for focus and concentration. After some time, the body of the devotee starts to sway or tremble, and the body drops. This is the stage I refer as “falling in” to ecstatic trance. The body submits to the spirit of the

³ Yellow is a color symbolizing purity and auspiciousness. Devotees either purchase a plain yellow outfit or obtain a white outfit which is then soaked into turmeric water. Women either wear a yellow *saree*, or a yellow *salwar kameez* (pants and knee-length tops) while men wear a yellow short pant, or tie long cloth called *vesti* from waist down, baring the top body.

deity. Subsequently, the spirit “rises up” to the sensations of music and drumming, accompanied by “strong physical sensations such as tears and quaking, as well as smell, movement and sound,” (Kapchan 2007, 54). There is considerable change in the possessed person’s behaviour, unusual from the behaviour of the person’s quotidian self. The obvious changes can be witnessed and sensed from the person’s voice (tone), eyes (the way he or she looks), and bodily motions (the way the person stands, and walks). The behavioural changes create avenue for subjectivity since it varies according to a person’s personality and the deity that possesses the person. Are most people carrying *kavadis* possessed by Lord Muruga, the deity of focus? The answer is NO. In most cases, the possessors are possessed by folk deities,⁴ Goddesses or “Fierce Gods” (Mines, 2005). Why is this so? I was told that Lord Muruga is a classical deity⁵ and a calm deity. Even if a person is possessed by the spirit of Lord Muruga or any other classical deities, it is very subtle and the possession is mild. There are higher tendencies for people to be possessed by the folk or “little tradition” deities. These deities are characterised as “aggressive” and “violent,” therefore, the possessed tend to project violent (emotional outbursts, anger, screaming, inflicting pain upon themselves etc.), or uncontrollable behaviours (speaking authoritatively and instructing public, scolding people for not giving respect to the possessed, swallowing huge portions of ashes etc). I was also told that the embodiment of a deity is highly dependent on the internal stimuli, the psychological aspect, and the sub-conscious mind of the possessed. The more a particular deity is worshipped, favoured and visualised, the stronger the image is recorded in the sub-conscious mind of the devotee. As a result of this, the devotee is fully capable of embodying, visibilising and manifesting the characteristics of the preferred deity during trance. Thus, the deity does not necessarily have to be Lord Muruga.

⁴ Folk deities are local Gods, or village Gods, or Village Goddesses (uncodified and unstructured or in other words not based on classical text). The Gods are categorized as “little tradition.” (Smith 2006,150) According to Smith, in contemporary India, most deity possession is by folk deities. I feel this is also applicable to the possession scenarios during Thaipusam.

⁵ Literate text based deities (codified and predictable) or classical deities, referred as “great tradition.” Examples are such as Shiva, Vishnu, Ganesha, Krishna, and Rama. (Smith 2006,150-151) There is no mention about Muruga, but I presume that since Muruga is the son of Shiva in the Hindu mythology, he is also considered as a classical deity.

The phase between “falling in” and “rising up” is what I would like to refer as liminal phase, a term coined by Victor Turner. According to Turner, liminality is an in-between stage; a stage that I believe blurs the boundaries between the natural and supernatural, or between the quotidian self and the divinity. It is highly mysterious and remains a wonder how this transition happens and what actually occurs during that moment since different individuals encounter different experiences, which some can recount and others are not able to do so.

Returning back to the discussion about the possessed devotee during the ritual, the devotees are then sent out one after the other to the temple with their bearings. The devotees bearing *palkudams*, and *kavadis* without body piercings are the first to be sent out upon possession. Priorities are given to children and women. Children are not required to go into trance. Following this group, devotees with bearings and simple body piercings (on cheek, tongue and forehead) are sent out. The last group to head to the temple is the group of devotees carrying huge *kavadis* with massive body piercings and the devotees who only vow to bear body piercings.

The ritual for this last group takes longer time, since each devotee has to be, on one hand, prepared to receive the deity and go into trance, and on the other hand, prepared mentally and physically to bear the pain from the massive piercings on the shoulders, on the front torso and back torso. These devotees depend chiefly on trance to endure the pain inflicted upon them. As long as the devotee has not gone into trance, body piercings will not take place. It requires incredible feats of mind. Ward asserts that piercing is usually performed by experts who are sensitive to appropriate timing and piercing techniques. She points out that needles and hooks are inserted through the uppermost layer of the skin to avoid bleeding. She adds on that most devotees appear to control pain and bleeding aided by the sharpness of hooks, the administration of holy ash on the insertion points as well as by the trance itself. *Kavadi* bearers and the devotees who have been pierced are believed to have attained spiritual strength to enable them to do incredible feats.

Once the huge *kavadi* bearers and those with massive body piercings are “prepared,” singing and drumming continues, but now, with greater intensity. This is to stimulate them to dance, the dance of joy and celebration. Dancing bells are tied on their ankles and they are expected to dance all the way to the temple. Based on my personal observation, I strongly feel that the dancing is the main highlight of the whole festival. The beauty of the *kavadi* is revealed by the way the *kavadi* is carried and danced by the devotee. Thousands of people, sometimes even millions, throng the Muruga temples each year to catch the glimpse of the *kavadi* dancing. It is particularly very beautiful and a sight to capture when the dancing is performed at night. This is the prime reason why huge *kavadis*, decorated with colourful lights, are reserved to be carried, paraded and danced at night. There is no standard sequence of movements in *kavadi* dancing as it is very much based on individuality; however, most *kavadi* dancing involves lots of circling and swirling movements (circular dancing) carrying the *kavadi*. The movements vary according to the rhythmic patterns produced by the drum, the primary instrument in stimulating trance dancing. The *kavadis* then ascend the stairs and reach the pinnacle of the temple. Once the *kavadis* arrive at the main shrine of Lord Muruga, the possession and dancing reaches its climax accompanied by accelerated drumming, chanting and singing.

When the possessed devotees reach a state of fatigue, the priest will “calm the spirit” by reciting mantras and smearing ash on the forehead of the devotees. The priest is believed to retain the power to control the trance and the spirits. At this point, the devotees who are possessed either faint, or become semi-conscious and weak. During this liminal state, the devotees are seen as “falling out” of the trance or possession. The spirits leave their bodies and the subjects regain their original self-identities. The hooks and skewers are slowly removed from the bodies when they are in unconscious or semi-conscious state. Once the *kavadi* bearers have gained full consciousness and are relieved of their *kavadis*, they make offerings to Lord Muruga shrine decorated beautifully with ornaments and garlands, and obtain their *prasad*,⁶ ash. With this, the devotees formally complete their sacred penance.

⁶ *Prasad* refers to blessed food or drink from the temple. Ashes are also considered as *prasad* since it can be eaten, besides being applied on the forehead and spread over the body.

Meanwhile, those who have carried milkpots offer their pots to the priest who pours the offerings on the *vel*/lance image situated under Lord Muruga's shrine. The drops of milk that have flowed over the image are then gathered in their respective pots and are given to the devotees as blessed milk together with the holy ash as their *prasad* to take home.

Theories and Models

What is possession and its connection to trance? What does it mean to be possessed? How does possession occur? What happens to the possessed? Is all possession genuine? Why do possessed people inflict pain upon themselves? These are some of the questions that have been troubling me and which I would like to seek answers. In order to understand and theorize these crucial issues pertaining to the festival, I have approached various scholarships that have dealt with these issues.

Definition

Many scholarships, though have outlined different definitions for possession, seem to be parallel upon one definition, which is, the altered state of consciousness (ASC). According to Walker, altered states of consciousness are:

Those mental states, induced by various psychological, physiological, or pharmaceutical maneuvers, or agents, which can be recognized subjectively by the individual himself, or by an objective observer of the individual as representing sufficient deviation, in terms of psychological experience or functioning, from certain general norms as determined by the subjective experience or psychological functioning during alert, waking consciousness (1972, 11).

Citing Ludwig,⁷ she points out that the characteristic features of ASC includes loss of control, change of emotional expression, body

⁷ Walker cited from Arnold M Ludwig's article "Altered States of Consciousness," Trance and Possessions States, ed. Raymond Prince. Montreal: University of Montreal Press, 1968.

image changes (depersonalization and transcendence), feelings of rejuvenation and sense of ineffable (unique, subjective experience, loss of memory). I find this definition useful primarily because of the usage of the terms “induced” and “agents.” The definition and characteristics pave the way for me to make connection as to how the ritual or ceremonial possession is induced by culture-specific traditions and practices (described in previous section and to be discussed in later section) and how the control of outside agent (in this case the spirit of deities), inspires, modifies and displaces the individual personality and acts.

In her text, even though Walker illuminates that possession and trance do not mean the same since possession is the folk explanation, appraised by cultural beliefs and traditions, and trance is a scientific description of a psychological and physiological state in western terminology, she agrees however, that in most societies, some degree of trance does exist when the term possession is used. She reveals that most states of trance and altered states of consciousness are explained as possession. Ward further explains the concept of ASC by stating that ritual trance represents but one example of a naturally occurring ASC evolved in the context of religious ceremonies and often interpreted as the possession by spiritual powers. Juxtaposing these two works, I would like to put forth the argument that Thaipusam ritual possession takes place in the form of trance as part of public ceremonial occasion and suggest that possession and trance can be used interchangeably.

Possession as Performative

Various scholarly works have dichotomized possession into controlled and uncontrolled possession as well as induced and spontaneous possession. Referencing to Kathleen’s Erndl’s work on goddess worship in Punjab and William Sax’s work on the Pandav Lila dance-drama in Garhwal, Smith notes that deities are themselves believed to be physically present, temporarily but fully manifested in the performers and the power and presence of the sacred permits deities to be directly worshipped. He utilizes the terms “plays”(Erndl) and “dancing”(Sax) to describe how the deities play with the devotees and

enjoy dancing in the bodies of the temporary hosts. Smith's study confirms the capacity for deities to be present in the bodies of the hosts and that it is a temporary, desirable, and voluntary phenomenon.

Walker outlines that the ceremonial possession may be controlled, or uncontrolled. She points out that the possessions among experienced people are more controlled compared to initial possessions which tend to be uncontrollable and lead to acts of violent. She adds that this could be due to the notion that there are more emotions to be released in the first manifestations than later ones. Based on her text *Trance in Bali*, Jane Belo shares similar view and suggests that the experienced trancers seem to be more in touch with reality. Belo also notes that experienced trancers become accustomed from long practice of entering such states and become familiar with their trance roles. Hence, they can be less introverted and give more attention to events outside. Ward, meanwhile, relates this phenomenon to learned behavioral pattern. She reveals that learning plays an essential part in trance and in her study, she claims most devotees acknowledge that it is easier to fall into trance the second and subsequent times compared to the first time. These arguments cast some light upon the doubts about why some people need more time to be induced into trance state, while others can go into the state spontaneously.

On a similar note, Walker elaborates that possessions may go from the most superficial level, in which one may wonder if the devotee is sincere, to the most profound level, when the individual is totally carried away that he becomes unconscious and loses all control. Smith, while categorizing these possessions as pure theatre and genuine possession, puts forth the concern to establish eligibility for communities practicing possessions. But, to what extent we could establish eligibility in any culture is controversial, doubtful and questionable.

Spatiality and Temporality

Kapchan points out that the women in Morocco who are "inhabited" by spirit themselves possess a repertoire of movements that are recognized as preludes to possession-trance. She terms the movements

as transit-gestures that bring the subject from one realm of subjective experience to another. Quoting Henri Lefebvre from his text, *Production of Space*, she explains that all gestural systems embody ideology and bind it to practice, therefore the meaning and power are not only encoded in the body's gestural repertoires or "techniques of body" (2007, 53) but these codes are produced and transformed at the site of the body and its movement.

According to Kapchan, the ritualized gestures of trance create a sacred space, a space transformed by gestures from existent and interior spaces of domesticity into places of sacred play and ritual drama. She further builds on her argument by asserting that such spatial transformations also serve to exchange the experience of time, from quotidian time to ritual or sacred time. Walker, on the other hand, discusses that the repertoire of deity personalities is large, and the behavior patterns are vague and flexible enough to allow much variation and innovation.

In trance dancing during Thaipusam, one can witness variety of bodily motions and gestures among the *kavadi* dancers. It is difficult to identify similar patterns of movements, except for the execution of circular or swirling movements with *kavadis*, since each person performs according to his or her own self-expression. On the whole, the quality and variety of movements are highly dependent on possession, rhythm, the type, and the weight of *kavadi* (lightness or heaviness). While some devotees execute abstract movements, there are others who fully embody the characters of the deity possessed and perform "role-play." These "dramatic" and "pure" dance performances are regarded legible within the context of the sacred time and sacred space created by the festival.

Possession and Agency

All the aforementioned works intertwines the concepts of possession and agency of the possessed. In her discussion about religion and politics in the South Indian village of Yanaimangalam, Diane Mines examines how possession among the low castes (Pallaiyar and Pallar) in the village gives them more freedom and agency to gain access or

enter the streets occupied by the higher caste Pillaimar, Mupanar, Thevar and Brahman, who are otherwise barred from entry. Describing this form of possession as empowering, or “benign,” she argues that possession can make the powerless powerful. She particularly advocates “metonymic” orientation to point out that Gods are not merely symbols but are the actual sources of power for human beings struggling for or against domination. She vies that it is the deity possession that puts them, the god-dancers, in a favorable position in the eyes of the people of the “Ur” or village. In other words, the moment of possession within the context of the “Ur” festivals elevates the oppressed castes’ status from the level of subordination to domination.

Smith, Walker, Kapchan, and Ward also describe vividly the inter-relations between possession and the marginalized. The marginalized are widely mentioned as women (Smith) (Walker), slaves (Walker) (Kapchan), and Malaysian Indians (Ward). Smith discusses possession as a refuge and an empowerment for the oppressed and marginalized women in the patriarchal society in South Asia. In this sense, he argues possession is a means of enabling woman to interact from a position of authority and status. To strengthen his argument, he utilizes the work of feminist, Mary Keller who theorized an “instrumental agency” in which she states, “possessed bodies share the same paradoxical agency in that the body is not speaking, it is spoken through, the body is not hammering, it is being used to hammer, the body is not mounting, it is being mounted,” (2006, 68-69). Walker notes that the people who become possessed in class societies such as Songhay, Zar, and Afro-American cults are people who are economically and socially disadvantaged, who have great need to escape reality and become divine for a short while. Trance or possession offers periodic releases of suppressed impulses in a culturally approved and valuable manner. Kapchan, meanwhile, links slavery with possession. She maintains that trance is represented more as a medium of liberation than a symbol of possession. She states that the spirit possession ceremonies of the Moroccan Gnawa are “metonymic performances in which memories of slavery is invoked and symbolically mastered,” (2007, 20). The Gnawa ceremony gives the wounds of slavery a voice. Ward points out that ritual possession is often found in minority group members and women. In discussing

Thaipusam, Ward stresses the need for the Indian community to attract attention. It is an undeniable and notable fact that the minority status of the Indians in Malaysia is closely associated with social and economic stresses. Compared to the Malay and the Chinese ethnic groups in Malaysia with the former politically and the latter economically sound, the Indian group is in many ways seen as disadvantaged and do not have much control over the political and economical domains in the country. Being a marginalized community, can we perceive that Thaipusam creates an avenue for the Indians to visibilize themselves by empowering them?

Possession and Self-Mortification Practices

Referencing to the mortification practices in Sufism, and specifically the Gnawa ritual, Kapchan asserts that the dangerous feats such as putting a person's face on the fireplace, eating glass, running sharp knife over tongue and pouring hot wax over the chest causes no injury or pain since the body transcends during the ecstatic trance. She argues that during the feats, which defy nature, the body which takes on the attributes of the spirit becomes invulnerable and protected, a phenomenon described as "alchemical transformation" (2007, 33).

Smith makes a similar case focusing on possession and mortification practices in tantric practice in North India. He asserts that *Tantra*, which is a movement distinct from practical grounding in the *vedic* texts, arose as a series of esoteric practices believed to originate from "folk" cultures. It was a strategy for healing existential disorder, of which physical order was a manifestation. Possession was one of the many aspects *Tantra* embodies. It is common to witness self-mortification practices as a form of religious experience and expression in Tantric rituals. On the same note, he adds that the possession frequently begets violence through self-infliction body piercing based on two case studies of possession in Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka. He mentions that the possessed bears a visage of pain caused, on the one hand, the power of possessing agent and on the other, joyful shrieks arising from aggressive emotions and ecstasy generated by the deity.

Ward puts forth the argument that pain is a highly personal experience which depends upon cultural learning, situational variables, and other factors that are unique to the individual.

Possession and Stimulation

One of the most obvious features of ceremonial possession listed by various theoretical sources is rhythmic stimulation. The sonic stimulation is primarily caused by drumming and chanting. Walker, citing the work of Andrew Neher,⁸ emphasizes that the brain wave frequencies (8-13 cycles per second) are the effective range for obtaining responses to rhythmic stimuli. According to this effect, the chances for people to be induced into trance rise immensely when the intensity and speed of a rhythm is increased.

Besides that, visual, olfactory and kinesthetic stimulation have also been identified as the main stimulants of possession. Ward states that the changes in lightness and darkness, olfactory stimulation by burning incense, and kinesthetic stimulation through constant stroking helps to induce trance. Walker reveals that according to the laboratory research, fasting subjects have more anomalous experiences (such as dizziness) than when their blood sugar is at a more normal level. The various stimulants can be witnessed during Thaipusam. Group singing, chanting “Vel, Vel!”, clapping, drumming, burning incense, and stroking are elements that play pivotal role in inducing trance and trance dancing.

Discussion and Conclusion

Thaipusam can be viewed and studied from multi-dimensional perspectives as it embodies very rich subject matter. Derived from a folk tradition and interpreted as ceremonial possession by Hindu deities, the festival has over the years evolved into a major event in

⁸ Neher in his article “A Physiological Explanation of Unusual Behavior in Ceremonies Involving Drums,” carried out laboratory experiments on human responses to sonic driving as a result of his observation of the frequent use of drumming to produce possession.

the multi-racial country. It is a celebration that promotes cohesion in the Hindu community, a means to reconfirm religious beliefs and traditions. The rising number of devotees and offerings year after year bear witness to this statement. Recounting Diane Mines' "metonymic" orientation, the Hindu Gods are seen as more than a metaphor since Gods and human are materially linked parts. According to Mines, this relationship makes the Gods the real agents in social life. Adopting this orientation, I argue that the strong faith and devotion (*bakthi*) of the people that God has the power to fulfill all pleas is the foundation of the Thaipusam celebration. The festival is built on group solidarity and stands as a promoter of this solidarity since it is a result of the Indian society's collective representations. "Thaipusam practices serve to preserve and intensify religious identification in a minority group," (Ward 1984, 325). In a way, it is also an example of Victor Turner's concept of "communitas,"⁹ where the social distinctions between the Indian people are erased and the differences are transferred from the ordinary human interaction to the supernatural interaction.

Although on the whole the festival is regarded as an excellent form of social unity among the Indians, the freedom of emotional expression or catharsis and the over-whelming attraction has transformed the festival from a mere religious ceremony to the status of a spectacle. This transformation as well as the individual freedom and agency within the context of the festival have created loopholes for some devotees to execute almost anything without restrictions. Their parodies of exaggerated actions and practices are visible especially through the self-mortification practices. These acts, accused as public display rather than spiritual humility, are associated with the lower class and those from the rural backgrounds. The main accusation is that many devotees have not understood the actual significance of vows and *kavadi* bearing. The urban well-educated middle class devotees who regard these practices as "pagan" or "barbaric" are alarmed by the possibility that these "over-doings" may cause degradation to the Indian community as a whole. They have begun voicing their concerns to the temple authorities to curtail these

⁹ According to Turner, the normal distinctions of the everyday society are abolished, and the laws governing the new communitas are ultimate in the culture – those of the deified ancestors, the founders of society. (Walker 1972, 98)

activities. But, so far the temples have met with resistance. This being the current dilemma, the main concern among the Indians is about how their religion and practices are being “imagined” by the other ethnic groups in the country and the world. Is it perceived positively or negatively? If it is negative, what further steps are to be undertaken to tackle the problem and to uplift the image of the Malaysian Indians in the eyes of the nation and world.

While discussing theories related to possession and marginalization, I presented Ward’s argument about the need for the Indians in Malaysia, who are the politically and economically suppressed group, to attract attention. It must be commended at this juncture that the Indians have been successful to a certain extent in gaining attention, especially the support of the government. The festival day has been declared public holiday recently but is only limited to the main venues of celebration such as the states of Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, Perak and Johore, as well as Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya and Penang. However, what is highly surprising is that this ritual trance has also attracted the economically advantaged, the Chinese ethnic group to participate as devotees. This development subverts the theories put forth by many scholars linking possession and marginalization. This situation prompts me to question the reason behind the interest of non-Indians to bear *kavadi* and to go into trance. How do we perceive this phenomenon? Racial mimicry? Devotion? Or what else? Unfortunately, I have to leave these questions open for now as it requires further research.

Finally, as I was pursuing archival research for this paper, I discovered that there have been ample researches on possession and trance dancing but none on *kavadi* dancing. The study of how rhythmic stimulation creates different moods and orthogenetic motions while dancing bearing *kavadis* sounds very promising. This paper has not been able to fully address this issue but identifies it as a prominent topic for future research.

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